



Department of Rural and
Community Development

*An Roinn Forbartha
Tuaithe agus Pobail*



Realising our Rural Potential

Action Plan for Rural Development



First Progress Report - Summary

August 2017



Minister's Foreword

I am delighted to present the first six-monthly progress report on Realising our Rural Potential, the Government's Action Plan for Rural Development.

So much has happened since the Government published the Action Plan in January this year, not least through the creation of a new Department of Rural and Community Development. I am honoured to serve as Minister in what will be a dynamic and forward looking Department. In my role as Minister for Rural and Community Development, I intend to take a pro-active approach to the challenges facing rural Ireland and I will place a strong emphasis on developing policies to support rural employment and rural communities.

The Action Plan for Rural Development has been in place now for just over six months and this report provides a detailed account of the progress being made, as well as highlighting some areas where further work needs to be done. As Minister for Rural and Community Development, I am responsible for overseeing the delivery of the Action Plan and I will work with my fellow Ministers to ensure that their Departments deliver on the Government's commitments to rural Ireland.

Overall, I am delighted to see so much progress being made right across the five pillars of the Action Plan. It is the combined impact of these actions which will make a difference for rural Ireland.

By continuing to deliver on this Action Plan, we can truly realise the potential of rural Ireland for the benefit of people who live and work in our rural communities.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Michael Ring". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looping flourish at the end.

Michael Ring T.D.

Minister for Rural and Community Development

Glossary of Abbreviations

BIM	Bord Iascaigh Mhara
CIF	Construction Industry Federation
CSO	Central Statistics Office
daa	Company formerly known as the Dublin Airport Authority
DAFM	Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine
DBEI	Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation
DCHG	Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht
DRCD	Department of Rural and Community Development
DCCA	Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment
DCYA	Department of Children and Youth Affairs
DES	Department of Education and Skills
DESP	Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection
DHPLG	Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government
DJE	Department of Justice and Equality
DoF	Department of Finance
DoH	Department of Health
DPER	Department of Public Expenditure and Reform
DTTAS	Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport
EI	Enterprise Ireland
ESB	Electricity Supply Board
ETBs	Education and Training Boards
FLAGs	Fisheries Local Area Action Groups
GSI	Geological Survey of Ireland
HEIs	Higher Education Institutes
HSE	Health Service Executive

IDA	Industrial Development Authority
ILCU	Irish League of Credit Unions
ISIF	Ireland Strategic Investment Fund
LAs	Local Authorities
LAGs	LEADER Local Action Groups
LDCs	Local Development Companies
LCDCs	Local Community Development Committees
LEOs	Local Enterprise Offices
NTA	National Transport Authority
NUIG	National University of Ireland Galway
OPW	Office of Public Works
OSI	Ordnance Survey Ireland
PPNs	Public Participation Networks
RAPID	Revitalising Areas by Planning, Investment and Development
RGDATA	Retail Grocery Dairy & Allied Trades Association
SBCI	Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland
SEAI	Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland
SFI	Science Foundation Ireland
SICAP	Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme
TII	Transport Infrastructure Ireland
WDC	Western Development Commission

1. Background

Realising our Rural Potential, the Government's Action Plan for Rural Development was launched on 23rd January 2017. The Action Plan contains 276 actions for the delivery across Government, State agencies and other bodies over the next three years to support the economic and social progress of rural Ireland.

The 276 actions in the Action Plan are broken down across 5 thematic Pillars as follows:

- Pillar 1:** Supporting Sustainable Communities
- Pillar 2:** Supporting Enterprise and Employment
- Pillar 3:** Maximising our Rural Tourism and Recreation Potential
- Pillar 4:** Fostering Culture and Creativity in rural communities
- Pillar 5:** Improving Rural Infrastructure and Connectivity

Each action has been assigned to a lead body which will be responsible for implementation of the action within a definite timescale. Progress on the implementation of the actions is overseen by a Monitoring Committee which includes senior representatives of relevant Government Departments and key rural stakeholder interests. Progress Reports on the implementation of the Action Plan will be published twice-yearly.

This Progress Report outlines the progress which has taken place in relation to all the actions due for implementation in the first six-months of the Action Plan. A total of 227 actions were either due for delivery in the first half of 2017, or classed as 'ongoing' with activity taking place in the first half of 2017.

220 of these actions were either completed on schedule or are in progress (particularly where the actions are multi-annual or on-going, representing a 97% delivery rate. 7 actions due for delivery in the first half of 2017 were delayed.

A summary of the key developments under each pillar is provided over the following pages. Detailed progress reports on each of the 201 actions are included in the subsequent section of the document.

The seven actions which were not completed on schedule in the first half of 2017 were:

- Action 100 – research on the impact of Brexit;
- Action 113 – Finalise the Draft Bioenergy Plan;
- Action 118 – Publish a high-level Policy Statement on the Bioeconomy in Ireland;
- Action 238 – Remove development contribution charges for telecommunications infrastructure;
- Action 239 – Complete the duct installation on 95km of roadway on the M7/M8 corridor;
- Action 240 – Explore whether the take up of the Metropolitan Area Networks can be improved;
- Action 243 – Development of revised 'Exempted Development Regulations' to exempt 4G antennae from requiring planning permission.

The actions in question will be kept under review and updates will be included in the next Progress Report.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

HEADLINE ACHIEVEMENTS

Pillar 1 – Supporting Sustainable Communities

If we want rural living to be viable and sustainable, we must support our rural communities. We must make rural Ireland a better place to live, enhance local services, build better communities and empower the people that live in them to ensure that their voices are heard.

Key achievements to date under this Pillar:

1. The 2017 Town and Village Renewal Scheme was launched on 13th April and will provide funding of €20 million over 15 months to support up to 300 towns and villages. The scheme is specifically targeted at rural towns and villages with populations of less than 10,000. Applications can range from €20,000 to a maximum of €100,000 and funding of up to €200,000 will also be considered for a limited number of projects which can deliver exceptionally strong economic benefits to a town and its outlying areas. **(Action 1 – DRCD).**
2. The Framework for Town Centre Revival was launched on 25th April to assist with the regeneration of rural towns. The Framework sets out the key characteristics of a successful town centre and identifies existing supports and best practice examples from around the country. It also includes an Action Plan for Town Centre renewal to guide towns and villages through the renewal process – this process includes stakeholder engagement, town centre health check and preparation of a Town Centre plan **(Action 4 – DBEI).**
3. The 2017 CLÁR programme was launched on 31st March to support disadvantaged rural communities through small capital projects. €7m was approved for 231 projects under four measures: *Measure 1: Support for Schools/Community Safety Measures; Measure 2: Play Areas; Measure 3: Targeted Community Infrastructure Needs; Measure 4: First Response Support Measure* **(Action 10 – DRCD).**
4. Over 80 offers were made to GLAS farmers nationwide to support the conservation of traditional farm buildings under the GLAS Traditional Farm buildings grant scheme which also supports employment in rural communities through the engagement of traditional skills people, architectural professionals and wildlife surveyors **(Action 14 – Heritage Council)**
5. A number of key initiatives were rolled out by the Health and Safety Authority to improve farm safety, including targeted inspection campaigns in March and May 2017 with a focus on livestock safety and tractor and machinery safety. Farm safety training was provided to over 300 Knowledge Transfer facilitators; the Code of Practice for Preventing Injury and Occupational Health in Agriculture was fully revised; farm accident awareness campaigns were broadcast on national TV and radio and social media. Over 1,000 farm safety visits have been carried out to date in 2017 **(Action 16 – HSA).**
6. 29 Local Action Groups are delivering the LEADER programme in the 28 sub-regional designated areas and over 5,000 expressions of interest have been received for LEADER funding in these areas. The Local Action Groups are working with project promoters to

finalise applications for funding and more than 200 project approvals have taken place. D/R&CD has committed to implementing 31 actions, identified by the Local Action Groups, to improve the administration of the programme and facilitate a higher level of project approvals (**Action 47 – DRCD**).

7. A total of €3.6 million was announced under the Fisheries Local Area Action Group (FLAGS) Strategy for Ireland's seven coastal regions. This will provide funding for a range of initiatives targeting job creation, social inclusion, tourism, community regeneration and market development (**Action 48 – DAFM**).
8. 500 additional Rural Social Scheme places were announced in January 2017. At the end of June 2017, there were 2,683 participants benefitting from the Scheme. Places will continue to be rolled out and DESP is working with the Implementing Bodies (35 Local Development Companies and Údarás na Gaeltachta) to ensure that all places are filled as quickly as possible over the coming months (**Action 50 – DESP**).
9. Application details for Social Farming Initiatives under the Rural Innovation and Development Fund were announced in June 2017. Total funding available is €370,000 for at least three social farming model projects which can demonstrate a national benefit (**Action 51 – DAFM**).
10. A new grant-aid scheme was announced in April 2017 for community groups to assist with the establishment of community-based CCTV systems which will help deter crime and assist in the detection of offenders (**Action 60 - DJE**).
11. A new €2m Communities Facilities Fund was announced in March 2017 to enhance communities, address disadvantage and improve social cohesion at local level. LCDCs are currently reviewing applications to ensure complementarity with the Local Economic and Community Plans (**Action 64 – DRCD**).
12. In June 2017, the Irish Men's Sheds Association registered its 400th shed and are well on target to meet the target in the Action Plan of 450 by 2019. In addition, the 'Sheds for Life' programme was launched on 29th May in Offaly and several free health events have already taken place (**Actions 66 & 67– Irish Men's Shed Association**).

Pillar 2 - Supporting Enterprise and Employment

Increasing employment opportunities for people across all regions of the country is a key objective for the Government. Supporting the growth of enterprises at regional level – whether start-ups, scaling companies or FDI companies – will bring increased job opportunities for people who live in rural areas, and will increase economic activity in rural areas.

Key achievements to date under this Pillar:

1. All eight Regional Action Plans for Jobs have been published and implementation is well under way. Employment increased in seven of the eight regions in the year to Q1 2017 and over 77% of the new jobs added in year to Q1 2017 were outside Dublin (**Action 68 - DBEI**).
2. A competitive Regional Enterprise Development Fund of up to €60m up to 2020 was launched in May 2017 by Enterprise Ireland. The Fund aims to accelerate economic recovery in every part of the country by delivering on the potential of local and regional enterprise strengths. The Fund will support collaborative regional initiatives and the development of industry clusters. The closing date for the first call under the Fund was 18th August 2017 (**Action 69 – Enterprise Ireland**).
3. Significant progress has been made across the actions in Harnessing our Ocean Wealth. A report published in 2017 by the Socio-Economic Research unit at NUI Galway showed that the marine sector has grown significantly since the publication of Harnessing Our Ocean Wealth in 2012. In the period 2014-2016, there has been a 23% increase in turnover, a 20% increase in gross value added and a 10% increase in employment in the marine sector (**Action 70 – DAFM**).
4. Advance buildings in Sligo, Tralee and Castlebar have been completed by the IDA, designed to provide high quality production and office accommodation suitable for future technology or Life Sciences projects (**Action 71 - IDA**).
5. Innovation hubs are now operational in the Donegal and Kerry Gaeltacht areas to support entrepreneurship and start-up companies, with others to follow before year-end in Mayo and Galway (**Action 85 – Údarás na Gaeltachta**).
6. The Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland (SBCI) has deployed the Agriculture Cash Flow Support Scheme in conjunction with the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine to provide flexible, low-interest loans to farmers in response to challenges they face due to price and income volatility and unfavourable market conditions (**Action 89 – SBCI**).
7. 'Brexit Readiness Vouchers' were supplied to companies to obtain specialist advice on a range of issues regarding Brexit (**Action 101 - InterTradeIreland**).
8. Through the National Waste Prevention Programme, the 'Stop Food Waste Challenge' has been rolled out in 50 mainly rural communities to reduce food waste. In addition 'Smart Farming' has worked with more than 1,000 farmers across all regions, saving an average €5,000 p.a. per farmer and reducing greenhouse gas emissions from their farms by 7-10% (**Action 103 – EPA, DCCA**).

9. Progress across FoodWise 2025 has led to an increase in employment in the agri-food sector, now accounting for over 8.6% of total employment; agri-food exports at end 2016 were €12.2 billion **(Actions 105&106 - DAFM)**.
10. To date, 585 companies, accounting for almost 95% of food and drink exports, have registered to take part in the Origin Green programme which contributes to improving the environmental, as well as the economic and social, sustainability of the sector **(Action 107 – Bord Bia)**.
11. €28m in funding was announced in February 2017, for ongoing capital investment in Ireland's six fishery harbour centres and smaller harbours to support safety, maintenance and fisheries processing and development **(Action 111 – DAFM)**.
12. A workshop with key stakeholders in the bioeconomy sector was held in February with a view to informing the establishment of a baseline assessment of the current levels of Bioeconomy activity and opportunities across the various sectors in Ireland **(Action 116 – D/Taoiseach)**.
13. Letterkenny IT has established a base in Pairc Ghnó Ghaoth Dobhair to support local businesses as part of Údarás na Gaeltachta's efforts to strengthen their links with ITs and Universities. This will help to build capacity in the region and support and promote research and innovation **(Action 127 – Údarás na Gaeltachta)**.
14. 'Expand your Horizons' meetings were held across the country in February 2017 by Teagasc to promote diversification options for farmers and to outline funding available to support farming and rural communities **(Action 132 – Teagasc)**.
15. A new round of funding of €1.75 million from the Dormant Accounts Fund was announced by Minister Michael Ring in March 2017, to support social enterprises that assist disadvantaged people, with an emphasis on rural areas **(Action 138 – DRCD)**.
16. The Earned Income Credit (EIC) was increased by €400 to €950 per annum in Budget 2017 and is available to self-employed individuals, including farmers, who do not have access to the PAYE employee tax credit **(Action 146 - DOF)**.

Pillar 3 - Maximising our Rural Tourism and Recreation Potential

Tourism is a key driver of economic development in rural Ireland. In 2015, 85% of visitors to Ireland visited at least one region outside Dublin. With the revenue this generates in the regions, tourism has a significant role to play in supporting sustainable jobs and growth in rural areas and will be supported through targeted marketing initiatives and co-ordinated approaches at national and local level. There is also potential to develop and promote Activity Tourism and capitalise on our rich built and natural heritage.

Key achievements to date under this Pillar:

1. A feasibility study in relation to the development of the 'Ireland's Lakelands' brand has been completed. Fáilte Ireland are examining proposals with a view to testing available options **(Action 153 – Fáilte Ireland)**.
2. A tourism strategy for the Gaeltacht was approved in the first half of 2017 and implementation of the actions in the strategy has already begun **(Action 154 – Údarás na Gaeltachta)**.
3. €450,000 has been announced for at least 9 projects supporting agri-food tourism initiatives under the Rural Innovation and Development Fund. This will focus on longer-term, wider impacting proposals such as business and skills training, network development, initiation and development of inter-county agri-food tourism schemes/trails **(Action 163 – DAFM)**
4. The tourism potential of the Border region is being developed through a number of initiatives, e.g. the development of the Ulster Canal Greenway and the Carlingford Lough Greenway, and the commencement of the Carlingford Ferry Service between Greenore, Co. Louth and Greencastle, Co. Down **(Action 164 – Local Authorities)**
5. A public consultation paper on a "Strategy for the Future Development of Greenways" was published in May 2017, inviting public submissions. **(Action 167 – DTTAS)**
6. Work has commenced on a number of initiatives to develop and promote our Blueways e.g. the development of the Royal Canal Blueway, which will provide 22km of paddling, centred around Mullingar, 140km of walking from McNeed's Bridge in Westmeath to Richmond Harbour in Longford, along with 60km of cycling trails; the development of a recreational activity hub in Carlow town; completion of the Lough Allen Board Walk. In addition, the Acres Lake section of the Shannon Blueway and works to the canoe trail on Lough Derg at 14 sites are nearing completion **(Action 168 – D/CHG and Action 169 – Waterways Ireland)**.
7. €11.4 million for outdoor recreational infrastructure was approved for over 200 projects across rural Ireland **(Action 170 – DR&CD)**.
8. Funding was awarded to 70 applicants in 19 counties across the country in April 2017 under the Inland Fisheries Ireland Sponsorship Scheme to assist rural communities to engage with angling, angling tourism and environmental issues, with a further funding round anticipated later in the year **(Action 179 - IFI)**.

9. €500k in capital investment was announced in January 2017 to boost the tourism potential of Ireland's National Parks, as part of a strategic partnership between the Department of Culture, Heritage, and the Gaeltacht and Fáilte Ireland (**Action 186 – DCHG**).
10. €11.5m in funding was announced by Fáilte Ireland in April 2017 for 10 key Heritage Sites, including funding of €8.2m for 8 sites outside of the Dublin Region (**Action 191 - OPW**)
11. Funding of over €1.3m has been approved for 67 projects to conserve historic, heritage structures under the Structures at Risk Fund (**Action 193 – DCHG**).
12. The Heritage Council has allocated €700,000 in funding to over 170 groups in rural Ireland under the Community Heritage Grants Scheme in 2017 to support the development of conservation and heritage tourism in rural areas (**Action 194 – Heritage Council**).

Pillar 4 - Fostering Culture and Creativity in Rural Communities

Many rural communities all over Ireland have a thriving arts scene and it is important that facilities and assets in rural areas are enhanced to strengthen the social fabric of rural life. This Pillar aims to increase access to the arts and to develop culture and creativity in rural communities. The Irish language is also a vital part of our culture and heritage and is a key resource in Gaeltacht communities.

Key achievements to date under this Pillar:

1. €9 million was approved for investment in 56 arts and culture centres across the country by the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, Heather Humphreys T.D., in February 2017. Over 80% of the investment will be in rural areas **(Action 203 – DCHG)**.
2. €135,000 was allocated to 23 regional museums across the country ensuring access to our cultural heritage for rural communities **(Action 204 – DCHG)**.
3. The Arts Council has agreed touring decisions for the first 6 months of 2018 in June 2017 under the Touring and Dissemination of Work Scheme to support quality professional productions to tour venues across Ireland, increasing access to the arts for rural communities **(Action 206 – Arts Council)**.
4. Investment in small festivals around the country has increased by 22% to support greater participation in the arts around the country **(Action 208 – Arts Council)**.
5. Creative Ireland co-ordinators and Culture Teams have been established in every local authority to better co-ordinate and maximise local arts provision. Each local authority has published a Culture and Creativity Plan for 2017 **(Action 210 – DCHG)**.
6. All 31 local authorities hosted free, family-friendly Cruinniú na Cásca events on Easter Monday in their individual counties as part of the national Creative Ireland programme **(Action 214 – DCHG)**.
7. As part of the Arts in Education Charter, Teacher/Artist partnerships as summer courses will be delivered in each of the 21 Association of Teachers/Education Centres in Ireland areas, as a model for Continuous Professional Development (CPD) this Summer **(Action 219 – Arts Council, DCHG, DES)**.
8. A Connacht regional event was held in May in Colaiste na Coiribe, Knocknacarra, Galway to showcase projects developed by young people involved in "Techspace as Gaeilge" in various rural-based schools in the Connacht region. Work is now focussing on progressing the initiative in the Munster region **(Action 225 – DCHG)**.
9. Additional funding of €22,000 was provided for Ealaín na Gaeltachta Teo to support their work in fostering creativity and the arts in the Gaeltacht **(Action 227 – Údarás na Gaeltachta)**.

Pillar 5 - Improving Rural Infrastructure and Connectivity

The objective of this Pillar is to improve the connectivity of rural communities through improved broadband connection, improved transport links and by reducing the risk of flooding in vulnerable areas.

Key achievements to date under this Pillar:

1. The National Broadband Plan has been a catalyst in encouraging investment by the telecoms sector so that, to date, approximately 1.4m or 61% of the 2.3m premises in Ireland can get high-speed broadband of a minimum of 30 Megabits per second. In April 2017, a commitment agreement with Eir was signed to provide broadband to an additional 300,000 mostly rural premises on a commercial basis and this is already progressing **(Action 232 – DCCAIE)**.
2. An Implementation Group was established in March 2017 to drive the recommendations of the Mobile Phone and Broadband Taskforce and to accelerate the rollout of broadband infrastructure and mobile phone access in rural Ireland. D/R&CD is working with stakeholders through two Regional Action Groups to remove barriers to the roll-out of telecoms infrastructure **(Action 233 – DCCAIE & DRCD)**.
3. Funding has been provided to each local authority to appoint a Broadband Officer to facilitate the roll out of broadband across the country **(Action 235 – DRCD)**.
4. New routes in development by the Rural Transport Programme during Q1 and Q 2 2017 included a total of 12 scheduled and demand-responsive transport services in Meath, Fingal, Sligo, Leitrim, Tipperary, Kerry, Waterford and Wexford **(Action 252 – NTA)**.
5. In June 2017, approximately €2m was allocated under the Regional Airports Programme for the regional airports in Donegal, Knock, Kerry and Waterford **(Action 260 – DTTAS)**.
6. Three new airlines, along with four new routes, are now operating from Cork airport which increases connectivity for the southern region and increase opportunities for tourism in the region **(Action 261- DAA)**.
7. Progress has been made on maintenance activity by the Shannon Flood Risk State Agency Co-ordination Working Group **(Action 273 - OPW)**.
8. In April, the Government agreed the administrative arrangements for a once-off targeted Voluntary Homeowner Relocation Scheme for certain houses affected by flooding in 2015 and 2016 **(Action 266 - OPW)**.
9. The Review of the Minor Flood Mitigation Works and Coastal Protection Schemes has been completed. As a result, the upper financial threshold has now been increased significantly from €500k to €750k per project and for the first time, farm yards and buildings will be included as commercial premises in all categories **(Action 271 – OPW)**.
10. 40 Flood Monitoring Stations have been installed across Roscommon, Galway, Longford and Mayo to identify potential solutions to address the risk of flooding from turloughs **(Action 275 – GSI, OPW)**