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Draft First Revision to the National Planning Framework

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Observations:

1. The Vision

Chapter: 1. The
Vision

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.

We welcome the opportunity to make an input into the Revised National Planning Framework (NPF). The draft of the revised Framework, is very ambitious. The landscape has changed since the National Planning Framework was first published in 2018; in that time, we have had a global pandemic, War on Ukraine has impacted all of Europe; leading to energy crisis and cost of living crisis. Ireland's population is now over 5 million, the highest since before the famine and this is expected to continue to grow with increase in migration.

While the population has grown in all counties of the country, the east of the country still has a larger percentage of young people with Border and North West region having higher percentage of older people. The revised NPF must ensure greater regional balance and growth in the North West and Southern regions. More job opportunities and quality jobs are needed to ensure young people can remain or return to live in these regions. The new Technological Universities, of which there is at least one in each region, have a key role to play in the development of the region and supporting young people in engaging with employers in the region.

The revised Framework recognises the long connection Ireland has to rural areas and this needs to continue. Development of rural areas must be a key priority and making rural communities, small towns and villages viable places to live must now happen. Rural areas offer many opportunities for new and emerging sectors, for healthier and better quality of life for people. These opportunities now need to be realised so there is greater balance across the country in development and growth.

The lack of a robust transport system in rural areas continues to be one of the biggest challenges for rural communities. As we move to a greener society, serious investment in public transport in rural areas will be needed to reduce the number of cars on the road. However, it is not just about reducing carbon emissions but also ensuring a just and inclusive society. For people who cannot afford a car, are unable to drive, young people, older people, people with disabilities, migrants, having a public transport system that serves rural areas, small towns and villages ensures that these cohorts can participate fully in society. For them, it means being able to access

education, training, employment, healthcare, social activities. The revised NPF must start to build opportunities for people to participate in their community and have that sense of belonging and place that is outlined in the revised draft.

The expansion of local link services is needed. Connection to national bus and rail services but also more regular services to local small towns and villages is needed. Last mile transport, such as community car service also needs to be invested in for shorter journeys or to access other Local Link services. Reference to Local Link services should be included the final draft of the Framework to ensure greater awareness of the service and to make it a more integral part of the overall transport system in Ireland.

3. Effective Regional Development

Chapter: 3. Effective Regional
Development

A better balance in regional growth is needed if the targets within the revised NPF. Dublin continues to be under pressure in terms of traffic congestion as many people still have to commute into the city for employment. While hybrid working is now adapted by most companies, people still need to go into the office 2-3 days per week. The creation of quality jobs in the other regions of the country is now needed to ensure people can work closer to home and that these regions continue to grow.

Development of the other 4 cities and larger towns can take pressure of the Capital and help them anchor growth for the region. The three Regional Assemblies must work with all stakeholders in the regions; local authorities, local enterprise offices, Universities and Technological Universities, transport, civil society organisations to ensure that the needs of the region are met and quality jobs can be created.

5. Planning for Diverse Rural Places

Chapter: 5. Planning for Diverse Rural
Places

The draft revised NPF recognises the importance of the agri-food and tourism sectors to rural areas and these remain the main employers in rural areas. While there is also a need for new jobs and quality jobs to rural areas, more value must be placed on jobs in the agricultural and tourism sectors. Ireland has an ageing population, meaning the health and care sectors will be in greater demand. Rural areas have older population and ensuring people can age comfortably in their homes and communities is needed - a priority of *Slaintecare*. The community and voluntary sector provide many of the health and social care services needed to support older people living in their own home but continue to be underfunded with an ad-hoc funding stream. Multi-annual funding is needed to ensure that these services; such as Meals on Wheels can become more sustainable and continue to deliver a service that is in growing demand. Again, ensuring that jobs in this sector are quality jobs with pay that affords people a minimum standard of living will be necessary. The Vincentian Research Centre Minimum Essential Standard of Living (MESL) highlights the income inadequacy for households living in rural areas in minimum wage employment unable to afford a basic living standard.

Our Rural Future: Rural Development 2021 -2025 sets out a framework to improving rural and regional development, supporting remote working and sustainable rural communities. Ensuring that essential services and infrastructure, such as public transport, high-speed broadband, shops, roads, employment opportunities and

access to community services, healthcare, training and education are in place is paramount to development in rural areas and the success of the new rural development policy. It needs to be backed up with investment and the political will so rural areas can grow and people want to live in rural areas while at the same time have employment that affords them a decent standard of living.

IRL welcome some of the developments such as the creation of more digital hubs to facilitate remote and hybrid working for people living in rural areas. However, rural towns and villages continue to see the closure of shops, bank branches and post offices with no increase in public transport services to access these services elsewhere. Ensuring that people have access to services must be a key part of the revised NPF.

While IRL welcome the Town Centre First policy and revitalising rural towns and villages to be a place where people can live and work, the necessary open and green spaces must be in place so that they can be places for people to live. Having reliable and regular transport to larger towns and links to national rail and bus services will be necessary for them to become a more attractive place to live. IRL still see a need for one-off housing in the countryside, especially for those who have a need to live there due to work or caring needs. The proposal to develop service sites is welcome but large investment is needed in water and waste water treatment for this to happen as well as for developments in or beside towns and villages. IRL are aware of housing developments in or close to villages unable to go ahead because water and sewage services are inadequate.

6. People, Homes and Communities

Chapter: 6. People, Homes and Communities

People and Communities are intrinsic to achieving a sense of place and belonging and improving quality of life. Developing communities that are inclusive and people feel a part of is important at every stage of life. Rural areas can be isolating but ensuring that services are in place, especially transport, so people can meet up and have a place to meet up is vital for both young and old.

Engaging communities on what they need and have a community-led approach to projects gives a sense of ownership and pride for their community. Funding for community projects must be easily accessible with little paperwork is needed. Ireland's population will continue to grow and migrants will continue to immigrate to Ireland. The rise of misinformation and disinformation on refugees and asylum seekers makes it very difficult for them to integrate into communities. IRL have long called for community engagement to happen, especially in rural areas to identify what services are needed and to quash the misinformation and disinformation from spreading so people have a better understanding of how they can support newcomers to their area as well as identify what services are available and what is needed to help them.

Documents Attached: No
Boundaries Captured on No
Map: