Pre-Budget Submission

2027

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Contents

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Overview

Irish Rural Link (IRL) is the national network of rural community groups, representing over 600 groups and thousands of individuals committed to socially, environmentally and economically sustainable rural communities.

Budget 2027 will be delivered at a time of significant geopolitical unrest and global uncertainty. Ongoing instability, including conflict in the Middle East, has contributed to rising energy costs and renewed increases in fuel prices, placing additional pressure on households, businesses and community organisations. Ireland is not immune to these challenges and, over the lifetime of this Government, may face continued economic uncertainty, pressure on public finances, and sustained increases in the cost of essential goods and services.

Inflation has begun to increase again, and the cost of everyday essentials remains persistently high. Many low-income households have yet to recover from successive years of rising prices. Through its membership, IRL is acutely aware of the challenges facing rural households. Limited public transport options mean many people rely on private cars for work, education, healthcare and daily activities. Rising fuel costs are placing further strain on already stretched household budgets, forcing difficult decisions about essential journeys and spending.

The high cost of food, fuel and other operating expenses is also affecting the delivery of vital community services. Local organisations, including Meals on Wheels providers, are struggling to absorb rising costs without corresponding increases in funding. At the same time, demand for community and voluntary services continues to grow as more households seek support. Without adequate investment, there is a real risk that essential services will become less accessible to those who depend on them most.

IRL recognises the need to transition towards a low-carbon economy, but this transition must be fair and inclusive. Those on low or fixed incomes are often most affected, while many existing supports remain inaccessible due to limited awareness, administrative barriers or the inability to meet upfront costs. Budget 2027 must ensure that climate action measures are designed and implemented in a way that leaves no one behind.

Budget 2027 is also the first full Budget following the publication of the Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2026–2030[1]. As such, it must begin translating the Roadmap's ambitions into tangible action through sustained investment in income adequacy, accessible public services, community infrastructure and targeted supports that enable people to participate fully in society. The medium-term budgetary framework, introduced in Budget 2026, provides an opportunity to move beyond temporary measures and make long-term investments that reduce poverty, strengthen public services and build more resilient communities.

[1] Government of Ireland (2026) 'Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2026-2030' https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/5d2f5151/20260526_26.05.25_Department_of_Social_Protection_-_Roadmap_for_Social_Inclusion_2026-2030.pdf

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Budget 2027 must be the first step towards achieving the targets set out in the Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2026–2030 and advancing Ireland's commitments under the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 1 (No Poverty), Goal 10 (Reduced Inequalities) and Goal 11 (Sustainable Communities). In a rapidly changing world, where the values of inclusion and social cohesion are increasingly under pressure, the Government must act decisively to ensure economic progress is shared fairly. This requires meaningful investment in housing, infrastructure and public services, alongside targeted supports for low-income and vulnerable households, to build a more inclusive, resilient and equitable society.

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Summary of Asks in Budget 2027

Issue	Asks
Regional & Rural Development	• **Rural Proofing and Regional Equity:** IRL welcome the publication of 'Guide to Rural Proofing for Policy Makers'[2], issued to every Government Department in 2025. Rural development is not and should not be the responsibility of one Government Department, but a whole of Government approach is needed. Budget 2027 must be rural-proofed and include a firm commitment to regional equity. Urban bias undermines not only the social and environmental pillars of sustainability but also limits the ability of regional economies to reach their full potential and adapt to emerging challenges. • **Provide funding support to advance a Rural Parliament for Ireland,** modelled on the ERP/ERCA model, responding to the OECD Rural Policy Review of Ireland 2026 and its call for improved rural intelligence, and enhanced through the structures of the new *Our Rural Future*. • **LEADER:** Negotiations at both EU and national level on the future funding of LEADER under the next MFF must ensure that the programme remains adequately funded and continues to support rural communities effectively. Any decisions on LEADER funding should not come at the expense of other valuable rural and community development programmes, which also play a critical role in supporting sustainable, vibrant and inclusive communities across the country. • **Investment in Rural Public Services:** Substantial investment in public services in rural areas is essential to help reduce the cost of living for low-income households. IRL continue to call for the establishment of a dedicated body to examine and improve service delivery models in rural communities—an initiative that Irish Rural Link has long advocated for. • **Increased Funding for Rural Development:** Budget 2027 must include increases in both current and capital expenditure for rural development to ensure that the next phase of *Our Rural Future* is adequately resourced and can be effectively implemented. • **Continued Rollout of the National Broadband Plan:** Continued delivery of the National Broadband Plan is vital. Government must also improve communication with the public regarding progress updates and any anticipated delays to ensure transparency and accountability. • **Enhanced Rural Transport Provision:** Increased funding for the Rural Transport Programme (RTP) and improved delivery of public transport in rural areas is urgently needed. Greater transparency is also required in how RTP and Public

[2] https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/2025_Guide_to_Rural_Proofing_for_Policy_Makers.pdf

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	Service Obligation (PSO) budgets are allocated, including a public breakdown of expenditures. ● **Deliver the largest investment ever made in rural transport** by elevating TFI Local Link to a standing co-equal with Bus Éireann as a national public transport provider, with a national mandate and multi-annual current and capital funding to expand services and provide replacement services where commercial routes are withdrawn. ● **Demand-Led Rural Transport Services:** A comprehensive, demand-led rural transport system should be established, making use of electric vehicles to support sustainability goals while improving mobility for rural residents and tackling the 'first-mile, last mile' challenges. ● **Community Engagement on Immigration:** Early engagement with local communities regarding immigration is essential to prevent misinformation and allow for open discussion of concerns. This proactive approach will help both existing communities and newcomers identify and secure the services needed to support growing populations. ● **Reform of Accommodation Centres:** The move away from privately owned and operated accommodation centres must continue. Staff working in these centres must be adequately qualified to provide appropriate support to individuals arriving from conflict zones. ● **Implementation of Sláintecare:** Budget 2027 must include adequate funding for the full implementation of *Sláintecare*. The Government must prioritise the delivery of its key actions to move Ireland closer to a fair and equitable healthcare system. ● **Multi-Annual Funding for Community Education:** Community education providers need multi-annual funding to plan and deliver quality education programmes effectively. This funding should come through a dedicated, independent budget line, enabling providers to engage directly with SOLAS, rather than relying on distribution via Education and Training Boards (ETBs). ● **Digital Inclusion for Older People and Rural Residents:** The re-establishment of the *Getting Citizens Online* computer training programme is needed to support older people and other vulnerable groups in rural areas to develop digital skills. As more services continue to go online, those without digital access or literacy are at serious risk of being excluded from essential services.
Address Poverty and Income Inadequacy	● In line with the MESL results for 2026, we call for an increase in core social welfare payments of a ***minimum* of €15 per week**. This is to help progress restoring the real value of the core social protection rate and go towards improving income adequacy.

