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Irish Rural Link

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About Irish Rural Link

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 300 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.'

Background

It is clear that Ireland's aging population is a growing area of concern not only for this government but also for future policy makers. The aging population will not only increase financial strain on the countries' finances but all on caring services themselves. Research indicates that home based caring is the preferred option for many families as well as government as it is the most cost effective method. Social services/ meals on wheels are plugging the gaps in the system left by the health services; they cannot continue to do so without adequate support. The importance of social activity for the elderly should not be underestimated. Rural isolation has bleakness about it. It describes the reality of many, mainly older people who live alone and may not come into contact with people for days or even weeks. Social activity with people of a similar age can provide stimulation at a level that younger generations may not be able to provide.

Policy

Policy formation in terms of finding solutions to rural health/isolation is limited and is often subsumed into the wider health arena. Up to now meals on wheels support is justified on the basis of social inclusion principles but that is presently under threat. Groups would argue strongly that the latest changes may reduce the capacity to meet many of the social inclusion objectives never mind having the ability to grow the concept of resolving rural isolation. Clearly the next stage of the meals on wheels/ social services network development, if any, will depend on how political parties, likely to be in government will be informed. Up to now such policy originates in submissions from state bodies but to truly tackle these issues there is a need to consult with the groups on the ground that has direct link to the community and deal with the issues every day.

Role of Irish Rural Link.

Irish Rural Link established in 1991 acts as a rural representative voice on rural community matters. This role is recognised by the political system in common with 17 other community organisations that make up the community pillar. This pillar negotiates collectively and individually with Government as well as other private and public agencies. It also has a significant European presence.

Currently IRL is encouraging its various members to form single issue networks within the umbrella of the organisation. The advantages of this are:

- We will support experts, who are knowledgeable about their area of interest.
- It allows the interest groups to participate at the heart of policy making and in that context bring greater integrity to the problems and opportunities that may materialise.
- The wider membership of IRL is also better informed and because of that is more likely to take into account the issues that affect rural communities.
- The agreed policy, because it is accepted by the wider rural family is more likely to be successful in terms of its influence.

Conclusion

Over the years members of Irish Rural Link have sought to advance policies based on community rural sustainability. It continually seeks to prioritise the interests of rural people and their communities who are disadvantaged because of poor access to basic services. One of those services is clearly health/ isolation. It will evoke passionate responses and

discussion as to how the needs of rural communities are best met. Such debates need a calm forum for careful consideration and development of practical solutions.

IRL would invite a representative from the proposed Social Services network on the IRL board such a representation would greatly publicise the issues facing social services/meals on wheels organisations. In that context the establishment of meaningful social services/meals on wheels network under the umbrella of Irish Rural Link would be hugely beneficial to all of the parties concerned and primarily the interests of people who need this service.

Invitation to Service Providers:

The establishment of a Social Services/Meals on Wheels Network under IRL umbrella to provide them with national representation. Irish Rural Link would provide advocacy and training to social services around the country helping them to become sustainable.

Given the greater demand for governance and accountabilities structures of recent times that small individual organisations might well have difficulties and not be in a position to source the supports they need while they will still be the ones doing the job. A network is seen as a way of the future by many. Government and authorities in general do prefer to deal with structured representation, for instance, in relation to pre-budget submissions, refunding etc.

It is clear that Ireland's aging population is a growing area of concern not only for this government but also for future policy makers. The aging population will not only increase financial strain on the countries' finances but all on caring services themselves. Research indicates that home based caring is the preferred option for many families but also for government as it is the most cost effective method. Local organisations are plugging the gaps in the system left by the health services; they cannot continue to do so without adequate support.

IRL called on all social services/meals on wheels organisations interested in becoming part of a national social services network to contact us. To participate in the formation of this national network we invited all individual groups to become members of Irish Rural Link. By becoming members, groups will have official status under the umbrella of IRL. As well as enabling the organisation to formally develop the network.

Irish Rural Link facilitated the first meeting of interested groups in attendance. The outcome was a shared belief that there is a viable network within the region and nationally. The group met again to formalize the network and identify a work plan. The group consisted of 11 service providers covering Counties, Mayo, Galway & Roscommon with about 2000 clients

Following five further facilitated meetings with Meals on Wheels the following Aims & Objectives were agreed;

Meals on Wheels Network- delivering community services.

Meals-on-wheels service is a critical component of the continuum of care services that enables older people to remain living in the community or to return to their own homes after hospitalisation. It has, therefore, previously recommended on a number of occasions that the service is designated as a core service underpinned by legislation and funding. Currently there is no legal entitlement to receive or obligation on the State to provide meals-on-wheels

to older people. As a result, there is no clear direction regarding who should be responsible for the support and development of the sector.

