Irish Rural Link

Sustainable Rural Communities

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pobal government supporting communities

Rialtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland

Irish Rural Link Strategic Plan 2027-2031

Rural Ireland speaking for itself

PUBLISHED NOVEMBER 2026



Our plan at a glance

Rural Ireland should have a real say in the decisions that shape its future. That is why Irish Rural Link exists. We bring the experience of rural communities into national and European policymaking, and we work with our members to translate good ideas into lasting change.

> By 2031, our ambition is to be the leading independent, member-led voice for rural Ireland: trusted for our evidence, valued by our members and able to speak freely on the issues that matter to rural communities.

We will focus on three priorities. We will influence policy, strengthen our membership and demonstrate practical solutions through the programmes and partnerships we support. Two foundations make this possible: financial sustainability and strong, transparent governance.

01 Influence policy

We will translate the experience of rural communities into evidence that decision-makers cannot overlook.

02 Strengthen our membership

A strong national voice begins with members who feel heard, supported and connected.

03 Demonstrate solutions

We will use projects and partnerships to show what works in rural communities, and translate the lessons into policy.

Financial sustainability

Our advocacy must be able to continue even when an individual project ends.

Governance and accountability

Independence is a responsibility we must demonstrate, not just a value we claim.

Across this work, three campaigns will give our policy voice a consistent focus: **fairness in the cost of rural living; resilient rural communities; and a fair rural transition.** We will review these campaigns each year, choosing the specific issues where our members' evidence and our influence can make the greatest difference. Two threads run through every priority: gender equality and social enterprise. Our Rural Future 2026 to 2031 sets out Government's ambition for rural Ireland under five pillars. This plan sets out how Irish Rural Link will deliver that ambition with rural communities, pillar by pillar, and how we will hold Government to it.

Fairness in the cost of rural living | **Resilient rural communities** | **A fair rural transition**

WHAT SUCCESS WILL LOOK LIKE IN 2031

Greater influence

Rural priorities are reflected in decisions on public policy, legislation and funding, with our contribution clearly recorded.

A stronger membership

We are working towards 1,000 member organisations, with active relationships across all 32 counties and a named contact for every member.

Better rural evidence

We publish a regular *State of Rural Ireland* report drawing on members and a geographically balanced panel of rural households.

Practical benefits

Members can point to useful services, independently verified savings, stronger networks, renewable energy communities earning for their areas and solutions that help communities remain viable.

A sustainable organisation

Our core work is sustainably funded, with diversified income, adequate reserves and earned-income activities that cover their costs and contribute to our purpose.

We will report publicly on progress every year. We will not wait until the end of the plan to say what has changed.

A message from our Chairperson

Irish Rural Link was founded in 1991 because rural communities wanted a national voice of their own. Thirty-five years later, that purpose remains. Our member organisations elect the Board, every member has one vote, and our policy positions are shaped by the experience and concerns of the communities we represent.

The Board began work on this plan with a simple question: what do rural communities most need from Irish Rural Link over the next five years?

We cannot do everything, so we have chosen the places where we can make the greatest difference. We must put policy and representation at the centre of our work; build genuine relationships with our members; and use our programmes to demonstrate what can succeed in practice. We must also ensure that the organisation has the resources and independence to speak with confidence, even when our position is uncomfortable for those in power.

Our three policy campaigns reflect that choice. We will challenge the extra costs of rural living, make the case for stronger and more resilient local communities, and work for a transition to cleaner energy and a healthier environment that is fair to the people who live and work in rural places, with rural communities owning a share of what is built around them. These priorities will be reviewed annually as new evidence emerges.

This is also a commitment to better engagement. Our members should know the people working on their behalf, have opportunities to shape our positions and be able to see what their membership achieves. Regional meetings, member networks and the Rural Parliament will be important places for that work.

We have strengthened the Society's governance during 2026. This plan now gives members a clear way to judge the results. Each year we will say what we set out to do, what we achieved and where progress fell short.

I thank our members, colleagues and partners for the contribution they have made to this strategy. Delivering it will depend on the same collective effort.

Gerald Quain
Chairperson, Irish Rural Link

A message from our Chief Executive

Since taking up the role in April 2026, I have heard a consistent message from rural communities. Many households face higher costs for heating, transport and essential services. Families struggle to find housing and childcare close to home. Community groups are increasingly relied upon in emergencies, even when they are unsure whom to contact for support. Many local organisations worry about who will take over when long-serving volunteers step down. And behind all of these is a quieter problem: people living alone at the end of long lanes, without transport or a daily contact.

These are not isolated problems. National decisions land differently depending on where people live, and our job is to make that difference visible and to argue for a fairer response.

Our consultation also showed us that we need to improve the way we serve our own members. Organisations that are regularly in touch with us value their membership much more highly than those that rarely hear from us. We cannot expect a strong collective voice without strong relationships. Every member should know whom to contact, what support is available and how to influence our work.

We will continue to deliver programmes, but with a clearer purpose. Work such as the Breeding Waders European Innovation Partnership, WaterLANDS and our cross-border PEACEPLUS partnerships helps communities, farmers and local organisations test solutions in practice. The evidence from that work must inform the policies we advocate. Projects must also be properly costed, managed and aligned with our mission.

We intend to develop services that members value and, where appropriate, choose to pay for. Shared services, group purchasing, mediation and succession support, and community energy may all help strengthen rural organisations while generating income to support our independent voice. No service or enterprise will proceed until demand and costs have been tested.

Government has set out its ambition for rural Ireland in Our Rural Future 2026 to 2031: five pillars, 34 commitments and an action plan to 2028. We share that ambition. This plan is how we will help deliver it, and how we will measure whether it reaches the people it is meant for. This plan is deliberately practical. It sets out what we want to change, the standards we will work to and the evidence members can expect to see. Behind it will sit a costed implementation plan, reviewed regularly by the Board. We will share our progress each year, including the things that did not work as expected.

Rural Ireland's voice must be heard in communities, in Dublin, in Belfast and in Brussels. I look forward to working with our members to make that voice stronger.

Briain Smyth
Chief Executive Officer, Irish Rural Link

SECTION 1

Who we are and why our voice matters

Irish Rural Link is a co-operative society and registered charity, established in 1991 and based in Moate, County Westmeath. More than 600 member organisations are part of the Society. Together they represent over 25,000 people through community groups, rural networks, development organisations, Meals on Wheels services, farming bodies and social enterprises.

Our structure matters. Eleven of the fifteen elected Board places are held by member delegates, and each member organisation has one vote. Our responsibility is to represent those members faithfully, while speaking up for the interests of people living in or visiting rural Ireland, particularly those facing poverty, exclusion or isolation.

We work across the island. Our formal representative mandate comes from our member organisations, while our cross-border partnerships and the European Rural Community Alliance help us address issues that cross borders. We contribute to national and European policy discussions through the Community and Voluntary Pillar, the EirGrid National Advisory Committee, Oireachtas engagement and European rural networks.

We also have a substantial record of practical work. The Society has advocated on cash access and broadband, developed AgriKids and delivered the PEACEPLUS programmes RiSE and Maximising Community Space with partners in Northern Ireland and the border counties. It hosts the Breeding Waders EIP, funded by the Department of Agriculture and the National Parks and Wildlife Service and one of the largest European Innovation Partnerships in the State, which pays farmers for results in protecting the habitat of breeding waders such as the curlew. It is a partner in the FarmPEAT EIP and in WaterLANDS, the European programme restoring wetlands with the communities around them. We coordinate CAP Network Ireland and host the National Meals on Wheels Network.

WHAT MEMBERS TOLD US

In September and October 2026, we asked our member organisations and the public what rural Ireland needs from its national voice. The responses shape the direction of this plan.

Four messages stood out. Members want action on the additional cost of rural living above anything else. Those in regular contact with the Society value membership highly, and those who are not are often unaware of it. Community organisations provided much of the local response to Storm Éowyn and often had no clear contact in the public services. And many organisations do not know who will take over when the current committee stops.

The messages also differed between open countryside and the villages and towns. In open countryside, energy was the dominant concern and conventional bus services were rarely raised. In villages and towns, where scheduled services are more feasible, transport became a greater priority. The responses reveal two distinct rural experiences, and the Society will tailor its asks to each of them.

We listen to rural communities, learn from delivery on the ground and present that evidence where decisions are made. We do not claim to speak for every individual. Our value is that we are answerable to the organisations that own us and open about the evidence behind our positions. Our distinctive strength is the combination of a national rural membership, a place in the structures where policy is made and projects on the ground that test what works. When Government, the Oireachtas or European institutions want to know what rural communities think, they come to Irish Rural Link. This plan is written to keep it that way.

SECTION 2

The challenges facing rural Ireland

Rural Ireland has enormous strengths: committed communities, local enterprise, natural resources and a tradition of people working together. Yet distance, population change, infrastructure gaps and the way services are funded can place extra pressure on rural households and organisations. Our strategy focuses on eight connected challenges. Each one sits under a pillar of Our Rural Future 2026 to 2031, and each is a test of whether that policy is working.

€4,393 to €5,608

The everyday cost of living

PILLARS ONE AND TWO · PLACES AND PUBLIC SERVICES

Living in a rural area can mean paying more to reach the same standard of living. The analysis cited in our supporting evidence estimates an additional annual cost of €4,393 to €5,608 for a rural household relying on a social welfare payment, compared with an equivalent household in a town or city. The estimate is €5,137 to €7,390 for a two-parent household on the minimum wage. Heating, travel and the distance to services make a material difference. Housing and childcare add further pressure, particularly for young families trying to remain close to home. The MESL Research Centre's Budget 2027 briefing finds that the Budget's measures broadly track inflation and will not narrow the gap between incomes and the cost of minimum needs. Going into the winter of 2026, home energy costs are on average 97.5% higher than in 2020, Fuel Allowance recipients will receive about €12 less energy support than last winter, and an older person living alone on the State Pension has an adequate income in urban social housing but not in a rural area, because of the cost of running a car.

Our response will be to publish and explain the rural cost gap, and to press for public decisions that take those costs into account. The same policy does not affect every household in the same way.

15 years

Energy and who benefits from the transition

PILLAR FIVE · SUSTAINING OUR RURAL ENVIRONMENT

Rural communities host much of the infrastructure needed for renewable energy, while many nearby households still face high electricity and heating costs. The benefits of investment do not always reach the people who live with its effects. Projects supported through the Renewable Electricity Support Scheme (RESS) must contribute to community benefit funds. The Small-Scale Renewable Electricity Support Scheme (SRESS) goes further: a renewable energy community can now sell the electricity it generates at a guaranteed tariff for 15 years, at a higher rate than a business receives. Our Rural Future promises reliable, affordable renewable energy for rural Ireland, with community benefit funds that communities can see. We will judge that promise by whether rural communities own a share of what is built around them, and we will make sure every eligible community understands both schemes and receives its fair share.

768,000

Community resilience and essential services

PILLAR FOUR · RESILIENT RURAL COMMUNITIES

Storm Éowyn in January 2025 showed both the determination of rural communities and the gaps in emergency coordination. The figures show that 768,000 homes, farms and businesses lost electricity. Local halls, volunteers and community services responded, but many lacked a direct contact in public agencies. Isolation is the quiet emergency behind the visible ones: people living alone, without transport, confidence online or someone who calls, are the first to be cut off and the last to be found, and loneliness damages health as surely as cold or damp. Resilience also depends on reliable information and on communities that include everyone who lives in them; disinformation spreads fastest in a crisis. Our Rural Future itself commits to strengthening local capacity to respond to weather-related risks. We will hold it to that, and seek agreed arrangements with local authorities and the HSE so that communities know who is responsible before the next emergency as well as after it.

