

**Social
Democrats**

Building Sustainable Rural Communities

*Hope for better.
Vote for better.
Vote Social Democrats.*

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Contents

Introduction	2
Quality of life and a New Deal for Parents.....	2
Public Transport	3
Making Insurance Affordable	3
Health	4
Build Resilient Communities	4
Arts at the heart of rural communities	5
Rural Broadband.....	6
Just Transition	6
Disability Services.....	6
Housing.....	7
Agriculture.....	7
Fisheries and Coastal.....	9

Introduction

We need to re-think what we mean when we talk about “Rural Development”.

For too long, this has been framed as some sort of urban-rural divide, when the truth is that lack of investment in public services, climate change, childcare and the escalating cost of living have the same impact on people living in rural communities as they do on those in our towns and cities.

In many instances – public transport, employment opportunities or access to healthcare – the impact is further reaching, leading to de-population, isolation and mental health challenges. People across Ireland hope for better.

Rural communities – our small towns, villages and countryside - are particularly hard hit and deserve the same services as the rest of the country. We must provide good quality public services to these communities, support and encourage community, sporting and arts groups, and government must fulfil its responsibility to stimulate economic development and job creation, all of which are key factors in building sustainable, thriving rural communities.

The Social Democrats have a number of proposals to support the development of sustainable rural communities:

Quality of life and a New Deal for Parents

Many people living in rural areas spend an excessive amount of time on long commutes into towns and cities for work. This is detrimental to family life. We seek to re-shape work/life balance with a range of measures to help people in rural communities, including:

- **The right to flexible work options**, including working from home and term-time working and helping with the costs of raising children.
- **Public services you can count on in areas such as Education and Health.**
- **Accessible, affordable childcare**, with a long-term aim of establishing a national public childcare service.

Public Transport

The failure of successive governments to properly plan, fund and deliver a public transport programme that takes into account the realities of life in rural communities means we have no rural public transport to speak of.

This impacts every area of our lives, from job opportunities to mental health, isolation and care for our elderly. It forces rural communities to rely heavily on cars, leaving them with no realistic options to reduce their carbon footprint.

- **Local Link** is vital to rural communities. It supports independence for our elderly, helps reduce traffic and travel time for parents and encourages people to shop locally. Current funding of €21m is completely insufficient. **We will increase funding for Local Link to €100m**
- We are committed to **lower transport fares** and will **remove charges for school transport**.

Making Insurance Affordable

Rural communities are heavily impacted by high insurance premiums. They drive up the cost of living, limit employment, childcare and study opportunities, damage local services and small businesses.

The Social Democrats are not satisfied that the Central Bank is sufficiently consumer-focused in its approach to investigate increasing premiums.

- We want to see a **new Consumer Affairs Committee** established to ensure that regulators are more accountable for actions or inaction.

We recognise that, in the absence of decent, reliable public transport, people in rural communities depend on cars.

- We will **end discrimination against drivers of older cars** and new or returning entrants to the insurance market.
- We will **improve non-litigations methods for claims settlement** to reduce legal costs and make it easier to switch insurers, driving competition.

Public liability insurance impacts significantly on the viability of small businesses and festivals, not least in rural communities.

- We will **expand the remit of the state-owned Public Bodies insurance scheme** to ensure that public festivals, community groups and volunteer-led sports teams can get cover immediately.
- We will also promote the concept of **co-operative or group insurance** and investigate the possibility of introducing a New Zealand style public liability insurance scheme in an Irish context.

Health

Rural communities often struggle with access to healthcare. People are forced to travel significant distances to access even basic services. By fully implementing and funding Sláintecare, we will ensure full investment in Primary Care Centres and Urgent Care Centres with diagnostic facilities, and greatly expand the services available locally.

- We will **abolish Home Care waiting lists** through proper investment in home care packages and step-down facilities, ensuring that people can live independently in their own home for as long as possible, with additional funding for dementia and Alzheimer's services, and for palliative care.
- **Greater resources for community eye-care** based on recommendations of the Primary Care Eye Services Review Group report.
- Ensure **effective and timely primary and community mental health care** is accessible to all.

Build Resilient Communities

Failure to invest in services and meaningful employment opportunities in rural communities drives our young people away because they don't see a future for them. It discourages those who left during the recession from returning. The knock-on effects of this include isolation for our elderly, lack of vibrancy in our towns and insufficient numbers to sustain local schools, businesses and other services.

Without solid, **strategic investment, not just subsidies**, our people will have nothing to stay for – or come back to. We must invest in sustainable local employment and better supports for small businesses.

- We will maintain a **special Brexit fund** to help insulate indigenous industries traditionally dependent on trade with the UK, particularly agriculture, food

and beverage, fisheries and energy towards new European markets and non-UK suppliers.

- We will **promote regional economic development** by investing in capital projects that boost industrial and commercial capacity across the country, such as electricity capacity and third level technological centres.
- We will **expand the Town and Village Renewal Scheme**, increasing funding and allow more urban pockets to apply
- Examine additional ways in which **local authorities can stimulate regeneration** in small towns and villages, including enhancements to the public environment including lighting and street furniture, tackling empty homes and vacant or derelict sites, encouraging and facilitating the development of over-the-shop living and the conversion of commercial back to residential properties to repopulate the main streets of smaller towns, and expanding the development of co-working spaces.
- We're committed to developing the **same social protections as PAYE workers for those who opt-in to social insurance contributions**.
- We will insist on **fair and transparent public procurement processes** and seek to give stronger rating to bids from businesses with stronger labour and environmental protection offerings.
- We will introduce opt-in mechanisms to **spread tax payments throughout the year**, which will bring greater cash-flow stability.

Arts at the heart of rural communities

Arts and culture are at the core of every vibrant community. They underpin our overall wellbeing and creativity, our innovation and our social cohesion.

- Ireland has the **lowest level of arts funding** as a percentage of GDP in Europe. We will develop a roadmap for progressive increases in total arts funding, to **bring it in line with average EU spending over 5 years**.
- We will establish **special commercial rates for creative/arts spaces** as well as "rates holidays" for new projects.
- We will introduce **mandatory requirements for local authority arts spending** and invest in physical infrastructure, such as studios, galleries, theatres and work spaces.

Rural Broadband

We recognise that the provision of quality broadband services underpins sustainability and future development of our rural communities. Small businesses, farmers, remote workers and students all require access to reliable, high-quality service.

The overspend and privatisation of the National Broadband Plan was unacceptable and strongly opposed by the Social Democrats in the Dáil.

- We will explore legal action to retain public ownership of our network, ensure that quality internet provision is available throughout rural Ireland and prevent any further gross mismanagement of funds.

Just Transition

A just transition is central to our approach to the climate emergency.

Rural communities have a unique role to play in this and we must ensure that supports are put in place to provide real alternatives and support the changes we need to make. Many people are not in a position to change how they keep their homes warm and how they travel.

- We will introduce a **'pay as you save' loan and grant scheme for people to insulate their homes.**
- We will ringfence income from carbon taxes to fund retrofitting homes and increase the viability of low-carbon lifestyle to all people, regardless of income.

Disability Services

- Develop and publish a **National Strategy for Autism**, to include better family supports, respite hours and SNAs for schools.
- Amend rules so that more people can qualify for **Carer's Allowance and improve supports, training and respite.**
- **Disability-proofing** for all new construction projects and reverse the recent unacceptable cut to disability services in the HSE 2020 service plan.
- We have published **extensive proposals** in our Disability Manifesto – [*Putting People with Disabilities at the Heart of All Decisions*](#) -where we commit to a rights based approach.

Housing

Housing is a fundamental right.

Rural communities are also impacted by the housing crisis. Families that find themselves in emergencies are often required to seek assistance 50kms or more away from where they live – without public transport to get there. For others, lack of affordability – for both renters and buyers - is preventing young families from being able to settle in their communities, pushing them further afield.

- Our housing priorities include **maximising the use of public lands** to deliver an actual build of **100,000 homes over the next five years**.
- We will introduce a **nationwide rent freeze** until increase in housing supply drives down the cost of housing substantially.
- We will introduce legislation to reserve **20% of housing in private developments for affordable housing to buy or rent** in addition to the current 10% social housing.

Agriculture

Agriculture is critical to our economy and is the lifeblood of rural communities across the country. Farmers and food producers are deeply affected by climate change, and their role in addressing it.

In the face of our climate and biodiversity crises, change is inevitable. We must accept the new realities and bring solutions that don't involve a cliff-edge with no supports or alternatives in place. These solutions should be fair not only to current farmers but to the next generation of farmers too.

Without sustainable and robust support from the state, the agricultural sector will suffer greatly, taking with it many rural communities and the heart of Irish society.

The following are our policy priorities to better support agriculture and rural development:

- Acknowledge the **importance of agriculture to the economy and rural communities**, and so ensure that producers themselves receive a fair price for their produce.
- We support a **fair and simpler CAP** which ensures more farm

- payments targeted towards low-income farmers.
- **Protect biodiversity and support a move away from monoculture and intensive farming.** Practical examples of these policies include wildflower borders on crop fields.
 - **Tackle the cartel-like practices in the beef processing sector.**
 - Allow small and local producers to compete with larger national/international retailers by **removing below-cost sales.**
 - Further **develop horticulture and organic farming**, which has less of a reliance of imports.
 - Increase funding to farmers in **Areas of Natural Constraint and Special Areas of Conservation.**
 - Launch initiatives to **reduce isolation, address mental health issues**, and foster selfcare and wellness in the farming community, especially amongst older and young farmers.
 - Provide funds to **allow for hiring costs of labour** in order to cover parental leave, sickness, injury and bereavement.
 - Promote **education and training initiatives to reduce farm accidents and deaths**, and to improve general health and safety.
 - Invest in **agriculture education courses at all levels.** Support third level institutions in conducting innovative research which could improve farming methods and increase yields sustainably.
 - **Support apiculture** and explore the possibility of allowing beekeepers to use land in bogs. Introduce a ban on the use of neonicotinoids
 - Support the **growth and diversification of the forestry industry** especially in terms of energy production and biomass production. As per our biodiversity policy, we support the development of native woodlands.
 - Reduce costs and emissions by using **shared machinery through co-ops and sustainable communal energy production** such as wind, solar and blue energy.
 - Formalise **walking routes** through commonages in the uplands of Ireland with a **full and transparent consultation process.**
 - Complete and **expand greenway programmes** with a comprehensive and open consultation process.

Fisheries and Coastal

- Work to ensure more **sustainable fishing practices**. Introduce **marine protected areas** (MPAs) to cover certain nurseries for species which are still below maximum sustainable yield. There will be a total ban on fishing within MPAs.
- Work towards an **EU-wide ban on super-trawlers** and ensure current controls are strictly observed and adequately resourced.
- Explore and develop a **Blue Carbon Strategy** for coastal communities to protect and restore coastal ecosystems, increase protection from storm surges and sea level rise, provide better fisheries habitat and nature-based tourism, and build sustainable livelihoods for fishing and coastal communities.

See also our General Election Manifesto *Invest In Better* at www.socialdemocrats.ie/InvestInBetter for further proposals across a wide range of areas that would have a positive impact on rural communities.

The background of the page is a complex, abstract pattern of overlapping triangles and polygons in various shades of purple, ranging from light lavender to deep, dark indigo. The shapes are irregular and create a sense of depth and movement.

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A solid purple horizontal bar at the bottom of the page, featuring a subtle geometric pattern of overlapping triangles and polygons, similar to the main background, but in a uniform dark purple color.