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	• Begin to **invest in Social Protection** and put measures in place to address consistent poverty, deprivation and 'at-risk' of poverty rates. **Benchmark rates against MESL** rather than CPI for Budgetary benchmarking. • A **50% increase in the fuel allowance** to help with the cost of fuel for low-income households who are unable to change to more sustainable alternatives. Further widening of the eligibility for fuel allowance to other low-income households. Retain the extended period of the fuel allowance. • **Review the fuel allowance income thresholds** for over 70's so no person will be made worse off if they are no longer eligible for fuel allowance. • Given uncertainties in the global market, we call for **no further increase in excise duty** in Budget 2027. • An allowance be given to those who hold a travel card but are unable to use it or get full use of it so it can go some way towards the cost of private transport. • CE and Tús schemes must ensure the best use is made of participant's skills, time, and effort while on these schemes and that meaningful employment is available when the scheme ends, which ensures affordable living is secured. Increase in top-up for participants on schemes to ensure people are not made worse-off if they take up a place on a scheme.
Supports for Just Transition and Climate Change	• **Invest in Renewable Energy Communities** through capital supports, low-cost finance, trusted intermediaries and improved access to grid connections, so that rural communities can own renewable energy projects and keep the benefits locally. • **Direct community energy revenues towards alleviating rural energy poverty**, allowing RECs to reduce bills for low-income members and to fund local energy poverty supports and community services. • **Ring-fence carbon tax revenue** to support households at risk of falling deeper into fuel and energy poverty and expand retrofitting grants to low-income households not currently eligible for Warmer Home Schemes. • **Develop targeted financial supports** for low-income rural households, including a comprehensive suite of sliding-scale grants and low-cost, government-backed loans based on ability to pay. • **Deploy Local Community Energy Advisors** in every local authority and support community-led outreach programmes to engage and inform hard-to-reach households most in need of energy efficiency upgrades. • **Advance the proposed Community Energy Outreach Programme** by IRL to ensure vulnerable households receive clear, accessible advice on retrofitting, alternative fuel sources, and addressing fuel poverty. • **Support workforce transition** by ensuring workers affected by the shift to a green economy are reskilled for employment in emerging sectors, such as retrofitting homes.

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	• **Ensure early and meaningful community engagement** in renewable energy projects, allowing communities to influence decisions on the most suitable energy sources for their local needs. • **Increase targeted purchase supports for low- and middle-income households** so an EV can become a choice for these households. • **Introduce a 50% grant** to assist households in upgrading electrical systems to enable home EV charging.
Supports for Community & Voluntary Sector	• **Secure cross-party support to reinstate the social dialogue structures dismantled after the 2008 financial crash**, restoring the community and voluntary sector as a full pillar and resourcing its participation. • **Increase in funding to the Community &Voluntary sector** to help alleviate rising operational costs and make the sector more sustainable. Introduce allowances for volunteers using personal vehicles that are essential for services like community car schemes, meals on wheels etc. • **Allocate a €10 million capital and resilience package to the National Meals on Wheels Network in Budget 2027**, in addition to increased core funding, to upgrade kitchens, add renewable energy to Meals on Wheels premises and energy-proof services against fuel disruptions, storms and energy price shocks. • **Roll out a nationwide standardised software dashboard** across the Meals on Wheels Network to support referrals, scheduling, routing, reporting and integration with the HSE. • **Provide additional administrative roles and resources across the Network** so that coordinators and volunteers can focus on delivering the service. • **Introduce Core, Multi-annual funding for C&V organisations** delivering essential services in the community, such as Meals on Wheels and other health and social care services, community education, transport and childcare to safeguard the continuity and sustainability of these services. • **Invest in community services** to create paid employment in the local area. This not only supports CE and Tus participants to gain employment using the skills they have developed but also ensures the future sustainability of these valuable services. • **Conduct a review of insurance for the Community & Voluntary sector** to ensure more funding goes to the delivery of the service and not on high insurance costs. Provide targeted support for fully voluntary groups with no government funding but who face high insurance costs when organising community events.
Agriculture	• **Design agri-environmental schemes** to be practical and financially worthwhile for farmers. Direct engagement and collaboration with farmers on the ground is essential to drive meaningful change.

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	• **Actively target and support smallholders** to participate in these schemes. While their land may be less productive agriculturally, it often holds high value for biodiversity and environmental conservation. • **Introduce support schemes** for farmers and rural communities to develop on-farm anaerobic digestion and bio-methane production. Funding for community-led projects must be accessible and free from excessive bureaucracy. • **Engage early and consistently** with farmers on the changes needed to meet climate targets, ensuring they are partners in every stage of the transition. • **Continue and expand grants** for solar panels, rainwater harvesting systems on farm buildings, and enable farmers to sell excess energy back to the grid. Launch engagement programmes to increase uptake of these grants. • **Support farmers and rural communities to establish and participate in Renewable Energy Communities**, enabling co-ownership of solar, biomethane, wind and storage projects and keeping the value of the energy produced in the local area. • **Deliver a new rural funding model, ring-fenced for rural community development**, with guaranteed multi-annual allocations that protect community-led funding such as LEADER regardless of changes to the CAP and the EU Multiannual Financial Framework. • **Increase the Farm Assist payment** and simplify the means-testing process to improve access for those most in need. • **Provide carbon credits** for the restoration of peatlands and wetlands that are unsuitable for productive farming, recognising their critical role in climate mitigation.

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Section 1: Long-term investment in Public Services for balanced Rural and Regional Development

Robust public services must go hand-in-hand with adequate incomes to ensure that everyone, regardless of location, can enjoy a minimum standard of living and fully participate in society. Many households have been hit hard by rising oil and fuel prices while still feeling the impact from the cost-of-living crisis, underlining the urgent need for increased investment in essential services, particularly public transport, to reduce reliance on private cars.

Rural Development and 'Our Rural Future'

While we await the publication of the new *Our Rural Future*, continued investment is needed in rural communities. Access to transport, broadband, employment, healthcare, childcare, education, and other community services remains critical. For the new policy to succeed, it must be backed by adequate investment and political will to ensure rural areas are attractive, viable places to live and work.

Census 2022[3] shows continued population growth in the east, particularly among younger age groups, while rural counties such as Mayo, Kerry, Roscommon, and Leitrim have the oldest populations. The concentration of jobs and services in Dublin and the Greater Dublin Area is no longer sustainable, with long commuting times, high living costs, and housing pressures increasing. While remote working has risen, it cannot replace the need for physical job presence in rural regions.

A Rural Parliament for Ireland

Rural Parliaments are well established in many European countries. They are national assembly's where rural communities set out their priorities and bring them directly to government. IRL proposes the development of a Rural Parliament for Ireland, modelled on the European Rural Parliament (ERP)[4] model, to give rural communities a permanent, representative voice in national policy-making. A Rural Parliament would also respond directly to the OECD Rural Policy Review of Ireland 2026, which calls for improved collection and use of rural intelligence, and would strengthen the evidence base for rural proofing and for measuring rural well-being.

The proposal can be enhanced through the structures of the new *Our Rural Future*, with the Rural Parliament feeding into the implementation and monitoring of the policy. Budget 2027 should provide funding to advance the proposal and to convene the first Rural Parliament.

[3] CSO 2023 Census of Population 2022 https://www.cso.ie/en/statistics/population/censusofpopulation2022/censusofpopulation2022-summaryresults/

[4] The European Rural Parliament is a long-term campaign to express the voice of rural people in Europe; and to promote self-help and action by the rural people, in partnership with civil society and governments. The ERP brings together rural players – local, regional and national – to exchange experience and agree the rural policy agenda with which to lobby government. The ERP is made up of ERCA, PREPARE and ELARD. IRL are members of ERCA and through this are members of the ERP.

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LEADER

LEADER, funded under Pillar II of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), is facing uncertainty under the proposed new EU Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF). The vital role that LEADER has played over the past 35 years in supporting rural communities, strengthening local development, and fostering community-led initiatives must be fully recognised before any decisions are made regarding its future. Funding for LEADER must be protected at both EU and national level. Equally, at national level, other important rural development programmes, including CLÁR, the Town and Village Renewal Scheme, the Rural Development Fund and a range of community funding schemes, must be safeguarded from cuts, given their significant contribution to the social, economic and environmental sustainability of rural communities.

Transport

The lack of reliable public transport remains a significant barrier for rural residents in accessing employment, healthcare, education, and everyday services. An overreliance on private cars is largely due to inadequate infrastructure. While the expansion of Local Link and evening services is a positive step, many remote areas continue to be underserved. Consequently, vulnerable and low-income individuals without access to a car are particularly affected.

The withdrawal of commercial bus services continues to leave rural towns and villages without public transport, often at short notice. When these services are withdrawn, no replacement service is put in place. The NTA, which has statutory responsibility for securing public transport services, and Bus Éireann, as the default provider of subsidised replacements, are failing to respond, leaving communities without transport to employment, education, healthcare, and everyday services. TFI Local Link offices have demonstrated that they can introduce services quickly and respond effectively to local needs, but they are constrained by their funding model and their position within the public transport system.

These shortcomings have a disproportionate impact on groups who are already vulnerable or socially excluded. For asylum seekers and those seeking International Protection living in rural accommodation centres, the absence of public transport presents a particularly serious challenge. IRL is aware of cases where young children are unable to access early years education due to transport issues. This lack of connectivity also leaves people isolated and unable to pursue education, training, or employment opportunities. In some cases, individuals must walk along unlit roads without footpaths to reach appointments or bus stops, putting their safety at risk

Budget 2027 must deliver the largest investment ever made in rural transport. Local Link must be elevated to a standing co-equal with Bus Éireann as a national public transport provider, with the mandate and the multi-annual current and capital funding to expand

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services, take on withdrawn routes and ensure no rural community is left without a public transport service.

Broadband

The rollout of high-speed broadband remains vital for rural development. The National Broadband Plan must be accelerated, with improved public communication on progress and any delays.

Migration

IRL continues to call for earlier and better community engagement on the opening of refugee reception and accommodation centres. A lack of communication fuels disinformation and misinformation and resistance. Early dialogue allows concerns to be addressed and ensures communities are better prepared to welcome and support newcomers. Services such as transport can be better planned for.

Healthcare and Social Care

Access to healthcare in rural areas is becoming increasingly challenging as the number of rural GPs continues to decline. When a GP in a rural practice retires, there is often a significant delay in finding a replacement, or no replacement at all. A new graduate programme in rural and remote healthcare at the University of Galway is set to begin in September 2027. This is a welcome development and may help improve the availability of GPs in rural areas. However, until the first graduates enter the workforce, immediate measures are needed to attract GPs to rural and remote communities.