54% and 22%

Water, nature and climate

PILLAR FIVE · SUSTAINING OUR RURAL ENVIRONMENT

Rural people are central to restoring water quality, improving habitats and responding to climate change. The source evidence records that 54% of rivers and lakes were in good or better ecological condition in 2025, while nitrate levels were too high at 22% of groundwater monitoring sites. It also points to serious challenges for protected habitats and to the need for faster climate action. The fifth pillar of Our Rural Future, sustaining our rural environment, depends on what happens on farms and in parishes. Farmers, landowners and communities must be involved in designing the solutions and fairly rewarded for the improvements they deliver.

The challenges facing rural Ireland

More than a fifth

Farming, land and the next CAP

PILLAR THREE · A STRONG AND DIVERSE RURAL ECONOMY

Farm families face the largest set of changes in a generation, all at once. The Climate Action Plan sets targets to cut farming emissions. The European Commission's budget proposal for 2028 to 2034 would cut Ireland's CAP funding by more than a fifth, and the broad framework for the CAP from 2028 is taking shape, but its final provisions remain under negotiation. Nature restoration rules require drained peatland to be restored, the Nitrates Derogation has tightened, and too few farms have a successor. We will work for a transition that is fair to the people who farm, with advice and payment for results reaching them through our own programmes and networks, with succession treated as a rural development issue in its own right, and with a voice in the design of Ireland's next CAP plan through CAP Network Ireland.

2029

Representation in public decisions

PILLAR FOUR · RESILIENT RURAL COMMUNITIES

The 2014 reforms moved rural development decisions away from the communities they affect. The Government has accepted the Local Democracy Taskforce's case for municipal councils in every local authority, with their own budgets and powers, and a review of whether the Rural Transport Programme should pass to local government. The new councils take office after the 2029 local elections. Our Rural Future puts towns, villages and their hinterlands at the centre; the countryside has to count as well as the towns. We will press for a formal place for rural communities in the new municipal councils, for the countryside to count as much as the towns in their budgets, and for rural indicators that show whether life outside the towns is improving.

Unevenly shared

Who carries the cost

PILLAR FOUR · SOCIAL INCLUSION AT THE CORE

Rural disadvantage is unevenly shared. Many of the costs this plan describes, childcare, transport, access to services, poverty and isolation, fall hardest on women, and rural women are also the entrepreneurs, community leaders and carers who hold rural places together. Rural Ireland is ageing faster than the State as a whole, and the gap between urban and rural provision for older people, from home care to Meals on Wheels, is among the widest we face. Gaeltacht and island communities carry costs of their own: distance, services that must be provided through Irish, and dependence on a ferry or a plane. Hidden harms, including domestic violence, affect rural communities even where other organisations are better placed to lead. Our Rural Future puts social inclusion at the core of rural development. We will gather evidence by gender and by age, measure our impact the same way and report whether that promise is being kept.

Short-term funding

The independence of the community sector

PILLAR FOUR · STRONG LOCAL ORGANISATIONS

Short-term grants and project contracts matter, but relying on them makes it hard for community organisations to plan, keep skilled staff and speak independently. Irish Rural Link faces these pressures itself. A secure organisational core, transparent governance and a broader income base are essential if we are to represent members consistently over time. Our Rural Future depends on strong local organisations, and Ar Scáth a Chéile accepts that they cannot be built on short-term money: it commits Government to promoting multi-annual funding arrangements. We will hold Government to that commitment for the whole sector.

THE POLICY LANDSCAPE, 2026 TO 2031

POLICY	WHAT IT MEANS FOR RURAL IRELAND	WHAT IRISH RURAL LINK WILL DO
Our Rural Future 2026 to 2031	The national rural policy, launched on 27 October 2026: five pillars, 34 commitments and a 2026 to 2028 action plan of 234 actions, with rural indicators and a dashboard to follow by 2028. Page 9 shows where this plan delivers each pillar.	Deliver each pillar with rural communities, feed the Rural Voice Panel into the rural indicators the policy promises, and hold Government to Rural Proofing in practice
Ar Scáth a Chéile, the strategy for the community and voluntary sector 2026 to 2030	Five pillars, from participation and partnership to a funding environment that promotes multi-annual funding, stronger structures for engagement and the sector at the centre of the climate response.	Secure sustainable funding for rural organisations, a rural voice in the sector's structures and a role for communities in climate action
The Local Democracy Taskforce	Municipal councils in every local authority from the 2029 elections, with their own budgets and powers, and a review of the Rural Transport Programme.	A formal place for rural communities in the new councils, and the countryside counting as much as the towns in their budgets
The Climate Action Plan, SRESS and the Nature Restoration Law	Emission targets for farming, a guaranteed tariff for community energy and restoration of drained peatland.	A fair transition for farm families and renewable energy communities, payment for results, advice that reaches the farm, and mediation and succession support
The CAP after 2027, still under negotiation	The proposed framework: from 2028 a single national plan would replace the two pillars, with ring-fenced farm income support and a smaller Irish allocation. Its final provisions remain under negotiation between the Council, the Parliament and the Commission, including the budget, the income support rules, the place of LEADER and the schemes that reward results.	Through CAP Network Ireland, take part in designing Ireland's plan and keep our farming asks under review as the detail is settled
PEACEPLUS 2, 2028 to 2034	The renewed cross-border programme proposed by the European Commission for 2028 to 2034.	Shape its priorities and deliver projects under it that foster reconciliation and collaboration between rural communities
National social enterprise policy	Whole-of-government support for social enterprise is growing.	A clear rural perspective in it, and support for the social enterprises among our members

SECTION 3

Our purpose and how we work

Our vision is of vibrant, inclusive and sustainable rural communities contributing to an equitable and just society.

Our mission is to influence and inform local, national and European policies in favour of rural communities, especially those who are marginalised as a result of poverty and social exclusion in rural areas.

Our ambition for 2031 is to be the leading independent, member-led voice for rural Ireland, with the evidence, relationships and financial strength to influence decisions that affect rural people.

OUR VALUES

Social inclusion and equality

We speak up for all rural communities and pay particular attention to people affected by poverty, exclusion and isolation.

Evidence-informed policy

We listen to members, check the facts and explain how we have reached our positions.

Innovation

We test innovations on the ground, measure what makes a difference, and share the evidence so that effective solutions can be adopted more widely.

Sustainability

We work for the long-term wellbeing of rural places and grow only at a pace we can support.

Partnership

We work constructively with others, including when we hold different views.

Independence

Our Board determines our policy positions based on members' experience and evidence, not the interests of a funder or client.

TWO THREADS THROUGH EVERY PRIORITY

Gender equality

Many of the costs of rural life fall hardest on women, and women lead much of rural community life. We will gather and report evidence by gender, build it into the Rural Voice Panel and the State of Rural Ireland report, reflect it in our policy positions and measure our impact the same way.

Social enterprise

Social enterprise is how rural communities fill service gaps, create employment and keep people connected. We will give it a clear place in our policy work, press for a rural perspective in national social enterprise policy, and support the social enterprises among our members through hosting, shared services and the cross-border programmes.

Our work covers rural development, enterprise and employment; agriculture, the environment and climate action; social justice, education and inclusion; and health, wellbeing and community services. These four areas cover the five pillars of Our Rural Future, so every campaign in the next section speaks directly to the national policy.

FROM EVIDENCE TO CHANGE

We follow a simple cycle.

1

Members and projects show us what is happening. We combine their experience with reliable research.

2

The Board sets the policy position and makes clear what change we are asking for.

3

We then seek influence through Government, public agencies, the Oireachtas and European institutions, returning to an issue when decisions are being taken.

4

Finally, we report back: members should know what changed, what did not and what we will do next.

The quality of our relationships with members makes this cycle possible. So does our ability to maintain independent research and advocacy between funding programmes.

SECTION 4

Our three policy campaigns

We cannot give every rural issue equal attention all the time. Our three campaigns provide continuity; the Board will decide the most important asks within each one every year, informed by members and the policy calendar. Each campaign draws on the relevant pillars of Our Rural Future and says what delivery must mean for rural people.

Campaign one: Fairness in the cost of rural living

PILLARS ONE AND TWO · PLACES AND PUBLIC SERVICES

Where people live should not determine whether they can afford a warm home, reach healthcare, find childcare or remain close to their families. We will make the additional cost of rural living visible and seek changes in the policies that contribute to it. We want the Rural Cost Gap Index to become the standard reference for rural costs in Ireland, and the measure against which the first two pillars of Our Rural Future, thriving rural places and high-quality public services, are judged.

OUR ASK

Our priorities include recognition of rural costs in social protection and fuel supports, with energy support that reflects the fuel a household actually uses and the price it pays; more affordable household energy; housing that allows young families to stay and older people to find suitable options; viable childcare provision in smaller communities; healthcare, home care and disability services within reach; the extra costs of island life, from freight to the ferry; and transport and local services that reduce dependence on a second car.

MEASURING IMPACT

We will judge this work by changes to policy, funding, Budget measures or services, not by the number of submissions we write. The measures are on page 14.

Campaign two: Resilient rural communities

PILLAR FOUR · RESILIENT RURAL COMMUNITIES

Resilience is about more than responding to storms. It means local organisations, facilities, services and volunteers that can meet changing needs and withstand shocks, communities that include everyone, and reliable information when it matters most. Our Rural Future asks for safer, more resilient and more inclusive rural communities. Irish Rural Link intends to be the national partner for that work, the organisation local authorities, the HSE and Government call first when they need to reach rural communities.

OUR ASK

We will seek emergency protocols with local authorities and the HSE, a community voice in national emergency coordination, a rural voice in the Local Community Safety Partnerships, and formal opportunities for rural communities to influence local government decisions. We will help farms, businesses and voluntary organisations plan for succession, and support rural community centres and halls as the foundation of local resilience. We will treat rural isolation as the public health issue it is: a daily contact for people living alone, through Meals on Wheels, community transport and the member organisations that know their areas, and an end to the gap between urban and rural provision for an ageing population, starting with Meals on Wheels. Our ambition is a truly national service, centrally negotiated with the HSE, local authorities and suppliers, operating as a social enterprise within the Irish Rural Link co-operative structure, owned and governed by its participating services, hosted by Irish Rural Link with central staff and shared systems, and delivered locally by the services themselves.

MEASURING IMPACT

Success will mean stronger public-community arrangements, better continuity of services and communities that are supported before a crisis arrives. The measures are on page 14.

Campaign three: A fair rural transition

PILLAR FIVE · SUSTAINING OUR RURAL ENVIRONMENT

Rural Ireland has a central role in renewable energy, nature restoration, better water quality and climate adaptation. The transition will only last if the people who own, manage and live on the land help shape it and share in its benefits. Sustaining our rural environment, the fifth pillar of Our Rural Future, will be delivered on rural land by rural people. Irish Rural Link will take the lead in a rural transition that delivers for rural communities. Renewable energy communities are at the centre of it: communities that generate, own and sell their own power and keep the proceeds at home.

OUR ASK

We will advocate for community benefit from energy infrastructure, safe private and group water supplies, and payment-for-results approaches that reward improvements in nature, water and carbon outcomes. We will promote climate measures developed with communities and fair arrangements for countryside access that respect users and landowners. We will become a leading source of practical support for renewable and sustainable energy communities, helping them to form, to secure support under SRESS and RESS and to direct their income into the local services their areas need, and we will press Government to keep SRESS open, simple and well funded for communities. We will promote independent community forums at the planning stage of renewable projects, so that communities are heard early, and reach farms and households through our own programmes under the Climate Action Plan. Where communities, farmers and the pace of the transition pull in different directions, we will say where we stand, and where the parties want help to agree, our mediation service will provide it impartially, with our own position declared.

MEASURING IMPACT

Success will be visible in decisions, funding and programmes that involve rural communities and recognise their contribution. The measures are on page 14.

01 Influence policy

We will translate the experience of rural communities into evidence that decision-makers cannot overlook.

Irish Rural Link exists to influence policy, but a strong voice requires more than a place at a meeting. It needs informed positions, trusted research, an active membership and the persistence to follow an issue through to a decision.