With the existence of the meals on wheels there is:

- lower mortality
- shorter hospital stays
- fostered independent living
- reduced need for nursing home care following discharge
- increased likelihood of discharge from nursing home and reduced need for non-elective hospital readmission
- reduced incidence of falls
- daily contact
- expression of community inclusion
- Decline in loneliness
- Decrease isolation

Aim: To provide a local, community led professional facility to assist people who require services to maintain optimum health and independence.

Objectives:

- to advocate for a national standardised meals on wheels service which provide a system all organisations can adhere to.
- to ensure members have adequate resources to deliver a professionally produced nutritious meal to their clients.
- To advise and advocate the government and other agencies which influence the delivery of Meals on Wheels and ancillary services.
- to meet the future demands of network members by assisting in the development of their services .
- To develop the organisation in a manner which is inclusive and participatory to all meals on wheels organisations.
- To develop a voluntary professional Meals on Wheels service to a standard and to create a template that will be recognised and given a quality national rating.

A survey was distributed to all service providers with a view to alerting them to the network and collect their input.

Agreed Work Plan. It was agreed that the network will meet quarterly. The group then had a discussion where to hold the next meeting. There has a lengthy discussion but no agreement could be made about a central location so it was decided to again host the next meeting in Castlebar until a central location can be agreed.

Moving forward the network must outline a priority document which identifies the issues that need to be addressed in the immediate future. The point is expressed that a National Standardised Meals on Wheels service must be delivered as many organisations are informed by different agencies and policies causing confusion.

Elderly people can take a great deal of time to trust someone coming to their homes, with this in mind the topic of long-term staff was raised. Many organisations rely on employment schemes and voluntaries to conduct their work, limiting the time each individual spends with an organisation.

For some, vetting by the Garda (Irish police) causes a great deal of distress as all employees need to be vetted before employment. The process can delay employment and the process has to be repeated when switching employment. If employees are remaining in the sector, the suggestion is that the Garda vetting can be transferred.

Media Launch. The network believes that a media launch would be beneficial for developing the group by attracting new members and gaining the attention of policy makers. It was agreed to invite An Taoiseach (Prime Minister) Enda Kenny to launch the network. The Launch took place on 8th June in Castlebar, with An Taoiseach Enda Kenny in attendance. Over 150 people attended the launch including members of HSE, Department of Social Protection, Mayo County Council.

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Future of Small Towns and Villages

1. IRL Annual Conference

In partnership with the MA students in Rural Sustainability at the Department of Geography at National University of Ireland Galway, IRL undertook a research project on the Future of Small Towns and Villages, using the small town of Moate, County Westmeath, as the subject matter, as it was deemed a town with immense potential for education services, tourism opportunities and social occurrences. When researching Moate, the students divided the research into three headings of economy, education and society. The process included :

- Preparatory work including how data would be collected, managed and analysed.
- Desk top research was carried out
- Collection of data through a variety of means including; interviews, focus groups, surveys;
 - 100 survey participants
 - Interviews; local businesses, education providers, youth, residents, community organisations.

The report on this research was presented by the student themselves during the IRL Annual Conference which was held in the Grand Hotel, Moate, Co Westmeath on 1 May 2015 on the theme '**Future of rural towns and villages**' and attended by 90 people. The conference heard from a range of different speakers on how rural areas are adapting and changing to the current climate. Minister Ann Phelan T.D for rural development addressed the conference on the CEDRA report and its implementation progress. The conference allowed participants to reflect on the many issues facing rural communities. Towns are losing Garda (police) stations, bank and financial services. Shops and pubs are in trouble and for many young people job opportunities are scarce.

At the conference, the students from NUI Galway presented their research report on the town of Moate and outlined 10 recommendations that they believe can greatly enhance Moate as a town to live, work and establish a business. They indicated that promotion of rural networks could potentially to enhance present and future developments in the town. The over-reliance on a small number of local heroes remains a problem for many rural communities. These local heroes can disappear over time due to other commitments, illness, age death etc. Collaboration within rural towns and villages has the potential to alleviate this succession issue and to expand the distribution of duties with a community setting.

The conference heard from Pat O' Callaghan how the town of Ferbane in west Offaly stood firm in the face of the Ulster bank closure. The small community of Ferbane decided to rally together to stop the closure of their Ulster Bank branch. Over a thousand people from the locality turned out on the streets to show their commitment to Ulster Bank in December 2014 and rallied another significant crowd for a further protest in January 2015. The opposition organised by the community of Ferbane in Offaly has to be lauded. By standing against the closure, they have made it clear that the rural hinterland of West Offaly does not wish to

become another statistic in the wind down of rural areas, but instead wants to build a long term infrastructure that sustains the area into the future.

As a result of their efforts, the town kept many of its financial services and the Ulster Bank premises is now community owned. The financial services were outsourced to the local post office and credit union, strengthening the organisations. Ferbane is a prime example how a rural community can adapt to the changing climate. Pat O' Callaghan stated throughout that if a rural protocol was introduced it could illuminate much of issues arising from the closure of services as it also allows the community to examine the issues involved and perhaps put forward proposals that could offset the need for a closure. It equally puts some obligations on the organisation, government or private company that proposes closure.

Peadar Casey outlined how his village of O'Gonnelloe had taken a number of small steps to help the local community develop both economically but socially, with a particular emphasis on socially at the beginning. O'Gonnelloe is a small parish overlooking Lough Derg in County Clare with an approximate population of 700 people located midway between Killaloe and Scarriff. The main industries in the area are agriculture, tourism and entrepreneurs (home workers). Previously there was one pub and shop but are now unfortunately closed. In 1985, there were 10 homes between speed limits and now there are 60 homes between the speed limits. In 2013, the community decided to build a footpath between the speed limits which would now connect the church, hall, school and GAA pitch. The footpath not only provides a practical function but it also created a sense of community and a pride of place.

At the beginning of 2015, the O'Gonnelloe community decided to turn the community centre into the centre of the community through a series of informal public meetings called Pow Wows to identify the positive aspects and areas for improvement. The positive aspects include the people, scenery, community spirit, accessibility, beauty, nature etc while the areas for improvement included a need for a meeting place, lake access, enterprise, broadband, promote tourism etc. The O'Gonnelloe Development Company was founded to support ideas and initiatives that nurture the development of the community of O'Gonnelloe, to encourage, support and facilitate development by the community in O'Gonnelloe, to apply for funding for community projects and to manage the funds and to hold the ownership of the community centre in. The Company is concerned with developing a sustainable culture through conversation, communication, connecting with other communities and agencies. Like other communities, O'Gonnelloe faces many challenges such as capturing creativity, channelling enthusiasm, maintaining momentum through projects, stimulating economic activity. One key measure that can be taken is to create a hub to meet and a place of active participation. Peadar Casey finished his presentation by saying "rural communities are alive and well, give them a chance."

The Conference also heard from Moynalty, the winner of the 2014 Tidy Towns Competition, how communities can fight back and make their area a source of pride. Many individuals at the conference believe that if the energy of Tidy Towns groups could be captured for the benefit of all rural places, the contribution to the common good and well-being of Ireland would be immense.

2. Rural Renewal – New Opportunities for North Westmeath, Seminar, Castlepollard, Co. Westmeath

Irish Rural Link's seminar, hosted in partnership with Westmeath County Council, set out to explore the opportunities for both economic and social development in North Westmeath. Participants in the seminar included local people, community leaders and business owners. It was also attended by Robert Troy T.D, Peadar Tóbin and former Senator and T.D. Donnie Cassidy. The seminar was opened by Cllr Paddy Hill, Cathaoirleach, Westmeath County Council and received presentations from Pat Gallagher (Chief Executive- Westmeath Co Co), Seamus Boland (CEO, Irish Rural Link), Peadar Casey (Ogonneloe Project) and Hugh O'Reilly (Chief Officer, Westmeath Local Community Development Committee). Following

the presentations, the audience was divided into tables of ten people and was posed a series of questions followed by a feedback session.

3. Broadband Connectivity: IRL will host a Seminar on Broadband on 15 December. The purpose of this seminar is to highlight the current standard of broadband in rural areas and the planned construction of a high speed broadband infrastructure. The seminar will also investigate how broadband has become essential for rural communities and businesses. –

4. Ireland's Future Transmission Grid:

Irish Rural Link hosted 3 public consultations in partnership with Eirgrid, in Sligo, Dundalk and Cork. Invitations were sent to several hundred organisations in each area utilising the local PPN Network and IRL Membership. Each consultation was attended by approx. 20 groups.

IRL also hosted a seminar on the Ireland Future Energy Policy on half of the Department of Communications, Energy & Natural Resources. The Seminar was held in Wexford, and approx 60 groups were represented.

5. Access to financial services

On 27 April 2015, Irish Rural Link hosted a seminar on social finance entitled "Is Your Community Ready for Social Finance ?" in partnership with the Ulster Community Investment Trust. The purpose of the seminar was to give groups a better understanding of the process involved in accessing social finance, leaving it easier for the lender to manage the assessment process, the group to better prepare their business case. Dónal Traynor, Associate Director for UCIT presented a step-by-step preparation guide for voluntary businesses on how to access social finance. The UCIT Group is one of the largest providers of Social Finance to the Community & Voluntary sector on this island (and indeed in mainland UK), having invested to date some €50 million in over 350 projects. Our existing access to funds within the Republic for onward investment, solely to community based entities via socially affordable loans, equates to almost €70 million. UCIT is a not-for-profit, open, membership based organisation with charitable status, established in 1995 as a response to a decline in government grant aid and the increasing difficulties being experienced by voluntary based groups accessing mainstream finance.