

Section 25A. (1) Report (Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended)

Department of Rural and Community Development – Southern Region Assembly report 2022

1) Outline of progress made by DRCD in supporting the objectives of the RSES.

- a) Planning for future growth in rural areas including housing, regeneration and renewal.

Rural Regeneration and Development Fund

The Rural Regeneration and Development Fund (RRDF) provides investment to support rural renewal, strengthen and build resilience in rural communities and assist in the regeneration of towns and villages with a population of less than 10,000, and outlying areas. The RRDF has a key role in delivering on the aims of the National Development Plan, in particular the National Strategic Outcome (NSO) of Strengthening the Rural Economy and Communities and seeks to promote balanced regional development, including reversing rural population decline and enabling population growth and development.

The projects supported by the RRDF assist in the regeneration of rural towns and villages, positioning them for further growth through regeneration and town centre renewal. The types of projects supported by the RRDF include measures to address dereliction and vacancy and town centre residency projects.

Our Rural Future

The new rural development policy recognises the significance of provision of essential services. Through Our Rural Future we will enhance public services in rural areas, in sectors such as public transport, health, and community safety.

The provision of serviced sites is a commitment in the policy, to be delivered by Local Authorities and funded by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage.

The policy also acknowledges the issue of water infrastructure for rural communities, with measures in the policy to be delivered by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage.

- b) Detail on sustainable rural development including; strengthened rural networks, economies and communities; regeneration of rural areas and enhanced vibrancy in these areas; the management of urban generated growth in areas under strong urban influence; the encouragement of sustainable growth in areas that have experienced decline or stagnation; and progress on placemaking to counteract physical decline such as vacancy and dereliction.

Rural Regeneration and Development Fund

The investment provided by the RRDF seeks to support project that can deliver transformative change in rural towns and villages, delivering sustainable social and economic benefits for rural communities and that can act as a catalyst for increased activity in rural areas.

Projects funded under the RRDF will assist in achieving sustainable community and economic development in rural Ireland including: the revitalisation and regeneration of towns and villages,

the encouragement of entrepreneurship and innovation, the development of key economic growth sectors, the development of tourism and place making initiatives and improved community development and quality of life.

The RRDF has to date provided funding of €277m for 191 projects costing €375m.

The fourth call for Category 1 projects is was announced in December 2021. A key focus of the this call for Category 1 proposals is to support projects that help revitalise our rural towns and villages through planned and sustainable regeneration and development, driving greater economic activity and footfall and addressing vacancy and dereliction, and projects which will provide the necessary infrastructure and facilities in term of remote working, town centre residency and economic and enterprise development that will assist in attracting people back to live in rural areas and support economic development.

CLÁR

CLÁR is a targeted investment programme that aims to provide funding for small infrastructural projects in rural areas that experience disadvantage and significant levels of de-population over a defined period. There are designated CLÁR areas in all counties excluding Dublin, Kildare and Wexford.

The 2021 CLÁR Programme included a new Innovation Measure targeted at piloting new ideas which address specific challenges faced by communities in CLÁR areas, including those associated with rural isolation, village decline, service accessibility, population change, social disadvantage and marginalisation in communities. Since the programme was relaunched in 2016, it has provided funding of over €45.2 million for over 1,700 projects under a range of different Measures.

Recognising the importance of the CLÁR programme to some of our most remote rural areas, an increase in funding was secured under Budget 2022, bringing the total allocation from €5.5m in 2021 to €7 million for 2022. The Measures to be funded in 2022 are currently being reviewed and will be launched in the coming weeks.

Town and Village Renewal Scheme

The Town and Village Renewal Scheme supports the revitalisation of Ireland's rural towns and villages.

It funds a diverse range of projects nationwide including public realm improvement, community parks and infrastructure, digital hubs, as well as the regeneration of derelict buildings and enhancement works at tourism attractions and other important local amenities. The 2021 Scheme was launched with an indicative budget of €15 million and places particular emphasis on addressing vacancy and dereliction, projects supporting remote working, and enhancing town centre living. Details of the projects to be supported under the 2021 Town and Village Renewal Scheme will be announced in early 2022.

Since the launch of the Town and Village Renewal Scheme in 2016, over €93 million of funding has been approved for more than 1,340 projects across Ireland. Details of the 2022 Town & Village Renewal Scheme will be announced when the scheme is formally launched the coming months.

LEADER

The LEADER approach to rural development is based on a number of key principles to guide the practice of community-led local development. The website of the National Rural Network (www.nationalruralnetwork.ie) contains case-studies of how LEADER has benefited local communities and businesses.

Connected Hubs

Our Rural Future, Ireland's Rural Development Policy 2021-2025, recognises the opportunity for rural rejuvenation that remote working presents and commits to establishing a comprehensive and integrated network of remote working hubs over the lifetime of the policy to 2025. In May 2021 Ireland's first ever National hub network, connectedhubs.ie was launched by Minister Humphreys. It is a single network of over 170 remote working facilities where the aim is for ConnectedHubs.ie to link over 400 hubs nationally, giving people the option to work within their own communities – regardless of where their employer is headquartered. Last year, through the Connected Hubs funding stream, Minister Humphreys awarded almost €9 million in funding to over 100 successful applicants. This allowed for the expansion of remote working infrastructure in digital hubs and broadband connection points in both urban and rural areas. Notwithstanding the clear benefits to individuals and families in terms of quality of life indicators, remote working from hubs will also support local economies, increase footfall to rural towns and villages, reduce carbon emissions and may arrest or reverse the depopulation of certain areas.

Our Rural Future

The theme of sustainability underpins the new rural development policy, with commitments across the whole-of-Government for sustainable rural development. A key objective of the Policy is the revitalisation of rural towns and villages and it outlines a range of measures that invest in their potential to remain or become vibrant hubs of economic and social activity.

The policy advocates a bottom-up approach, with local governance and community engagement to develop balanced regional plans, with a focus on place and the unique opportunities and challenges for individual towns and villages.

- c) The protection of existing rural economies such as valuable agricultural lands to ensure sustainable food supply and protecting the value and character of the open countryside.

Our Rural Future

The new rural development policy contains a range of measures to support the sustainability of the Agriculture, Marine and Forestry sectors. These policy commitments will be delivered, primarily by the Department of Agriculture, Food & the Marine, over the policy's five year lifetime.

- d) Supports related to a sustainable rural economy, which can withstand economic shocks and sustain growth, and measures for economic diversification to create additional jobs and maximise opportunities in sectors, such as agri-business, renewable energy, tourism, fishing and aquaculture, the bioeconomy, and forestry enterprises.

Rural Regeneration and Development Fund

The Rural Regeneration and Development Fund supports the development of key sectors including tourism, the bio economy and agri-business. The types of intervention that will be supported under the RRDF include:

Projects which consolidate and better position our strong existing tourism offering, particularly those which will directly benefit rural towns and villages. In addition, projects which seek to avail of evidence-based opportunities, including environmental or ecotourism or marine and activity tourism.

Projects that support the development and diversification of the agri-food sector in rural areas including the development of production facilities demonstrate the potential of the bioeconomy provision of facilities to add value to agri-food products and to encourage innovation and collaboration in the sector.

LEADER

In April 2021, the Minister for Rural and Community Development announced a €70 million Transitional LEADER Programme for the period 2021-2022.

This support, which is co-funded by the European Union, will provide rural communities and local enterprises throughout Ireland with an opportunity to respond to emerging challenges in their area by supporting measures that provide employment and job creation, as well as promoting the value of social capital and environmental protection.

Interested applicants should, in the first instance; contact the relevant Local Action Group (LAG) through its Implementing Partner to discuss the eligibility of the project and the funding that may be available.

The list of all Local Action Groups, their Implementing Partners and their contact details, is available on the Department's website at the following link: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/c45498-local-action-groups>.

Outdoor Recreation and Infrastructure Scheme

The Outdoor Recreation and Infrastructure Scheme (ORIS) provides funding in partnership with Fáilte Ireland, for the development and enhancement of outdoor recreational infrastructure such as walking trails, forest walks, beaches, bogs, lakes, blueways and local greenways. The scheme invests in physical infrastructure that underpins recreational activities based on the use of the resources of the countryside. The 2021 scheme, in particular, supported recreational infrastructure that not only provides an outlet for the communities in which they are situated but also delivers added value from a tourism perspective, positioning rural areas to respond to the post-COVID-19 economic environment.

A total of 273 projects valued at almost €18.9 million were approved under the ORIS 2021 programme. Over €855k of this was approved for a new Project Development Measure introduced to assist Local Authorities to scope and carry out all the necessary preparatory work e.g. ecological screening, design etc. to develop outdoor recreation projects.

Recognising the importance of the ORIS, an increase in funding was secured under Budget 2022, bringing the total allocation from €12m in 2021 to €15 million for 2022. The Measures to be funded in 2022 are currently being reviewed and will be launched in the coming weeks.

Our Rural Future

The rural development policy recognises the need for diversification in rural economies and maximising opportunities in both traditional and emerging sectors, such as outdoor and activity tourism, offshore wind energy and the bioeconomy.

Other policy commitments relating to regional job creation will be delivered by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment and relevant State Agencies, including IDA Ireland and Enterprise Ireland.

The policy recognises the opportunities presented by remote working and supports the development of a remote working hub network, to facilitate regional growth.

Additional measures for delivery include access to education, training, apprentices and meaningful career opportunities to ensure balanced regional investment and growth.

e) Progress relating to a Low Carbon Just Transition.

Our Rural Future

The policy outlines an ambition to support a Just Transition for rural communities to a sustainable, resilient and climate neutral economy and society. The Department of Environment, Climate and Communications has lead responsibility for a range of measures contained in the policy to contribute to the Just Transition agenda.

While DRCD is not a lead Department in respect of major climate actions, the issue of the Just Transition is of particular interest. Rural communities in particular are at risk of bearing a disproportionate cost of the adaptation measures that will be required to meet climate action targets. The measures being implemented in the Midlands are vital for that region, but will be informative for the national response including the Southern Region. DRCD is an active participant on the Just Transition Taskforce.

- f) Detail relating to the local link Rural Transport Programme throughout rural communities in the Southern Region and the integration of this service with other public transport services, improving linkages of services between towns, villages and rural communities, ensuring fully accessible vehicles operate on all services, while improving the overall customer experience.

Our Rural Future

The rural development policy recognises that transport links are significantly important for people who live and work in rural areas. Improvement and further integration of rural public transport services will enable people to continue to live in rural areas and to access work, education and social activities.

Our Rural Future contains a measures to support improvements in rural transport services, including bus, rail and Local Link services. These policy commitments will be delivered by the Department of Transport and the National Transport Authority over the policy's five year lifetime.

- g) Detail relating to the provision of sustainable transport options including cycling and pedestrian infrastructure in smaller towns and villages in the Southern Region, providing safe cycling routes in small towns and villages across the Southern Region, and enhancing pedestrian facilities in all rural communities based in the Region.

Rural Regeneration and Development Fund

The Rural Regeneration and Development Fund supports a range of measures that will deliver improved accessibility and pedestrian facilities in rural communities including large-scale public realm projects in towns and villages, infrastructure that enables improved accessibility, supporting in particular sustainable modes of transport such as walking, cycling and public transport links.

Projects such as walkways, cycleways and pedestrian infrastructure that are centred in towns or villages have been supported through the Town and Village Renewal Scheme.

Outdoor Recreation and Infrastructure Scheme

The Outdoor Recreation and Infrastructure Scheme (ORIS) provides funding for the development and/or enhancement of outdoor recreational infrastructure such as cycleways, walking trails, blueways and mountain access routes in rural areas.

- h) Progress relating to community development including enabling increased active participation and social integration of minority groups, including the aging population, those with disabilities, non-Irish nationals and Travellers for instance.

Rural Regeneration and Development Fund

The Rural Regeneration and Development Fund supports projects that deliver essential community infrastructure in the centre of rural towns and villages including the co-location of community services. Projects funded under the RRDF will deliver a range of community infrastructure including libraries and community resource centres that will enable the integration and active participation of minority groups.

Tidy Towns

Tidy Towns has become Ireland's most well-known and popular local environmental and sustainable initiative. It is voluntary- based and has provided opportunities for active participation for over sixty years, increasing pride of place and improving the environment in towns across the Country

The SuperValu TidyTowns Competition is administered by the Department with sponsorship from SUPERVALU. In 2021, Minister Humphreys announced a €1.5million grant scheme to assist TidyTowns groups with their initiatives. This brings the total funding provided since 2017 to €6.7 million.

The competition proceeded in 2021 with entry via electronic means and adjudication in the main, being conducted remotely. At a results ceremony in November in the RDS, Minister Humphreys announced Ennis as Ireland's Tidiest Town for 2021

Throughout 2021, the TidyTowns unit increased capacity building and engagement with groups and volunteers through the TidyTowns newsletters and postings on social media. Information on the various competition categories and the Sustainable Development Goals featured throughout the year.

The Seniors Alert Scheme

The *Seniors Alert Scheme* encourages community support for vulnerable older people in our communities through the provision of personal monitored alarms to enable them to live securely in their homes with confidence, independence and peace of mind.

A total of 34,745 participants from the South East, the South-West and the Mid-West respectively, have been approved as part of the Scheme to the end of 2021.

Libraries

The public library strategy, 'Our Public Libraries 2022', aims to establish a modern, progressive library service which connects and supports communities and individuals and to increase the level of usage of public libraries across communities.

Among other things, the strategy focuses on removing barriers to access and improving accessibility, with a specific focus on communities and individuals at risk of being socially excluded, marginalised or disadvantaged. The Dormant Accounts Action Plan approved €635,000 in 2020, and a further €650,000 in 2021, for programming in public libraries to support disadvantaged, marginalised and socially excluded communities. The 2021 Action Plan also approved €200,000 for a Digital Equity and Social Inclusion Programme to support the purchase of modern equipment in public libraries for people with a disability, and also those with sensory needs. It also provided €100,000 for the First 5 Little Library Initiative. This project aims to support the development of little libraries in early learning and care settings and encourage a love of books and reading among our youngest children. Under this initiative, more than 4,500 early learning and care settings were invited to collect free book bags and other resources from their local library. The 2021 funding also included funding of €100,000 to Foróige to provide programming for teenagers in public libraries.

The 2022 Dormant Accounts Action Plan has approved €700,000 for literacy supports, programming and Digital Equity and Social Inclusion. In addition, a further €150,000 is being provided for the next phase of the First 5 Little Library Initiative.

In July 2021 Libraries Capital Programme funding of €2.245m was allocated to the new Mayfair Library in Kilkenny, which is currently under construction and due for completion in Q1 2023. The department also approved funding of €469,000 for the continuing roll out of the My Open Library service and to support the provision of library delivery vehicles.

Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme

Through the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme the Department provides funding to Local Development Companies to complete work in this area. In excess of €220m of funding is being provided nationally over the six years from 2018 to 2023.

Community Policy

Local Community Development Committees (LCDCs) are a cornerstone of meaningful participation in decision making and community development at a local level. LCDCs are committees established in each local authority area on foot of *Putting People First - Action Programme for Effective Local Government and the Local Government Reform Act of 2014*, and draw on the expertise and experience of public and private people and organisations in each local authority area.

The purpose of the LCDC is to develop, co-ordinate and implement a coherent and integrated approach to local and community development. LCDCs promote meaningful citizen and community engagement in the planning and evaluation of development programmes. LCDCs manage the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP) at a local level with support from Local authorities and actions are delivered by Local Development Companies (LDCs).

The LCDC Review, published in 2019, made recommendations aimed at strengthening the role and effectiveness of LCDCs. These recommendations were echoed in the 2019 policy document, *Sustainable, Inclusive and Empowered Communities: a five-year strategy to support the community and voluntary sector in Ireland*. DRCD are currently implementing the strategy, with current work focusing on a comprehensive training needs assessment of the sector and its supporting structures, including LCDCs. The outputs of the assessment will inform the design of supports to assist the sector and its supporting structures including LCDCs and PPNs, to build capacity, and to strengthen their role – with the ultimate objective of better outcomes for communities and the individuals who live, work in and enjoy them.

The **Local Economic and Community Plan (LECP)** is an important element of the local planning process detailed in the *Local Government Reform Act 2014* and is linked with broader national and regional planning processes. The LECP sets out the objectives and actions that will be needed to promote the economic, local and community development of the relevant area, both by the Local Authority directly and in partnership with other relevant economic and community development stakeholders.

A full public consultation will be undertaken by each LA to support the development of the next iteration of LECPs. Dormant account funding has been secured for a project which will include the development of toolkits to assist the engagement of marginalised communities in planning and decision-making processes.

Community Services Programme

The Community Services Programme (CSP) supports 420 community organisations to provide local services through a social enterprise model. The CSP provides an annual co-funding contribution of

€19,033 for each fulltime equivalent (FTE) position being supported, and, where warranted, provides €32,000 towards the cost of employing a manager. The aim of the CSP is to create sustainable jobs for those most distant from the labour market, in particular for those who are long term unemployed and from specific target groups.

There are 3 main types of project funded under the Programme:

1. Community services for disadvantaged people, for example: home insulation; disability transport; meals-on-wheels and centre-based day care and social activities; personal security and visitation services; community radio and other forms of community media
2. Community enterprises employing those most distant from the labour market including the long term unemployed, people with disabilities, Travellers, recovering drug misusers and/or ex-offenders or those in contact with the Probation Service. The employing company or co-op must operate as a social enterprise and demonstrate some form of progression of the workers.
3. Community halls and facilities available for community use which enable the day-to-day operation of community infrastructure.

- i) The role of digitalisation in enhancing rural development and communities, including the provision of broadband and development of smart towns and villages.

Broadband Connection Points and Remote Working Hubs

Broadband Connection Points (BCPs) are a key element of the National Broadband Plan providing high speed broadband to publicly accessible buildings for onsite use. There will be BCPs in every county in advance of the roll out of the fibre to the home network. As of January 2022, 250 BCP sites have been fully installed and are now operational. A further c.50 sites will be completed in the coming months. BCPs are predominantly in rural and isolated areas, including a number of our off-shore islands.

BCPs will be supported by DRCD to become long-term, digitally-enabled community assets meeting a number of local and regional development needs. These supports include the trialling, refining and scaling of eHealth, digital skills and remote work and study initiatives.

A two year development strategy for the nationwide BCP network will be finalised in 2022. This strategy will seek to encourage and facilitate BCPs to meet local needs and to mature as a national network of community-based digital hubs. DRCD will continue to make specific supports, including funding, available to the BCP network throughout 2022.

Connected Hubs

Our Rural Future, Ireland's Rural Development Policy 2021-2025, recognises the potential of remote working hubs as key economic assets for our rural towns and villages. ConnectedHubs.ie is Ireland's first ever National hub network, a Government of Ireland initiative led by the Department of Rural and Community Development and supported by Government, remote working advocacy groups and industry representatives. Launched in May 2021, it is a single network of over 170 remote working facilities that provides users with information on the location of, and facilities available at remote working hubs throughout Ireland. Ultimately our aim is for ConnectedHubs.ie to link over 400 hubs nationally, giving people the option to work within their own communities – regardless of where their employer is headquartered. The network provides a vehicle for individual hubs to come together under a shared identity to maximise the economic opportunity of remote working. The

Connected Hubs platform is a key part of making remote working a reality for thousands of people post Covid-19.

Last year, through the Connected Hubs funding stream, close to €9 million in funding was awarded to over 100 successful applicants. This funding allowed for the expansion of existing hub facilities and remote working infrastructure in digital hubs (including Broadband Connection Points (BCPs)) throughout the country.

In support of the strategic development of the National Hub Network, a 2022 Connected Hubs fund will be launched shortly to further develop and leverage the capacity and quality of existing remote working facilities across the State. Funding available for the 2022 Connected Hubs Call has been provisionally set at €5 million. The primary objective of the Connected Hubs 2022 Call will be to support and complement the development of our National Hub Network, which is a key action of the Rural Development Policy – *Our Rural Future* and the National Remote Working Strategy – *Making Remote Work*.

A significant number of initiatives will also be developed through the National Hub Network during 2022 including - engagement with potential corporate clients with a view to building a revenue stream for the Connectedhubs platform contributing to its sustainability; supporting collective engagement between Connected Hubs and large scale employers and supporting collaborative projects in the Network to drive economies of scale and helping identify the benefits that Connected Hubs delivers for their local communities and the wider economy and exploring the potential climate-related benefits of the National Hub Network.

Town and Village Renewal Scheme

Funding has been provided under the Town and Village Renewal Scheme to equip a number of Broadband Connection points, as well as to adapt community owned premises in order to facilitate remote working.

Rural Regeneration and Development Fund

The Rural Regeneration and Development Fund provides support for projects that support job creation, entrepreneurship and innovation in rural areas including the provision of remote working facilities, Digital and Enterprise Hubs and training facilities. The RRDF also provide funding to provide assistance to the management and development of a project once construction is completed.

LEADER

LEADER funding supports locally-led projects, which focus on many of the key themes of Our Rural Future such as; building capacity and empowering local communities, embracing opportunities in the green economy, supporting remote working and the digital transformation.

The Smart Villages concept is closely aligned to the LEADER approach. This can be achieved by maximising the potential of rural communities, which can build on their own strengths through digital skills development and maximising the usage of remote working facilities.

Libraries

The public library strategy, 'Our Public Libraries 2022', commits to providing additional opening hours for the public, ensuring each library provides the optimum staffed service and provides the *My Open Library* service in appropriate branches. *My Open Library* is the flagship initiative under the new strategy that offers extended opening hours for members from 8 a.m. to 10 p.m., 365 days

per year, complementing regular staffed hours and optimising service delivery, promoting community engagement and facilitating improved programming activities.

The *My Open Library* service will be operational in 34 libraries when the service re-opens from March 2022. DRCD has approved funding for the provision of the service in a further 16 branches and it will be included in an additional 19 new library construction projects that are being funded by Libraries Capital Programme, RRDF and URDF, bringing to 69 the total number of branches providing the service. The strategy commits to the service being available in 200 branches by 2028.

2) Details of any DRCD policy initiatives/developments that have been finalised or are in preparatory stages that support the objectives of the RSES.

a) Our Rural Future - Rural Development Policy 2021-2025

Our Rural Future

Our Rural Future is the whole-of-Government policy for the sustainable development of rural Ireland for the period 2021-2025, which was launched in March 2021. It contains more than 150 commitments for delivery across Government and is the most ambitious and transformational policy for rural development in Ireland for decades.

The policy supports the delivery of other key Government policies and objectives, including Project Ireland 2040, the forthcoming National Economic Recovery Plan, the Climate Action Plan, the National Remote Work Strategy, the forthcoming Agri-Food Strategy, and the Town Centre First initiative. It focuses on optimising the opportunities from high speed broadband for individuals, communities and businesses, emphasising the potential for remote working to transform rural Ireland with more people living and working in rural areas.

The Government's vision is for a thriving rural Ireland which is integral to our national wellbeing and development, built on the interdependence between rural and urban areas.

Our Rural Future recognises that both have a role to play in our post-COVID recovery, which must be both inclusive and sustainable. The policy takes a more strategic, ambitious and holistic approach to investing in, and maximising, opportunities for rural areas. It will bring about improved opportunities for communities and a better quality of life for all people, to ensure no one is left behind.

In terms of High-Level Outcomes, Our Rural Future provides a framework to get more people living and working in rural areas, to revitalise our towns, to ensure people benefit from the transition and to ensure that communities can play an active role in shaping their futures. Amongst the measures for delivery are commitments aimed at supporting sustainable rural development, the regeneration of town centres and rural areas, meaningful career opportunities in the green and circular economies, access to public services (including rural transport links), local amenities and facilities for all cohorts, and enhanced community participation in rural development.

The 2021 Work Programme is available online. The Department is currently developing the 2022 Work Programme, and it is expected that this will be published in the coming weeks. Annual work programmes allow for the inclusion of new priorities and commitments.

Progress of measures for delivery are monitored by DRCD and will be overseen by the Cabinet Committee on Economic Recovery and Investment. Progress reports are published every six months; the first of which is scheduled for Q1 2022,

Our Rural Future is available at <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/4c236-our-rural-future-vision-and-policy-context/>

Town & Village Renewal Scheme

In line with Our Rural Future the 2021 Town & Village Renewal Scheme will provide funding to bring vacant and derelict buildings and sites back into use as homes, multi-purpose spaces and remote working hubs. Details of the projects to be funded under the 2021 Town and Village Renewal Scheme will be announced in early 2022.

b) The Town Centre First Approach.

The Town Centre Living Initiative (TCLI) was a pilot scheme which aimed to develop innovative proposals to respond to challenges relating to vacant properties in rural towns and villages and encouraging people to live in town centres. The independent report on (TCLI) was published on 22nd June 2020. The Report set out key issues to encourage increased town centre living and the repurposing of vacant properties for residential purposes and highlighted the multiplicity of factors that need to be addressed to encourage town centre living.

Following this, an Inter-Departmental Group was established to consider all of the suggested actions in the report on the Town Centre Living initiative, as well as progressing the commitment in the Programme for Government to develop a Town Centre First approach to the regeneration of our towns and villages. The Group was chaired jointly by DRCD and the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage. Through the establishment of a number of working groups the IDG collated input and produced the Town Centre First policy document, which was approved by Government in Dec 2021 and is due to be announced shortly.

c) The review of procedures relating to Local Economic and Community Plans.

Local Community Development Committee Supports

The LECP is an important element of the local planning process detailed in the Local Government Reform Act 2014 and is linked with broader national and regional planning processes. The LECP sets out the objectives and actions that will underpin the promotion of the economic, local and community development of the relevant area, both by the Local Authority directly and in partnership with social partners and civic interest groups.

As the LECP is an important part of the effort to support more sustainable development at a local level, it is critical that it reflects national priorities across a range of policy areas. In this context DRCD engaged with sectoral interests including Regional Assemblies, C & V interests, economic

groupings and PPN pillars in relation to the development of guidelines to support the LECP planning and subsequent implementation processes.

An Advisory Group was established to support this process with representation from a number of bodies including the;

- Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (DHLGH) and the Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation,
- The Rural Development, Community, Tourism, Culture & Heritage (RCTCH) and the Business, Enterprise, Innovation & Urban/Town Economic Renewal (BEIUR) committees of the CCMA; and
- The three Regional Assemblies - Northern and Western Regional Assembly (NWRA), Eastern and Midlands Regional Assembly (EMRA) and the Southern Regional Assembly (SRA).

The new Local Economic and Community Plan (LECP) Guidelines were officially launched in November 2021 and they build on the lessons learned from the current LECP cycle as well as changed policy, strategic and socio-economic context. The LECP process will include the overall strategic Framework LECP that outlines the High-Level Goals, objectives and outcomes over the 6-year planning period and an Implementation Plan process that will detail the prioritised actions for that implementation plan period. The revised LECP Guidelines include clear guidance on monitoring and evaluation of the LECPs.

New LECPs will be produced by all Local Authorities in 2022, drawing from the revised LECP Guidelines, and informed by extensive consultation with stakeholders. DRCD, in collaboration with DHLGH, will continue to support the development of the LECPs through a series of events thematic webinars scheduled to take place in Q1 2022 which will help equip the LCDCs with the required knowledge and skills for the preparation of the LECP. These will be designed and delivered in partnership with other relevant Departments/Stakeholders.

- d) Any other policy initiatives/developments that are relevant, including those by agencies under the aegis of DRCD.

National Social Enterprise Policy 2019-2022

Ireland's first National Social Enterprise Policy was launched in July 2019. The Policy is helping to create an enabling environment for social enterprise in Ireland to grow and contribute to Ireland's social and economic progress. It sets out a series of 26 commitments on the part of Government across three key objectives Building Awareness; Growing and Strengthening Social Enterprise and Achieving Better Policy Alignment, for the development of social enterprise over the period 2019 to 2022. The continuing implementation of the policy includes the following notable examples. A new Awareness Strategy has been developed to highlight the critical role social enterprises play in responding to many challenges such as addressing the impacts of COVID-19 and to emphasise their potential to shape a more sustainable and inclusive future. It complements other critical awareness raising efforts including the National Social Enterprise Conference which took place in Croke Park in 2019, virtually in November 2020, and streamed live from the Dunhill Ecopark in Waterford in 2021 allowing very significant participation and engagement both nationally and internationally.

For social enterprises, as for other businesses, access to capacity building and other supports is a constant necessity. The Department of Rural and Community Development has worked to grow and strengthen social enterprise nationally in a variety of ways, including by allocating the following funding from the Dormant Accounts Fund:

- €800k for a Training and Mentoring Scheme for Social Enterprise
- €2m for the Small Capital Grants Scheme which supported 230 social enterprises
- €945k for the COVID-19 Social Enterprise Regeneration Programme
- €400k for the Social Enterprise Start-up Scheme to support 25 early stage social enterprises
- €1m Social Enterprise Capital Grants Scheme in association with the LCDC Network
- €680k for the Awareness Raising Initiatives for Social Enterprise (ARISE) Scheme to support social enterprises, and their networks to raise awareness of social enterprise at local, regional and national level.

Significant support was also provided by the Department through the Community Services Programme (CSP), SICAP and LEADER, as well as support provided under the Social Enterprise Development Fund. The Department ensured social enterprises benefitted from supports such as the Stability Fund and Innovate Together Funds in response to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

DRCD also continued to engage with government Departments and agencies including the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, the Local Enterprise Office Centre of Excellence and Enterprise Ireland in relation to maximising access by social enterprises to mainstream business supports. To promote and facilitate the inclusion of social considerations in public procurement projects and thereby help enable market opportunities for social enterprises, DRCD actively participates in the Office of Government Procurement's Strategic Procurement Advisory Group. A series of three Procurement training and advice Webinars for social enterprises, in association with the Department of Justice and Pobal took place in 2020 and 2021. Further webinars are expected to be rolled out in 2022. In 2021 DRCD sponsored a new category 'Partnering with a Social Enterprise' at Chambers Ireland Sustainable Business Impact awards 2021.

The Department initiated a collaboration with Foróige to develop a SE module as part of highly successful Network for Teaching Entrepreneurship (NFTE) programme which was delivered in 2021. Further efforts are also underway to explore areas in which social enterprise can be included in education and training systems.

Internationally, the Department continues to engage with the British Irish Council (BIC), EU, OECD and International Labour Organization (ILO) to ensure that the critical role played by social enterprises in fostering inclusive growth, and a fairer, more sustainable society is mainstreamed at an international level. In December 2020 Minister Humphreys signed the Toledo Declaration on the Social and Solidarity Economy as a key driver for an inclusive and sustainable future on behalf of the Irish Government, joining 18 other EU member states in reaffirming Ireland's commitment to the development of this critical sector. In December 2021 The European Commission published a new EU Action Plan on the Social Economy, DRCD fed into the process of the development of the Action Plan through the EU Expert Group on Social Economy (GECES) and through written submission.

Work was progressed in 2020 and 2021 regarding data collection on social enterprise in Ireland. It is expected that a comprehensive baseline data collection exercise regarding the social enterprise sector in Ireland will be completed in 2022 that will provide information that will include the number of social enterprises in Ireland, their regional spread, and the primary sectors of activity.

Progress on the implementation of the National Social Enterprise Policy takes place under the guidance of the National Social Enterprise Policy Implementation Group.

Community Policy

In order to create a vibrant, sustainable and inclusive society, communities need to be empowered to develop and sustain their own wellbeing.

In August 2019, the Minister for Rural and Community Development launched *Sustainable, Inclusive and Empowered Communities; A five-year strategy to support the community and voluntary sector in Ireland 2019-2024*. The strategy was co-produced by Government and people from the community development, local development, community and voluntary and local government sectors through a Cross Sectoral Group (CSG).

In order to support the Department's mission to "promote rural and community development and to support vibrant, inclusive and sustainable communities throughout Ireland" the Strategy seeks to use a mix of policy initiatives and funding supports for communities, non profit organisations and the community and voluntary sector, while also working with other Government Departments and agencies that support communities.

The Strategy describes a long-term vision for our communities and sets a general direction of travel for government policy in relation to supporting communities and the community and voluntary sector in the next five years and beyond. Ongoing collaboration with the CSG, including their oversight of strategy implementation, cements the renewed relationship and partnership between Government and the community and voluntary sector which developed and strengthened during the course of the preparation of the Strategy.

3) Details of any DRCD funding initiatives/developments that have been finalised or are in preparatory stages that support the objectives of the RSES.

The Rural Regeneration and Development Fund

The fourth call for Category 1 applications was launched in December 2021. This call is for large scale ambitious capital projects with all the necessary planning and consents in place and ready to proceed. The closing date for applications is 29th April 2022.

Town and Village Renewal Scheme

The 2021 Town and Village Renewal Scheme was launched on 3rd May 2021. The Scheme provides funding to support the revitalisation of our rural towns and villages. A budget allocation of €15 million in funding was made available to support the 2021 Scheme. The 2021 Scheme

places particular emphasis on addressing vacancy and dereliction, projects supporting remote working, and enhancing town centre living.

The Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP)

SICAP addresses high and persistent levels of deprivation through targeted and innovative, locally-led approaches. It supports in need groups and communities and individuals including unemployed people, people living in deprived areas, people with disabilities, single parent families, people on a low income, members of the Traveller and Roma community. This type of support will continue over the lifetime of the programme, which runs from 2018 to 2023.

Community Enhancement Programme (CEP)

The Community Enhancement Programme (CEP) is one such funding stream which provides funding to community groups and organisations across Ireland, with a focus on areas of disadvantage. The Community Enhancement Programme provides small capital grants to community groups to enhance facilities. Typical projects funded can include the renovation of community centres, community amenities, disability access projects and purchase of equipment. The 2021 CEP was launched in May with an allocation of €4.5m. While the €4.5m fund is now closed it is hoped to run the CEP again in 2022. Any community, voluntary or not-for-profit group may be eligible to apply to the CEP. It will then be advertised in each Local Authority area by the Local Community Development Committees (LCDCs) who administer the grant on behalf of this Department.

Community Policy: Healthy Ireland

Healthy Ireland, A Framework for improved Health & Wellbeing 2013-2025, is the national framework for action to improve the health and wellbeing of Ireland over the coming generation administered by the Department of Health. The Government has approved the creation of a Healthy Ireland Fund to support the implementation of its objectives in a practical way such as through alignment with specific objectives contained in Local Economic & Community Plans (LECPs).

The Healthy Ireland initiative aims to create an Irish society where everyone can enjoy positive physical and mental health. This is to be achieved through supporting innovative, cross-sectoral, evidence based projects and programmes that implement key national policies in areas such as obesity, smoking, alcohol, physical activity and mental health. In particular, an emphasis is on the Health & Wellbeing of the most disadvantaged groups and areas and those experiencing significant health inequalities.

At a local level, The Healthy Ireland Fund is administered by LCDCs, who through objectives in the Local Economic & Community Plan 2016 – 2022, and the next iteration of their LECP 2022-2028, will identify and set out actions and targets that align to these national health policies.

EU PEACE PLUS Programme

PEACE PLUS is a new cross-border EU funding programme for the period 2021-27, which will succeed both of the current (2014-20) PEACE IV and INTERREG VA Programmes. The combination of the PEACE and INTERREG type activities in a single programme represents the inclusion of wider economic, social and environmental activities.

The PEACE PLUS Programme Area includes Northern Ireland and the Border Counties of Ireland (Donegal, Leitrim, Sligo, Cavan, Monaghan and Louth). However, in a change from previous PEACE programmes, activities can involve partners and activity outside the programme area, as long as the projects being funded are making a contribution to the objectives of the programme and benefit citizens within the programme area.

The value of the new PEACE PLUS programme is €1.145 billion (indicative value) and this programme represents an opportunity to continue to fund peace building interventions alongside activities which help to make this region a more prosperous, healthier place to live through funding areas of mutual interest on a cross-border basis.

The draft programme document was recently approved in both jurisdictions and the draft programme is now submitted to the EU Commission for its consideration. Following Commission's approval, it is likely that the programme will be launched in Spring 2022.

4) Details of funding programmes administered by DRCD over the last two years, which have been awarded within the Southern Region ¹.

DRCD Note: see separate spreadsheet supplied by email, outlining overall project funding and second spreadsheet outlining Community Services Programme Support (current funding) within the region.

5) Contact point in the event that contact you about this material is needed.

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¹ The Southern Region covers the counties of Carlow, Clare, Cork, Kerry, Kilkenny, Limerick, Tipperary, Waterford and Wexford.