Over the life of this plan, we will strengthen our dedicated policy and research capacity. We will publish a rural voice update every quarter, use members' experience to inform our positions, and take a consistent view on each Budget, the delivery of *Our Rural Future* and its action plans, and the Common Agricultural Policy after 2027. We will build research partnerships with universities and institutes so that our evidence meets the standard decision-makers expect, and we will publish a Rural Landscape Charter setting out where we stand on landscape, planning, heritage and development. Through CAP Network Ireland, which we coordinate, we will take part in designing Ireland's single national plan for the CAP from 2028, arguing for payment for results, a generational renewal strategy that works for family farms, and the well-funded CAP and continued LEADER programme that the policy itself commits Government to seek.

We will develop the **Rural Voice Panel**, drawing on rural households throughout the island and reflecting the diversity of regions and communities, with its findings reported by gender and by age. It will be built in stages, subject to an approved research design and appropriate data protection safeguards. Alongside an annual survey of member organisations, the panel will inform a regular *State of Rural Ireland* report. The aim is to show decision-makers whether everyday life in rural areas is improving and for whom.

We will continue to press for a formal place for rural community representatives where decisions are made, including at the National Emergency Co-ordination Group, maintain a transparent register of the external seats held on behalf of the Society and a panel of suitably qualified nominees, and press for a clear rural perspective in national social enterprise policy.

Our European role will remain important. We will continue our work through the European Rural Community Alliance and, with relevant partners, prepare a bid to bring the European Rural Parliament to Ireland when the organisation is ready to do so.

HOW WE WILL WORK

The Rural Cost Gap Index will be published in advance of each Budget, with its calculations checked against the Minimum Essential Standard of Living research. Our annual policy calendar will align the Budget, Oireachtas work, major national strategies and European decisions. Positions will be developed with the members most affected, agreed through our governance structures and pursued consistently.

WHERE THIS PLAN DELIVERS OUR RURAL FUTURE 2026 TO 2031

PILLAR OF OUR RURAL FUTURE	WHAT THE POLICY SEEKS	WHERE IRISH RURAL LINK DELIVERS IT
Thriving rural places	The Rural Development Investment Programme; Town Centre First; gigabit broadband and Connected Hubs; resilient water and electricity; sustainable rural housing	The Rural Landscape Charter on housing and development; safe private and group water supplies; community benefit from the infrastructure rural areas host; the countryside and town evidence
High-quality public services	Rural transport and roads; healthcare and disability services; education and childcare; skills; public services through Irish	Campaign one and the Rural Cost Gap Index; support for rural childcare services and childminders; the national Meals on Wheels service; the evidence on transport in villages and the open countryside
A strong and diverse rural economy	Enterprise and employment, including social enterprise; the Gaeltacht economy; agri-food and generational renewal; a well-funded CAP and LEADER; tourism; remote working; digital and AI	A home for rural social enterprise; payment for results and advice that reaches the farm; CAP Network Ireland and a voice in Ireland's next CAP plan; mediation and succession; landscape profiles and place intelligence
Resilient rural communities	Inclusive, empowered communities, with the Gaeltacht and islands named; youth; amenities; social inclusion and isolation; ageing in place; culture; health and wellbeing; safer communities; the Irish language	Campaign two; resilience hubs and community centres; a daily contact for people living alone; AgriKids; evidence by gender and age; membership and peer networks in every county, the Gaeltacht and the islands
Sustaining our rural environment	Climate resilience; reliable, affordable renewable energy; climate-smart farming and forestry; the bioeconomy and circular economy; nature and biodiversity; coasts and seas	Campaign three; the Rural Futures Champion; renewable energy communities under SRESS; Breeding Waders, FarmPEAT and WaterLANDS; community benefit funds reaching host communities

HOW MEMBERS WILL SEE PROGRESS

- An annual account of the asks we made
- Decisions and funding that followed
- Evidence of our contribution, distinguishing confirmed influence from plausible contribution
- The reach of our research
- The representation roles held in members' name

THE ROLE OF MEMBERS Members themselves will provide evidence, contribute to policy positions and raise agreed campaigns with representatives in their own areas.

02 Strengthen our membership

A strong national voice begins with members who feel heard, supported and connected.

Our first responsibility is to the organisations Irish Rural Link represents: the members who own it. Consultation showed a significant difference between how members who hear from us regularly value membership and how less-connected members perceive it. We will address that gap, and communicate better with members, before placing all our attention on recruitment. Our Rural Future depends on strong local organisations and a new generation of volunteers; a membership that is heard and supported is where both begin.

Every member organisation will have a named contact within the Society and opportunities to connect with similar organisations. Members will know what they are entitled to, how decisions are taken and where to seek help, and joining and renewing will be straightforward.

We will also increase the practical value of membership. Advice on funding, governance and training will be available to a clearly defined level, with succession support for committees whose long-serving volunteers are stepping down. We will develop group purchasing, beginning with insurance and considering energy, payroll and compliance once the schemes can demonstrate savings and value. Member feedback and independently checked savings will guide future decisions.

We want a membership that reflects the whole island, including the Gaeltacht and the offshore islands, where distance, language and the ferry timetable shape every service. Our ambition is to reach **1,000 paid-up member organisations by 2031**. We will prioritise areas where our relationships are weak, build recruitment around the quality of member contact, and monitor retention as carefully as growth. Our Living Islands and the 20-Year Strategy for the Irish Language set the national frame for island and Gaeltacht communities; we will work with the island co-operatives, Gaeltacht development organisations and Údarás na Gaeltachta so that their experience reaches our policy work.

Members must also have places to shape the Society's work. We intend to hold regional assemblies each year and two Rural Parliaments during this plan. Peer groups and themed networks, for Meals on Wheels, childcare, community centres, renewable energy communities and social enterprises, will help members exchange experience, identify shared needs and develop collective responses. We ask every member to bring one organisation it works with into the Society. Certificates, member recognition and a common standard of practice will make membership more visible, but they will not substitute for real service and engagement.