A fair, affordable, and universal healthcare system, promised under *Sláintecare*, must remain a top government priority. Community-based services, such as Meals on Wheels, play a vital role in supporting older people to live independently, preventing hospital admissions, and enabling timely discharges. Yet, underfunding remains a growing concern, and capital investment is now needed in the kitchens, equipment and premises behind these services. These services must also be energy-proofed against fuel disruptions, storms and energy price shocks so that meals and social contact for older people are not interrupted. Meals on Wheels and similar community services must be fully integrated into the healthcare system and adequately resourced.

Community Education

Community Education plays a key role in supporting personal development and helping people return to work or further education, particularly those furthest from the system. However, inconsistent and inadequate funding threatens its survival. Many providers receive no funding through ETBs and are excluded from national data collection, limiting visibility of their impact. Multi-annual, direct funding is essential to ensure long-term sustainability and effectiveness.

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Lifelong Learning and Digital Inclusion

As society becomes increasingly digital, renewed investment in basic digital literacy is essential to prevent exclusion, to support older people and non-liners to feel confident and safe in using services, which many have moved online.

Budget 2027 Calls:

The following are IRL asks in relation to investment in Public Services to enhance regional and rural development

- **Rural Proofing and Regional Equity:** IRL welcome the publication of 'Guide to Rural Proofing for Policy Makers'[5], issued to every Government Department in 2025. Rural development is not and should not be the responsibility of one Government Department, but a whole of Government approach is needed. Budget 2027 must be rural-proofed and include a firm commitment to regional equity. Urban bias undermines not only the social and environmental pillars of sustainability but also limits the ability of regional economies to reach their full potential and adapt to emerging challenges.
- **Provide funding support to advance a Rural Parliament for Ireland,** modelled on the ERP/ERCA model, responding to the OECD Rural Policy Review of Ireland 2026 and its call for improved rural intelligence, and enhanced through the structures of the new *Our Rural Future*.
- **LEADER:** Negotiations at both EU and national level on the future funding of LEADER under the next MFF must ensure that the programme remains adequately funded and continues to support rural communities effectively. Any decisions on LEADER funding should not come at the expense of other valuable rural and community development programmes, which also play a critical role in supporting sustainable, vibrant and inclusive communities across the country.
- **Investment in Rural Public Services:** Substantial investment in public services in rural areas is essential to help reduce the cost of living for low-income households. IRL continue to call for the establishment of a dedicated body to examine and improve service delivery models in rural communities—an initiative that Irish Rural Link has long advocated for.
- **Increased Funding for Rural Development:** Budget 2027 must include increases in both current and capital expenditure for rural development to ensure that the next phase of *Our Rural Future* is adequately resourced and can be effectively implemented.
- **Continued Rollout of the National Broadband Plan:** Continued delivery of the National Broadband Plan is vital. Government must also improve communication with the public regarding progress updates and any anticipated delays to ensure transparency and accountability.

[5] https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/2025_Guide_to_Rural_Proofing_for_Policy_Makers.pdf

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- **Enhanced Rural Transport Provision:** Increased funding for the Rural Transport Programme (RTP) and improved delivery of public transport in rural areas is urgently needed. Greater transparency is also required in how RTP and Public Service Obligation (PSO) budgets are allocated, including a public breakdown of expenditures.
- **Deliver the largest investment ever made in rural transport** by elevating TFI Local Link to a standing co-equal with Bus Éireann as a national public transport provider, with a national mandate and multi-annual current and capital funding to expand services and provide replacement services where commercial routes are withdrawn.
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- **Reform of Accommodation Centres:** The move away from privately owned and operated accommodation centres must continue. Staff working in these centres must be adequately qualified to provide appropriate support to individuals arriving from conflict zones.
- **Implementation of Sláintecare:** Budget 2027 must include adequate funding for the full implementation of *Sláintecare*. The Government must prioritise the delivery of its key actions to move Ireland closer to a fair and equitable healthcare system.
- **Multi-Annual Funding for Community Education:** Community education providers need multi-annual funding to plan and deliver quality education programmes effectively. This funding should come through a dedicated, independent budget line, enabling providers to engage directly with SOLAS, rather than relying on distribution via Education and Training Boards (ETBs).
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Section 2: Address Poverty and Income Inadequacy

It is well documented that income inadequacy continues to be deeper in rural areas, particularly for those in receipt of social welfare payments and those in low-paid or minimum wage employment when compared to their urban counterparts.

Consumer Price Index (CPI) continued to rise, with a 3.6% increase between March 2025 and March 2026 - the highest annual rate of inflation observed in the CPI since January 2024. (CSO, 2026). In the year to May 2026, the cost of clothing and footwear rose by 9%. Key staple foods saw significant increases; the cost of bread, cheese, and eggs all increased in the period by 0.9%, 1.2% and 5.9% respectively. Meat prices rose by 10.2% with beef alone increasing by over 19.3% during the same period[6]. In the 12 months to March 2026, Electricity, Gas & Other Fuels increased by 7.2%. Such increases compound existing difficulties - particularly in low-income households and rural areas - to meet rising costs of living. These households are also disproportionately affected by annual carbon tax increases and remain vulnerable to external economic shocks.

The CSO SILC[7] figures for 2025 showed a slight decline in consistent poverty, decreasing from 5% in 2024 to 4.7% in 2025. Consistent poverty rate was highest among children aged 0 to 17 years (7.8%). In addition, 12.6% of the population were classified as 'at risk of poverty' in 2025, up from 11.7% in 2024. Without these support measures, that figure would have been 14.9%. The Northern and Western regions recorded the highest poverty risk, with 20.4% of individuals having equivalised disposable income below the at-risk threshold.[8]

In 2025, 15.1% of the population experienced enforced deprivation—defined as going without two or more of the eleven deprivation indicators. Among those at risk of poverty, the enforced deprivation rate fell slightly to 37.4% down from 43.1% in 2024. For those not at risk of poverty, the rate stood at 11.9%. Alarmingly, 4.5% of people in enforced deprivation were unable to adequately heat their homes. Additionally, 6.4% of the population reported having great difficulty making ends meet in 2025[9].

While previous cost-of-living measures provided important short-term relief, they had a limited impact on reducing consistent poverty or addressing income inadequacy among low-income households. Any future cost-of-living supports should be more targeted to ensure those most in need experience a meaningful improvement in their living standards. Budget 2027 must also prioritise longer-term investment in income adequacy and social protection

[6] CSO (2026) Consumer Price Index May 2026 https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cpi/consumerpriceindexmarch2026/

[7] Survey on Income and Living Conditions

[8] CSO (2025) SILC Report 2025 https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-silc/surveyonincomeandlivingconditionssilc2025/poverty/

[9] CSO (2025) SILC Enforced Deprivation Report 2025 https://www.cso.ie/en/statistics/socialconditions/surveyonincomeandlivingconditionssilcenforceddeprivation/

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measures to support progress towards the targets set out in the Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2026–2030 and Ireland's SDG commitments by 2030.

Rural Poverty

The Vincentian MESL Research Centre annual Minimum Essential Standard of Living (MESL) considers the change in the cost of the minimum basket of goods and services needed to enable people to live with dignity. Such goods and services include; food, clothing, heating, healthcare, transport, education, etc. IRL is aware that having a minimum standard of living in rural areas is more than just income; it is also about access to services such as transport, childcare, and healthcare.

In the year to March 2026 MESL costs have increased by an average of 3.8%. Since 2020 there has been a cumulative increase of 23.6%. Home energy and food saw the most significant increases, both of which make up a third of the MESL expenditure basket. Home energy costs increased by 24.9%. Within home energy costs, home heating oil rose by 72.4% (this is included in the Rural MESL basket), with electricity charges increasing by 25.6% in the 12 months to March 2026[10].

The tables below show the income inadequacies for household types in receipt of a social welfare payment and 2 adults employed full-time in minimum wage jobs and living in social housing based on 2026 MESL figures[11]. It highlights the deeper income inadequacies for rural households compared to their urban peers.

Income Inadequacies by Household Type in Receipt of SW Payment

Household Type	Rural	Urban
2 Parents with 1 infant	-€104.59	-€5.13
2 Parents with 2 Children (1 pre-school,1 primary)	-€110.54	-€15.76
2 Parents with 2 Children (1 primary, 1 secondary)	-€169.68	-€84.31
2 Parents with 4 Children (2 primary, 2 Secondary)	-€252.80	-€161.23
One Parent with 1 child (Primary school)	-€140.70	-€32.86
One Parent with 2 Children (1 primary, 1 secondary)	-€189.37	-€88.62

10 Vincentian MESL Research Centre (2026) MESL2026. https://budgeting.ie/mesl-2026/

11 Vincentian MESL Research Centre (2026) MESL 2026

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Pensioner Living Alone (non-contributory)	-€58.77	+€26.71
Pensioner Living Alone (Contributory)	-€47.95	+€36.53

Source: Vincentian MESL Research Centre MESL 2026

The 2026 MESL showed some improvements in income adequacies among some household types who are working on minimum wage, however some income inadequacies still existed among some household types.

Income Inadequacies by Household Type with 2 Parents in Full Time Employment earning minimum wage

Household Type	Rural	Urban
2 Parents with 1 infant	+€138.25	+€280.36
2 Parents with 2 Children (1 pre-school,1 primary)	+€24.90	+€153.89
2 Parents with 2 Children (1 primary, 1 secondary)	+€11.78	+€151.91
2 Parents with 3 Children (1 infant, 1 pre-school, 1primary)	-€37.73	+€61.06
2 Parents with 4 Children (2 primary, 2 Secondary)	-€159.58	-€20.99

Source: Vincentian MESL Research Centre MESL 2026

Restoring the purchasing power for low-income households must be a priority for the Government in Budget 2027. Investment in social welfare must be prioritised to enable people to live with dignity.

Fuel Allowance

IRL welcomes the extension of the Fuel Allowance to single people and couples over the age of 70. However, we recognise the challenges many people over 70 continue to face in accessing the Fuel Allowance. Under the current income thresholds, a couple may qualify because their combined income falls below the limit for couples. However, if one spouse or partner passes away, the surviving person can become ineligible if their income exceeds the lower threshold for a single applicant.

In many cases, household energy costs remain largely unchanged, while the individual is coping with a reduced income and the loss of financial support, placing them at greater risk of energy poverty. IRL recommends that these income thresholds be reviewed to ensure that no person is left worse off or loses eligibility for Fuel Allowance following the death of a spouse or partner.

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Employment Activation Schemes and Rural Social Schemes

Employment Activation programmes such as CE and Tús Schemes must equip participants with the necessary skills to take up paid employment and that they are matched with the scheme that best works for them. Participants must not be made financially worse-off if they take up a place. The cost of fuel in rural areas can make a participant worse off getting to the place of work.

Many community and voluntary organisations providing essential services such as Meals on Wheels, childcare and other services rely on participants from various employment activation schemes, such as the Community Employment (CE) Scheme, the Tús Scheme, and in rural areas, the Rural Social Scheme (RSS), to help deliver their services. However, with near full employment, it is becoming increasingly difficult to recruit new participants to replace those who complete their time on the schemes. This is placing additional pressure on service providers. In many rural areas, individuals finishing these schemes often have no paid employment opportunities available to them.

The 'Rural Dwellers RSS' pilot allows individuals over 50 who are long-term unemployed or who have completed the CE or Tús schemes—without prospects of paid employment—to transition onto the RSS. Such a programme helps ensure the sustainability of essential services like Meals on Wheels, while also offering greater security to those participating in the scheme.

Budget 2027 Calls to address income inadequacy:

The following are IRL asks to improve income adequacy:

- In line with the MESL results for 2026, we call for an increase in core social welfare payments of a ***minimum*** **of €15 per week**. This is to help progress restoring the real value of the core social protection rate and go towards improving income adequacy.
- Begin to **invest in Social Protection** and put measures in place to address consistent poverty, deprivation and 'at-risk' of poverty rates. **Benchmark rates against MESL** rather than CPI for Budgetary benchmarking.
- A **50% increase in the fuel allowance** to help with the cost of fuel for low-income households who are unable to change to more sustainable alternatives. Further widening of the eligibility for fuel allowance to other low-income households. Retain the extended period of the fuel allowance.
- **Review the fuel allowance income thresholds** for over 70's so no person will be made worse off if they are no longer eligible for fuel allowance.
- Given uncertainties in the global market, we call for **no further increase in excise duty** in Budget 2027.
- An allowance be given to those who hold a travel card but are unable to use it or get full use of it so it can go some way towards the cost of private transport.
- CE and Tús schemes must ensure the best use is made of participant's skills, time, and effort while on these schemes and that meaningful employment is available when the

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scheme ends, which ensures affordable living is secured. Increase in top-up for participants on schemes to ensure people are not made worse-off if they take up a place on a scheme.

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Section 3: Supports for Just Transition and Climate Change

The energy crisis highlighted the urgent need to move away from fossil fuels as energy sources to heat our homes and power our electricity. Census 2022 results showed that over 21,000 households lack central heating, while nearly 68,000 still rely on peat, including turf, as their primary heating source – down from 90,000 in 2016. Peat use is highest among households headed by someone over 65, with 28,351 relying on it. Notably, 6,941 households in this age group also lack central heating[12]. As previously outlined, the number of people unable to adequately heat their home or who had to go without heat continues to remain high.

IRL welcomes SEAI grants and the extension of the fuel allowance to those over 70, making them eligible for the 100% Warmer Home grant. However, the eligibility criteria remain too narrow, excluding many low-income households and social welfare recipients, particularly renters, who are dependent on landlords or local authorities to carry out improvements. Other available grants often remain out of reach for those on low incomes, particularly those in rural areas.

While low-interest loans for retrofitting are a positive step, access must be improved for low-income households through sliding interest rates and flexible repayment options. Credit Unions should play a key role in delivering these loans.

While the Just Transition Fund and related measures are welcome, they are insufficient and are progressing too slowly for those most affected. Budget 2027 must prioritise targeted supports to ensure the most vulnerable are helped first.

Community Energy Projects

Communities must be at the centre of just transition with meaningful engagement from the outset of any renewable energy projects. Community owned energy projects empower communities to understand and appreciate the benefits of sustainable energy sources and help them choose the solutions that best meet their needs. It also helps to build trust between communities and energy companies, while creating local employment opportunities.

Renewable Energy Communities

Renewable Energy Communities (RECs) can help to alleviate rural energy poverty and provide direct benefits to communities. Through a REC, households, farmers, community groups and local businesses can jointly own renewable energy projects such as solar, wind, biomethane and battery storage, and the value of the energy produced stays in the community. Revenues can be used to reduce members' energy bills, to support households in energy poverty and to fund local services.

[12] CSO (2023) Census of Population 2022 Profile 2 – Housing in Ireland https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cpp2/censusofpopulation2022profile2-housinginireland/occupieddwellings/

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Rural communities are hosting a growing share of Ireland's renewable energy infrastructure but often see little of the benefit. RECs give communities ownership of energy projects in their own area. However, communities continue to face barriers around grid connections, planning and technical expertise, and upfront capital. Budget 2027 must properly resource RECs so that rural communities see real benefits from the energy transition.

Electric Vehicles

Recent increases in petrol and diesel prices have supported a modest rise in EV uptake, but high upfront costs remain the main barrier to wider adoption. This is reinforced by uneven access to public charging infrastructure, particularly in rural and smaller towns, which reduces confidence in switching. These challenges are most acute for low-income households, for whom EVs remain largely unaffordable even with existing grants.

In addition, many older homes require costly electrical upgrades before home charging can be installed safely, adding another upfront barrier not adequately covered by current supports. Together, these factors create a dual constraint of vehicle affordability and home infrastructure readiness.

Budget 2027 Calls for Just Transition and Climate Change:

- **Invest in Renewable Energy Communities** through capital supports, low-cost finance, trusted intermediaries and improved access to grid connections, so that rural communities can own renewable energy projects and keep the benefits locally.
- **Direct community energy revenues towards alleviating rural energy poverty**, allowing RECs to reduce bills for low-income members and to fund local energy poverty supports and community services.
- **Ring-fence carbon tax revenue** to support households at risk of falling deeper into fuel and energy poverty and expand retrofitting grants to low-income households not currently eligible for Warmer Home Schemes.
- **Develop targeted financial supports** for low-income rural households, including a comprehensive suite of sliding-scale grants and low-cost, government-backed loans based on ability to pay.
- **Deploy Local Community Energy Advisors** in every local authority and support community-led outreach programmes to engage and inform hard-to-reach households most in need of energy efficiency upgrades.
- **Advance the proposed Community Energy Outreach Programme** by IRL to ensure vulnerable households receive clear, accessible advice on retrofitting, alternative fuel sources, and addressing fuel poverty.
- **Support workforce transition** by ensuring workers affected by the shift to a green economy are reskilled for employment in emerging sectors, such as retrofitting homes.
- **Ensure early and meaningful community engagement** in renewable energy projects, allowing communities to influence decisions on the most suitable energy sources for their local needs.

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- **Increase targeted purchase supports for low- and middle-income households** so an EV can become a choice for these households.
- **Introduce a 50% grant** to assist households in upgrading electrical systems to enable home EV charging.

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Section 4: Supports for Community Groups and Voluntary Sector

The Community and Voluntary (C&V) sector were significantly impacted by recent fuel increases but were excluded from any dialogue with Government or additional supports. Many organisations were already struggling before this, having seen reduced funding post-Covid due to limited fundraising opportunities during the pandemic.

Despite their financial challenges, the Government relies heavily on the C&V sector to deliver vital services in health, social care, education, childcare, and transport. Many of these services have operated on limited budgets for years, with funding cuts from the financial crash never fully restored. HSE Section 39 organisations, in particular, face serious staffing challenges due to low wages, making it increasingly difficult to recruit and retain staff. This threatens the sustainability of essential community services.

Reinstating Social Dialogue

Under social partnership, the community and voluntary sector had a formal seat at the table alongside Government, employers, trade unions and farming organisations. These social dialogue structures were dismantled in the wake of the 2008 financial crash and have never been restored. As a result, the sector that delivers so many essential services, and the rural and low-income communities it represents, has no structured voice in national decision-making. Ad hoc consultation is no substitute for this.

IRL is calling for cross-party support to reinstate these structures, with the community and voluntary sector restored as a full pillar. The challenges facing rural communities, from service delivery to the just transition, can only be addressed in partnership with the communities themselves.

National Meals on Wheels Network

IRL's National Network of Meals on Wheels providers continues to face increased costs, from rising food prices to the expense of running kitchens and delivery vehicles. The funding increase in Budget 2026 was insufficient, and the Network is now seeking a €10m capital and resilience package in Budget 2027, in addition to increased core funding for the service. This capital investment is needed to upgrade kitchens across the Network, to add renewable energy to Meals on Wheels premises, and to energy-proof the service against fuel disruptions, storms and energy price shocks. Recent storms, including Storm Éowyn, showed how exposed community services are to prolonged power outages. They also showed how important Meals on Wheels providers are in the emergency response for older people.
Alongside this capital investment, the Network requires a nationwide standardised software dashboard covering referrals, scheduling, routing and reporting. This would support consistent service delivery, integration with the HSE and better national data on need and provision. Additional administrative roles and resources are also needed across the Network, as coordinators and volunteers are taking on more and more administration on top of

delivering the service. IRL also continues to call for multi-annual funding to support long-term planning and prevent cost burdens being passed on to older service users.

Insurance Barriers

High insurance costs remain a major obstacle for C&V groups, particularly smaller, volunteer-led organisations. These costs can limit growth and community engagement, especially in rural areas.

Employment Schemes and Rural Services

The C&V sector heavily depends on employment schemes such as the Rural Social Scheme, Community Employment (CE), and Tús. These programmes not only help deliver vital services like rural transport, Meals on Wheels, and community childcare, but also provide skills development and employment opportunities for participants.

The Rural Social Scheme is especially valuable for farmers and fishers on Farm Assist, allowing them to contribute their skills to the community during off-peak seasons. CE and Tús schemes offer a crucial lifeline for unemployed individuals in rural areas. However, many participants return to jobseeker's payments after completing the schemes, as few local jobs are available. This also results in the loss of skilled staff from community services; despite the strong relationships they've built with service users.

Budget 2027 calls for the Community and Voluntary Sector:

- **Secure cross-party support to reinstate the social dialogue structures dismantled after the 2008 financial crash**, restoring the community and voluntary sector as a full pillar and resourcing its participation.
- **Increase in funding to the Community &Voluntary sector** to help alleviate rising operational costs and make the sector more sustainable. Introduce allowances for volunteers using personal vehicles that are essential for services like community car schemes, meals on wheels etc.
- **Allocate a €10 million capital and resilience package to the National Meals on Wheels Network in Budget 2027**, in addition to increased core funding, to upgrade kitchens, add renewable energy to Meals on Wheels premises and energy-proof services against fuel disruptions, storms and energy price shocks.
- **Roll out a nationwide standardised software dashboard** across the Meals on Wheels Network to support referrals, scheduling, routing, reporting and integration with the HSE.
- **Provide additional administrative roles and resources across the Network** so that coordinators and volunteers can focus on delivering the service.
- **Introduce Core, Multi-annual funding for C&V organisations** delivering essential services in the community, such as Meals on Wheels and other health and social care services, community education, transport and childcare to safeguard the continuity and sustainability of these services.

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- **Invest in community services** to create paid employment in the local area. This not only supports CE and Tus participants to gain employment using the skills they have developed but also ensures the future sustainability of these valuable services.
- **Conduct a review of insurance for the Community & Voluntary sector** to ensure more funding goes to the delivery of the service and not on high insurance costs. Provide targeted support for fully voluntary groups with no government funding but who face high insurance costs when organising community events.

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Section 5: Agriculture

Agriculture remains a cornerstone of rural life. However, the sector is evolving, and targeted supports are needed to help it grow and diversify in response to climate action and environmental goals—while minimising the impact on livelihoods. The bio and circular economies are emerging opportunities where farmers can play a leading role, particularly in protecting biodiversity. With the correct incentives, smallholders and less viable land could be used for these purposes. Greater value must be placed on non-productive areas of farmland. IRL believes smallholders, especially those farming marginal land with little return, are well-positioned to benefit from this transition, turning low-value land into a source of environmental and economic benefit.

This also applies to peatlands and adjacent poor-quality land. Ireland has significant peatland capable of storing carbon, and landowners should have the opportunity to earn carbon credits to offset potential costs from regulatory changes. However, meaningful engagement with farmers and landowners is essential. Through the delivery of various projects delivered by IRL, our experience shows that when farmers are involved in planning and decision-making, they are more open and responsive to environmental reforms in agriculture.

Farm Assist remains an important payment for many farming households across the country, helping to partially reduce poverty and also to participate in the Rural Social Scheme. The current rate must be increased in line with other core social welfare payments to restore real purchasing power of individuals' income. The means testing process is still off-putting for many farmers to apply for the payment even though they may be eligible. Consequently. they do not participate in the RSS, despite being eligible.

Non-contributory state pensions can place farming families at greater risk of poverty. Women are particularly at risk, as they are financially dependent on the farm holder, even though they have worked on the farm. They are assessed on their spouse's income from the farm and elsewhere. This puts women in a financially vulnerable position. We know some progress has been made on this issue and we call for further work to be done to protect farm families into the future.

Agri-environment Schemes

IRL is involved in the delivery of projects and programmes that support and engage farmers in schemes that protect the environment and local biodiversity. IRL is lead and partner on the Breeding Waders EIP, where again farmers are engaged with and are making changes, working alongside ecologists to protect the environment and local biodiversity.

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Breeding Waders

IRL is currently involved in the delivery of two EIP projects. Lead partner in the Breeding Waders EIP, the aim is to secure existing Breeding Wader[13] populations and support population recovery through landscape management and policy development. The project is now one year into its work and is monitoring breeding waders while working closely with farmers during the current breeding season to help protect these bird species, which are at risk of extinction.

Renewable Energy Communities and the Farm Transition

Farmers have a central role in delivering the energy transition in rural Ireland. Renewable Energy Communities allow farmers and their neighbours to co-own solar, biomethane, wind and storage projects, to host generation on marginal land and farm buildings, and to earn a diversified income while the value of the energy produced stays in the local area. Adding RECs to the supports available to farmers and rural communities would help communities to deliver the transition themselves and would build on existing supports for on-farm solar and anaerobic digestion.

A Ring-Fenced Rural Funding Model

The proposed new EU Multiannual Financial Framework and the future shape of the CAP have created real uncertainty for rural development funding, including LEADER. Budget 2027 must begin delivery of a new rural funding model that is ring-fenced for rural community development. This funding must be protected, multi-annual and must not be diverted to other purposes, regardless of what structure is agreed at EU level.

Budget 2027 Calls for the agriculture sector:

- **Design agri-environmental schemes** to be practical and financially worthwhile for farmers. Direct engagement and collaboration with farmers on the ground is essential to drive meaningful change.
- **Actively target and support smallholders** to participate in these schemes. While their land may be less productive agriculturally, it often holds high value for biodiversity and environmental conservation.
- **Introduce support schemes** for farmers and rural communities to develop on-farm anaerobic digestion and bio-methane production. Funding for community-led projects must be accessible and free from excessive bureaucracy.
- **Engage early and consistently** with farmers on the changes needed to meet climate targets, ensuring they are partners in every stage of the transition.
- **Continue and expand grants** for solar panels, rainwater harvesting systems on farm buildings, and enable farmers to sell excess energy back to the grid. Launch engagement programmes to increase uptake of these grants.

[13] Breeding Wader species includes; Curlew, Lapwing, Redshank, Snipe, Oystercatcher, Dunlin, Golden Plover, Ringed Plover, Common Sandpiper, Red-Necked Phalarope

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- **Support farmers and rural communities to establish and participate in Renewable Energy Communities**, enabling co-ownership of solar, biomethane, wind and storage projects and keeping the value of the energy produced in the local area.
- **Deliver a new rural funding model, ring-fenced for rural community development**, with guaranteed multi-annual allocations that protect community-led funding such as LEADER regardless of changes to the CAP and the EU Multiannual Financial Framework.
- **Increase the Farm Assist payment** and simplify the means-testing process to improve access for those most in need.
- **Provide carbon credits** for the restoration of peatlands and wetlands that are unsuitable for productive farming, recognising their critical role in climate mitigation.

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Conclusion

Budget 2027 presents a crucial opportunity to begin seriously addressing poverty and income inadequacy among low-income households and individuals reliant on social welfare payments. With the publication of the new Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2026-2030, investment and action must now begin to reach the targets set out in the Roadmap.

Addressing poverty is not only about income support—it also requires meaningful access to essential public services such as public transport, childcare, healthcare, and broadband. Real investment in public services must go hand-in-hand with efforts to improve income adequacy, particularly in rural communities, to both alleviate and prevent poverty.

As Ireland continues its transition to a low-carbon, digital economy, it is essential that those furthest behind are supported first. Climate and digital measures must be inclusive and equitable. Retrofitting grants should operate on a sliding scale, and low-cost, guaranteed loans should be based on ability to pay. A Community Outreach Programme should also be explored to engage households most dependent on fossil fuels, ensuring they are supported through the transition.

Budget 2027 must provide more than subsistence-level support for those on low incomes and social welfare; it must enable them to achieve a dignified and adequate standard of living. Crucially, the Budget must look beyond short-term fixes and implement long-term strategies to lift people out of poverty rather than risk pushing more into it.

This will require not just financial support, but genuine investment in public infrastructure—particularly in rural areas where the absence of reliable public transport increases dependence on private cars and drives up the cost of living.

As global uncertainty continues and social values face growing threats, Ireland must remain committed to ensuring that its most vulnerable and marginalised communities are not left behind. Supporting people to live with dignity must be a key part of Budget 2027.

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Irish Rural Link - The Organisation

Irish Rural Link (IRL), formed in 1991, is a national network of organisations and individuals campaigning for sustainable rural development in Ireland and Europe. IRL, a non-profit organisation, has grown significantly since its inception and now directly represents over 600 community groups with a combined membership of 25,000.

The network provides a structure through which rural groups and individuals, representing disadvantaged rural communities, can articulate their common needs and priorities, share their experiences and present their case to policy-makers at local, national and European Level.

Irish Rural Link is the only group represented at the national social partnership talks solely representing rural communities' interests.

'Our vision is of vibrant, inclusive and sustainable rural communities that contribute to an equitable and just society'

Irish Rural Link's aims are:

- To articulate and facilitate the voices of rural communities in local, regional, national and European policy arenas, especially those experiencing poverty, social exclusion and the challenge of change in the 21st century.
- To promote local and community development in rural communities in order to strengthen and build the capacity of rural community groups to act as primary movers through practical assistance and advice.
- To research, critique and disseminate policies relating to rural communities including issues such as sustainability, social exclusion, equality and poverty
- To facilitate cross-border networking between rural communities

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

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