HOW MEMBERS WILL SEE PROGRESS

- The proportion with a named contact
- Membership numbers and geographic coverage
- Retention levels
- Annual satisfaction and value scores
- Participation in assemblies
- Savings verified from purchasing schemes

OUR COMMITMENT We will publish what members tell us and act on it.

03 Demonstrate solutions

We will use projects and partnerships to show what works in rural communities, and translate the lessons into policy.

We will concentrate where member needs and practical experience give us a credible role, and social enterprises among our members will have a home in the co-operative and a place in every programme.

Rural Futures: how we will lead the transition

A Rural Futures Champion. We will create a senior Rural Futures role, established in stages as its funding is secured, to lead our work on landscape, nature, water, climate and community energy, so that environmental progress and community strength advance together. The role will build a Rural Landscape Charter, our position on landscape character, planning, heritage and appropriate development; a knowledge hub turning public data and local evidence into landscape profiles and place intelligence for local authorities, development companies and communities; and a staged programme that takes a parish from what it values to a costed, fundable landscape action plan. Each service will be developed on a full-cost-recovery basis.

Renewable energy communities first. Under SRESS a community can generate its own electricity and sell it at a guaranteed tariff for 15 years. We will help member communities to form renewable energy communities, secure SRESS support and put the income into the services their areas need, and we will prove the model in our own networks so that national schemes learn from rural practice. Irish Rural Link will lead this rural transition by doing it, parish by parish, and bringing the results to Government.

Keeping rural childcare available

PILLAR TWO · EDUCATION AND CHILDCARE

Community childcare services and childminders are essential to rural towns and villages; in small places a single closure can leave families without a realistic alternative. We will work with member services and childminders on shared administration, governance, staffing and access to funding and registration, argue for funding that reflects the cost of rural provision, and investigate a rural childcare network, creating one if members want it, under a Board-approved resource plan.

Supporting nature, water and climate action

PILLAR FIVE · SUSTAINING OUR RURAL ENVIRONMENT

Breeding Waders, FarmPEAT and WaterLANDS have shown how environmental action can be developed with the people who manage the land. We will build on that through results-based support for farmers, community-led restoration of wetlands, bogs and rivers, and practical advice on natural capital and climate adaptation, tested in our own networks before we seek to scale it. Where land use or peatland obligations put neighbours and agencies at odds, our mediation service will help them reach workable agreements.

Building lasting cross-border relationships

PILLAR FOUR · COHESIVE COMMUNITIES

Through RiSE and Maximising Community Space we work with partners and communities in Northern Ireland and the border counties on social enterprise, reconciliation and shared community facilities, and we want that collaboration to outlast funding cycles. We will contribute to PEACEPLUS 2, the renewed cross-border programme the European Commission has proposed for 2028 to 2034, in shaping its priorities and in delivering projects under it, designed with communities on both sides of the border.

Building community resilience

PILLAR FOUR · SAFER, MORE RESILIENT PLACES

We will support rural community centres and halls as the foundation of local life and work with public agencies on local emergency arrangements. Our ambition is **100 equipped resilience hubs in member halls by 2031**, recognised in local emergency plans, with our community champions re-energised when they are needed. Hubs will proceed only after protocols are agreed and the Board approves a realistic business case. After major emergencies we will gather the lessons in a Rural Resilience Report.

Farm safety through AgriKids

PILLAR FOUR · HEALTH, WELLBEING AND SAFETY

AgriKids, our farm safety education programme, teaches children to see the dangers on a farm before they are hurt by them. The Farm Safety Action Plan 2025 to 2027 puts children and older farmers at the centre of the national effort; vehicles caused every child death on Irish farms from 2020 to 2024. We will build AgriKids into the delivery of that plan and its successors through schools, community events and our members, reaching older farmers through the same networks.

A national Meals on Wheels co-operative

PILLAR FOUR · AGEING IN PLACE

Our ambition is a truly national Meals on Wheels service, operating as a social enterprise within the Irish Rural Link co-operative structure, owned by its participating services. The services would elect its board, Irish Rural Link would host it and employ its central staff, and local services would keep cooking and delivering. It would negotiate centrally with the HSE, local authorities and suppliers and run the shared ordering, rostering, compliance and payment systems, so that every older person in rural Ireland can rely on a meal and a daily contact.

HOW MEMBERS WILL SEE PROGRESS Projects contributing to the Society's core and policy evidence · Childcare services supported and the case for a network examined · Farmers and communities in environmental programmes, and results achieved · Renewable energy communities formed and earning for their areas · Mediation and succession cases resolved · Cross-border organisations working together · Children reached through AgriKids · Services in the Meals on Wheels co-operative · Emergency protocols and hubs that work in practice. **Members will be delivery partners as well as beneficiaries.**

SECTION 8 · FOUNDATION

Financial sustainability

Protecting our independent voice

Our advocacy must be able to continue even when an individual project ends.

Irish Rural Link cannot maintain a strong voice if it depends on constantly finding the next project to cover the costs of its core work. We therefore intend to build a sustainable mix of core funding, appropriate contributions from funded projects, membership income, donations and earned income.

A secure core will provide the policy, membership, communications, finance and governance capacity on which the whole organisation depends. We will cost that core fully, plan for the future of every post and maintain a reserves policy that helps us withstand funding disruption. We will seek longer-term core support, while recognising that no external funding agreement is guaranteed.

Every project must recover its full costs and contribute fairly to shared organisational functions. Where projects generate useful evidence and community benefit but cannot pay for themselves, we will make the choice openly and identify how the shortfall is funded.

SERVICES THAT MEMBERS NEED

Our members have told us they need practical support but have different abilities to pay. We will therefore pilot services before scaling them, offer clearly defined member benefits and set transparent charges for work beyond the included level.

SERVICE	WHAT IT IS AND HOW IT WILL BE OFFERED
Shared services	Finance, payroll, human resources, governance and compliance support for organisations too small to maintain their own back office.
Hosting	A supported home within the co-operative structure for networks and rural social enterprises, with clear terms, accountability and fair contributions to shared costs, so that Irish Rural Link becomes a recognised home for rural social enterprise in Ireland.
Mediation and succession	A mediation service for community groups, local authorities and State and semi-State bodies where land use, boundaries or conflicting mandates cause dispute, with any interests of the Society disclosed, and succession support for farms, businesses and community organisations planning leadership or ownership transitions, with specialist referrals where needed. The organisation that needs the solution covers the cost.
Group purchasing	Joint arrangements, beginning with insurance, that provide demonstrable savings to members and a sustainable contribution to the Society.
Community energy	Subject to an approved business case and legal safeguards, an enterprise that helps communities form renewable energy communities, secure SRESS support and benefit from renewable energy, with its income and any conflicts of interest reported openly, so that Irish Rural Link becomes a leading source of practical support for renewable and sustainable energy communities.
Rural Futures services	Landscape profiles, place intelligence, community landscape plans and training, commissioned by local authorities, development companies and community organisations on a full-cost-recovery basis, with a free first workshop for member communities.

Community benefit funds under RESS belong to eligible communities, and SRESS tariffs belong to the communities that generate. Irish Rural Link will help members understand and access both.

We will look for long-term philanthropic partners and welcome unrestricted gifts, but we will not build core spending plans around uncertain donations. Where a profitable activity can responsibly support a necessary but less commercially attractive service, the Board will adopt clear cross-subsidy rules.

HOW WE WILL MEASURE FINANCIAL STRENGTH

Each year we will report four measures:

Core covered
the proportion of core costs covered by unrestricted income

Funder dependency
the share of total income coming from our largest funder

Reserves
the number of months of unrestricted operating reserves

Net contribution
the net contribution made by each earned-income service

The Board will set target ranges and intervention thresholds through the annual budget, review them regularly and publish progress against them.

> Financial independence will be judged by the resilience of the organisation and its ability to serve members, not simply by growth in turnover.

Governance and accountability

Earning trust

Independence is a responsibility we must demonstrate, not just a value we claim.

Irish Rural Link works closely with Government departments, public agencies, European bodies and commercial partners. These relationships are necessary and valuable, but they can create real or perceived conflicts. Our governance arrangements must give members confidence that our policy positions remain their own.

The Board will continue to set policy positions on the basis of members' experience and evidence. Agreements will be reviewed to protect our ability to express an independent view, including the right to disagree with a funder or delivery partner. We will maintain registers of interests, external representative roles and hosted organisations, and ensure that potential conflicts are declared and managed.

We strengthened our governance framework in 2026 through updated Board and staff handbooks and declarations. During this plan, policies will be kept current, version-controlled and reviewed on a clear cycle. Employment, data protection and trading arrangements will receive appropriate professional review before being put into effect. Hosted bodies and any community energy enterprise will have the legal and operational arrangements appropriate to their activities, with responsibilities and employment status determined by substance. Where the Society mediates, it will assess and declare any relevant interests, ensure the mediation can be conducted impartially, decline any dispute to which it or a project it hosts is a party, and keep its mediation separate from its advocacy.

All staff will be introduced to the co-operative's membership purpose and will have a role in maintaining good relationships with members. Communications will be factual, clearly sourced and accessible. We will use our website, local radio and appropriate partnerships to make rural evidence easier to find, respond responsibly to misinformation and help others report our work accurately.

WHAT WE WILL PUBLISH

Each year our members will receive an **impact report** describing what we achieved, what changed as a result and what remains unfinished. Alongside it, an **independence statement** will show income by source, representative roles, relevant interests, the Society's involvement in community energy and the mediation it has provided. We will explain significant changes to our plans and why they were made.

> The Board will review delivery at every scheduled meeting. A public mid-term review will give members and partners an opportunity to test the direction of the plan and recommend changes for the years remaining.

HOW MEMBERS HOLD THE SOCIETY TO ACCOUNT



Eleven of the fifteen elected Board places are held by member delegates

Each member organisation has one vote. The Board, not a funder or client, sets every policy position the Society takes.

What members receive, and when

- **Every Board meeting:** delivery reviewed against the implementation plan
- **Every year:** the impact report, the independence statement and the scorecard
- **Mid-term:** a public review that can change the plan
- **Every Annual General Meeting:** members decide whether we have kept our word

SECTION 10

How we will judge progress

A strategy is useful only if people can see whether it is making a difference. We will publish a concise scorecard each year, supported by more detailed information on projects, finances and governance. Baselines will be confirmed at the start of 2027 and included in the first annual report.

FIVE COMMITMENTS FOR 2031

1 Our voice makes a difference

We will show where our campaigns contributed to changes in Government decisions, funding or legislation. The evidence will include the original policy ask, our engagement, the decision taken and a careful assessment of our contribution.

2 Members are engaged and supported

We will report on progress towards 1,000 paid-up organisations, membership in all 32 counties, named contacts, retention, member satisfaction and participation in the Society's work.

3 Rural evidence informs decisions

The Rural Voice Panel and annual member survey will inform the State of Rural Ireland report. We will publish the reach of that evidence and show where it is used in policy, Oireachtas debates and other public discussions.

4 Communities see practical benefits

We will report verified purchasing savings, meals delivered through the national Meals on Wheels service, member services used, mediation and succession cases supported, renewable energy communities formed, environmental outcomes, cross-border cooperation and the progress of recognised resilience hubs.

5 Our independence is more secure

We will report whether the organisational core is adequately funded, whether reserves and income diversity are improving, and whether earned-income services make a sustainable net contribution.

Alongside the five headline measures, we will monitor the number and quality of regional assemblies, two planned Rural Parliaments over the life of the strategy, the performance of the three flagship campaigns, the strength of national and European partnerships, programme delivery with members, and the annual publication of our independence and impact reports.

HOW WE WILL MEASURE THE THREE CAMPAIGNS

Fairness in the cost of rural living

- Budget measures that explicitly address rural energy costs, with the first by Budget 2028
- The rural cost gap cited in at least one Government social protection or fuel support assessment each year
- The Rural Cost Gap Index published before every Budget, and the measured gap tracked year on year
- Rural childcare services supported to stay open, against a 2027 baseline
- Rural cost criteria in at least one national housing or childcare funding scheme by 2031
- Rural Voice Panel households in villages and small towns within walking distance of a scheduled public transport service, alongside routes added each year

Resilient rural communities

- Emergency protocols agreed with local authorities and the HSE, covering every local authority area by 2030, and a Rural Resilience Report after each major emergency
- Resilience hubs established, verified as operational and recognised in local emergency plans
- Rural representation and budget provision in the new municipal councils after the 2029 elections
- Services participating in the national Meals on Wheels service, central agreements reached with the HSE, local authorities and suppliers, and people living alone reached with a meal and a daily contact
- Mediation and succession cases supported, and essential rural services at risk where our intervention is documented
- Children reached through AgriKids farm safety education each year, and older farmers reached through the same networks
- Member organisations in the Gaeltacht and on the islands, and weekly social contact among people living alone, measured through the Rural Voice Panel

A fair rural transition

- Communities supported to access RESS community benefit funds and SRESS tariffs, and the share that receive a fair share
- Renewable energy communities formed and supported each year, and the income they return to local services
- The community energy enterprise launched only with an approved business case and safeguards, and its income reported openly
- Farmers and landholders enrolled in results-based programmes, and hectares under results-based management
- Verified outcomes: breeding wader numbers, hectares of wetland, bog and river restored, and progress against the water baselines of 54% and 22%
- The Rural Landscape Charter published, landscape plans delivered with communities, and national schemes that adopt our approach, including the CAP after 2027 and the Nature Restoration Plan

We will distinguish **activity** from **impact**. For example, holding a meeting or issuing a submission tells us what we did. A funding decision, changed policy, stronger local service or measurable member saving gives a clearer indication of what that work achieved. Where our influence is one factor among many, we will describe that honestly.

> The scorecard will be considered at each Board meeting and updated annually alongside the budget. At mid-term, the Board will decide what should continue, change, scale back or stop.

SECTION 11

Delivering the plan responsibly

The published strategy sets the direction. A separate internal implementation plan will describe the work needed to deliver it, with responsible leads, dates, costs, funding, milestones, dependencies and evidence of progress. The Board will review that plan at each of its four scheduled meetings every year and refresh it alongside the annual budget.

We will not treat every ambition as an unconditional promise. Some activities depend on public agreements, specialist capacity or future funding. Those dependencies will be made explicit and tested before major resources are committed.

In particular, no resilience hub programme will expand without agreed public-service protocols and an approved operating and capital model. The Rural Voice Panel will grow through staged recruitment under an approved methodology. Shared services and the mediation and succession service will be piloted and priced before expansion. The national Meals on Wheels service will grow with the services that join it and will depend on agreements with the HSE and local authorities. A community energy enterprise will require a satisfactory business case and safeguards against conflicts of interest. The Rural Futures role and its services will be established in stages as their funding is secured. New cross-border programmes will depend on the final shape of PEACEPLUS 2 and the strength of our partnerships. A European Rural Parliament bid will depend on the Society's membership and organisational readiness at the mid-term review.

TESTS FOR EVERY PROGRAMME

Our projects have value in their own right: they support people, services, farms and communities, and they give us evidence of approaches that could work more widely. Every new or renewed programme will be assessed against clear tests: alignment with our strategy, full cost recovery, a named manager, a fair contribution to core costs and useful learning for members and policymakers. We will decide the future of each project post well before its funding ends.

DELIVERING WITH GOVERNMENT

Our Rural Future 2026 to 2031 commits to annual progress reports, an Implementation Advisory Group, rural indicators developed with the CSO and a rural development dashboard by 2028. We will seek a place in that oversight, offer the Rural Voice Panel and the State of Rural Ireland report as the ground-up half of those indicators, and report our contribution under each of the policy's five pillars in the annual impact report, so that Government, members and the public can see where rural Ireland is improving and where it is being left behind.

THE RISKS WE WILL MANAGE

Dependence on short-term projects

We will cost the core properly, require fair project contributions, maintain reserves and decide the future of posts well before their projects finish.

Loss of independence

We will monitor concentration of income, maintain clear conflict-of-interest rules, disclose material relationships and preserve the Board's right to set policy.

Services that fail to cover their costs

New services will begin as tested pilots with realistic pricing. The Board will review performance and discontinue or redesign lines that are not delivering value.

Growing membership without building relationships

Named contacts, renewal and member satisfaction will come before recruitment campaigns.

Community organisations losing capacity

Our governance helpdesk, succession support and hosting options will be developed early, with priority given to member organisations most at risk.

Interruptions to cross-border and European programmes

We will preserve relationships between funding rounds and pursue the next programme only where it fits our priorities and resources.

We will be open about these choices, and if circumstances change we will explain why we have changed course. The plan exists to make Irish Rural Link more useful and more accountable to rural communities, and we will not defend an original assumption for its own sake.

JOIN US IN SPEAKING FOR RURAL IRELAND

Irish Rural Link belongs to the member organisations that make it up. Membership is open to rural community organisations, service providers, social enterprises and networks across the island of Ireland, and to individuals. Members elect the Board, hold one vote each and help shape the positions we take.

If your organisation wants to strengthen rural services, influence policy, connect with others or contribute its experience to a national voice, we would welcome a conversation.

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HOLD US TO THIS PLAN

Every year we will publish an impact report and an independence statement, and at the mid-term review we will say in public what has worked, what has not and what we will change. Members decide at every Annual General Meeting whether we have kept our word.

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THE SIX PARTS OF THIS PLAN

Influence policy and decisions	Strengthen our membership	Demonstrate solutions	Fairness in the cost of rural living	Resilient rural communities	A fair rural transition
Priority one	Priority two	Priority three	Campaign one	Campaign two	Campaign three



Irish Rural Link

Sustainable Rural Communities

Irish Rural Link is core funded by the Scheme to Support National Organisations (SSNO) funded by the Department of Rural and Community Development through Pobal.

pobal
government supporting communities

Rialtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland