

**Social
Democrats**

Rural and Regional Development

For Sustainable Communities

**For the Future
It Starts Here**

#VoteSocDems

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Key Points

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Promote regional economic development by **investing in capital projects that boost industrial and commercial capacity across the country**, including telecommunications and third level technological institutions.
- Rebalance infrastructural spending to anticipate and create demand away from the larger cities, creating **regional economic hubs**.
- Acknowledge that we cannot achieve proper balanced regional development without **strong regional government**, and accordingly devolve to new regional assemblies a certain amount of power related to economic development strategy.
- **Invest in the delivery of public services** including health and social care so that rural Ireland can expect services of a similar standard to those in our towns and cities.
- Work to ensure the agriculture sector is **both economically and socially sustainable**, and that farmers receive a fair price for their produce.
- Invest in **Technological Universities** so they can better support regional growth, acting as an anchor for **regional economic development, research and investment**.
- **Build a strong community banking sector** in Ireland. This would result in credit union and post office customers having full current account facilities, including debit cards and online banking.
- **Expand the Town and Village Renewal Scheme**, increasing funding and allowing more urban pockets to apply.
- **The right to flexible work options**, including working from home and term-time working.
- Work to **ensure community-ownership of wind farms** so that local communities can benefit from developments in their area.

Introduction

A sustainable society requires balanced regional development, for the sake of both the economy and social well-being.

A more balanced approach to development has the potential not just to make Ireland more sustainable but to improve living standards while revitalising rural communities.

The proportion of the population of Ireland living in and around the capital city is already very high by international standards, and Dublin accounts for approximately half of all Irish economic output. Yet as a country we are continuing to drive growth, and design our public services, in a way that encourages such concentration.

By locating a disproportionate share of our best health, education, and cultural institutions in Dublin **we are driving a model of development that precludes the kind of regional balance required for Ireland to thrive.**

Too much centralisation has a suffocating effect on the capacity of regions to the South and West of the capital to promote enterprise and develop sustainably. We also know that Ireland has one of the most centralised systems of government in the developed world, so decisions on revenue and investment are almost entirely outside the control of local representatives.

Aside from reforming this overly centralised structure of government, infrastructure funding must focus not only on where demand is today, but on creating new growth paths which spread the benefits of growth around the country. **It is not enough to plan for the expanding population of the country; there must also be a plan to address existing regional disparities in jobs, incomes and service provision.**

Balanced regional development is crucial to living standards not just in rural Ireland, or in towns and villages around the country. **It would also contribute to improved living standards in cities,** which already face significant infrastructural challenges in areas like housing, transport, and other service provision.

While Ireland's cities suffer from a shortage of housing, unaffordable rents, and severe traffic congestion, **many people who would love the opportunity to live and work where they grew up are being denied that option.**

Unbalanced economic growth hinders Ireland's overall potential for economic and social development and has an adverse effect on the overall standard of living in our society. There is a huge social cost to half-empty villages and towns

around Ireland while Dublin and other cities are thriving to the point where people cannot find affordable places to live, or have to deal with long commutes in heavy traffic.

This must change, and **the government's *National Development Plan* must succeed in developing regional social and economic hubs, serving wider regions and creating employment** in places that allow people to remain in or near their locality if they wish. This will require - amongst other things - increased frontloaded investment to complete the rollout of the *National Broadband Plan*, and integrated supports for rural entrepreneurs, micro-enterprises, and SMEs.

Rural and regional policy has to grasp with issues such as higher poverty rates, lower median incomes, older populations (and often labour shortages), greater distances from everyday services, and a higher rate of part-time employment in rural areas. Many of these challenges have persisted over time.

Social democracy is about more than poverty mitigation, labour rights, and more transparent politics – though it is very much about these things too. **At its heart, social democracy is about better public services**, and we all know that rural people, at present, cannot expect the same level of services as those living in cities and bigger towns.

We now need a social democratic vision for rural Ireland. Government must build the infrastructure and deploy the public services that will allow rural Ireland to thrive. In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Promote regional economic development by **investing in capital projects that boost industrial and commercial capacity across the country**, including telecommunications and third level technological institutions.
- Rebalance infrastructural spending to anticipate and create demand away from the larger cities, creating **regional economic hubs**.
- Acknowledge that we cannot achieve proper balanced regional development without **strong regional government**, and accordingly devolve to new regional assemblies a certain amount of power related to economic development strategy.
- **Invest in the delivery of public services** including health and social care so that rural Ireland can expect services of a similar standard to those in our towns and cities.

Building Resilient Communities

Failure to invest in services and meaningful employment opportunities in rural communities drives young people from their homeplaces, often never to return.

This negatively skews the demographics of some areas of the country, making them older and less economically innovative and dynamic. The knock-on effects of this include isolation for our elderly, lack of vibrancy in our towns and villages, and difficulty sustaining local schools, businesses and other services.

Our small towns, villages and countryside deserve the same quality of services as the rest of the country. They deserve to experience a decent level of cultural vibrancy and social life.

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.

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

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- **Promote regional economic development** by investing in capital projects that boost industrial and commercial capacity across the country, including telecommunications and third level technological institutions.
- **Expand the Town and Village Renewal Scheme**, increasing funding and allowing more urban pockets to apply.
- Identify **State-owned properties** in rural Ireland that can potentially be used for community purposes.
- Expand the development of **co-working spaces and hubs**.
- Examine additional ways in which **local authorities can stimulate regeneration** in small towns and villages.

This should include 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 to residential properties to repopulate the main streets of smaller towns.

Balanced Economic Development

Too many rural communities feel left behind by economic progress in urban centres. As already noted, **we need a more economically diverse and vibrant rural Ireland** not only for the sake of rural Ireland, but for the sake of society and the economy more widely.

For this to take shape, people and their families must have the option to live and work in the areas they are from, in sustainable communities. **Breathing fresh life into towns and villages across the country requires more than equal access to public services**, important as that is. **It requires more balanced economic development.**

Government and the State must lead by example in creating a more even geographical spread of employment opportunities. While not perfect, previous redeployments of government departments, civil servants and state agencies outside Dublin have proven **a real economic boon to many towns and regions**. Greater technological advances in the meantime, and greater opportunity for remote working, have only increased the potential in this area.

A challenge is to achieve an appropriate balance between supporting Ireland's agricultural communities and other traditional rural based economic activity whilst simultaneously fostering sustainable economic diversification.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- **Increase the regional spread of civil service and state agencies**, in a way that has buy-in from all stakeholders and builds on lessons from previous redeployments.
- Invest in **Technological Universities** so they can better support regional growth, acting as an anchor for **regional economic development, research and investment**.
- Aim to create a more diverse spread of air traffic into the country, with a **focus on utilising unused capacity at regional airports**, including Shannon, Cork, Waterford, and Ireland West.
- Tackle **deficits in wastewater infrastructure** that are inhibiting the development of towns and villages around the country, including preventing delivery of new homes, hampering business expansion and tourism, adding to environmental pollution and strangling the potential of several regions.

- Invest in **flood defences** in areas of the country that are experiencing regular issues, and ensure that construction is avoided in flood-prone areas.
- Support **REDZ and Local Enterprise Offices (LEOs)** to develop remote working hubs and Smart Villages.
- Identify necessary **upgrades to our seaports** to ensure our main connections to mainland Europe have the capacity and infrastructure required, both for trade and to allow the development of offshore wind.

The **LEADER Program** is an integral part of the community sector providing vital services in several areas including, childcare, tourism, enterprise, renewable energy, biodiversity, and basic services targeted at hard-to-reach communities.

However, several local schemes that are of particular importance to rural economies and communities have yet to have their funding restored since the cuts that followed the financial crisis.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- **Increase funding** for the LEADER scheme and **reform eligibility criteria** and conditions of Tús, Community Employment and Rural Social Schemes to maximise participation by unemployed individuals and protect vital community services.
- **Simplify the process** through which community groups apply for LEADER funding.
- Begin closing the **SICAP funding gap**: current funding levels are still far below 2008.
- Enhance the **Rural Social Scheme** by increasing the top-up to €50 per week for participants.

Rural Business and Innovation

Entrepreneurs and the SMEs they establish and grow with their fellow employees are the lifeblood of our local economies. Without them Ireland would not be known for the quality services and products we offer the world, nor would we have become such an attractive place for foreign investment.

However, this investment and access to resources and skilled labour is lacking in many of our rural areas. The Social Democrats see it as government's responsibility to assist our innovators and entrepreneurs, helping them bring the benefits of their enterprises to their wider community and ensuring finance, resources and labour market skills they need are readily accessible. More balanced economic development this will reduce the need for people to leave their communities for economic opportunities.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Split food and accommodation businesses for the purposes of VAT, and apply a **reduced 9 per cent VAT** rate on food and beverages.
- Make available greater funding to incentivise firms to invest in the human capital of their workforce, and to incentivise engagement with academics and business networks to facilitate a higher rate of technology diffusion.
- **Scale-up up Microfinance Ireland** to support greater numbers of small businesses and start-ups to access finance.
- Improve supports for **Local Enterprise Offices**.
- Annually increase the **VAT-entry threshold for small businesses** in line with average earnings.
- Ensure that all primary and secondary legislation impacting the micro and small business sectors is subject to a **regulatory impact assessment**, and conforms with the Small Business Act.
- Engage with the sector and its representatives to find ways to use the **National Training Fund**, which currently has a significant surplus, to address skills gaps, including those that are slowing down infrastructure delivery.

Community Wealth Building

Community Wealth Building is an approach to **local economic development** where local economies are reorganised so that **the amount of wealth extracted from the local community is limited**, and more income and **spending is recirculated** within the local area.

These ideas are being applied by a growing number of businesses and municipalities across the UK and USA, driving a shift in thinking around economic development. Community Wealth Building (CWB):

- Recognises the **benefits of a diverse blend of ownership models**, which can return more economic power to local people and institutions.

For example, small enterprises, community organisations, cooperatives and many forms of municipal ownership are often more economically beneficial for the local economy than large or public limited companies.

Community ownership of energy sources is another way in which different ownership models can bring benefits to the locality.

- Seeks to **increase flows of investment within local economies**.

The aim is to harness wealth that exists locally, for example by maximising local community benefits through procurement and commissioning policies.

Progressive procurement can develop more local supply chains, with benefits for local SMEs, social enterprises, cooperatives, and other forms of community business that are more likely to support local employment and retain wealth and spending locally.

CWB can be particularly useful (even crucial) in areas where the economy has been hollowed out through years of under-investment. It has the potential to re-direct millions of euros back into the local economy, leading to a reduction in unemployment and increased wealth in the area.

All communities, cities and counties are unique, and so there can be no one-size fits all model of CWB. Elected representatives from each area must work together to develop local models of CWB based on local characteristics.

The Social Democrats are committed to the following actions and principles around Community Wealth Building:

Procurement

At local authority level, our Councillors will insist on **fair and transparent public procurement processes**, and work to give stronger weighting in procurement competitions to bids from suppliers with strong credentials around **labour rights, quality local employment, environmental protection, and local social benefit or value**.

We will also seek to create a more inclusive and **accessible tender process** so that a wider range of organisations can successfully bid for contracts, for example smaller local firms or local social enterprises. Using a wider range of criteria beyond cost alone can be used as part of the procurement processes and can help contribute to virtuous local supply chains.

We will develop a **Social Value Procurement Framework** to encourage suppliers to promote local training and employment, support the local community and community sector, and promote environmental sustainability.

Community Energy Schemes

There can be **significant benefits at a community level from the shared ownership of energy projects**. Local populations can retain wealth in their local area through the community ownership of projects like windfarms and solar farms. Such ownership has also been shown to increase local support for such projects.

There is now a clear pathway to allow communities, primarily through the Sustainable Energy Community (SEC) model, **to own and generate their own renewable energy**, the revenues of which will return to the community, reinforcing community support for decarbonisation.

Despite this, the Government is far off its 500MW target to be produced by community-owned renewable schemes. The Social Democrats have **a target at least 20 per cent of our new renewable energy generation to be community-owned by 2030**, providing direct funding to assist capacity building and technical expertise. (See section on Community Energy Ownership, Page 22).

Social Enterprise

Social enterprises blend entrepreneurial spirit and activity with a social mission, with the goal of addressing issues including local, unemployment, social

exclusion, or environmental sustainability at a local level. Properly funded and supported, they can **play a significant role in building resilient communities**.

Our elected representatives, at local and national level, will advocate for access to Local Enterprise Office business supports that enhance the skills and capabilities of social enterprise leaders and workers.

They also will ensure that local Social Value Procurement Frameworks (see the Procurement section, previously) facilitate local authority procurement from social enterprises in a way that **supports local jobs and other community benefits**. We will work for increased local financial support to encourage the growth and sustainability of social enterprises, and foster an environment where Social Enterprises and Cooperatives can thrive.

Promoting Community Banking

Community Banking can be a form of Community Wealth building. See section on Financial Inclusion, Page 16, for more information.

Community Wealth Building within the Wider Community

Our TDs and Councillors will **work with local Anchor Institutions** so that they are aware of the concept of Community Wealth Building, what it can achieve, and how to implement policies and processes that support it.

The term ‘anchor institution’ refers to organisations which have an important presence in a place by virtue of being large scale employers, large purchasers of goods and services in the locality, whilst also having relatively fixed assets.

Anchor institutions are **usually tied to a place by their mission**, for example hospitals and other health and social care related settings, educational institutions, housing associations, and some large (and longstanding) local businesses and community and voluntary groups.

Tapping into their **sense of civic responsibility and their contribution to the local economy** – from how they purchase goods and services to their employment policies to their investment and finance strategies – can also further Community Wealth Building. We will work to mainstream Community Wealth Building in the strategies and policies of local authorities, national government, and the business community.

Rural Broadband and Remote Working

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 last few years have seen a notable growth in remote working. Increased options around remote working for many professions, and the possibility of long-term flexibility around working locations and a reduced number of commutes, **makes living away from the main cities more appealing to many.**

This change has been driven in part by a realisation that much of the work people previously had to commute for can be done from anywhere with a decent Wi-Fi connection, and in part by re-prioritised work-life balance and the importance of quality nearby amenities. This trend should represent an important step in revitalising rural and regional Ireland, but **only if Government capitalises on the opportunity to help re-balance Ireland's growth model** and assist in the necessary spatial re-balancing of our society and economy.

This trend has huge potential for rural Ireland. It will also help relieve transport and traffic congestion, reduce emissions, reduce housing pressure in cities, and breathe new life into rural communities. **The key ingredient is good telecommunications infrastructure.**

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Prioritise capital investment in the **National Broadband Plan.**
- Simplify the **Working From Home tax relief process**, and increase the **weekly allowance to €20.**
- Develop more **remote working hubs** in rural areas and smaller towns, including providing financial support to Local Authorities to re-purpose vacant properties in those towns.
- Move to **greater home/remote working in the public sector**, including a pilot that would see civil servants hot-desking in a number of regional towns.

Quality of Life and Public Services

As noted on the previous page, many people living in rural areas spend an excessive amount of time on long commutes into towns and cities for work. Minimising this time would greatly improve quality of life for many.

There is also significant scope for job creation including social enterprise and social services (e.g. childcare and elder care), tourism, and cultural and creative industries. These sectors will form an important part of any future rural development strategy.

While rural areas usually have older populations than urban ones, demand for workers in health and social care is higher in rural areas, meaning employment potential in rural areas for this kind of work is high.

In Government we will 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.
- **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.
- Increased rollout of **electric vehicle charging points** in rural Ireland.
- Ring-fenced money for local authorities to purchase land for **community growing** purposes, ensuring more permanent locations be set up for community gardens and allotments.

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 with diagnostic facilities, and we will expand the services available locally.

We will also ensure increased accountability through the implementation of the Regional Health Areas defined in the Sláintecare plan.

In Government, the Social Democrats 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.
- **Invest 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.
- Expand **community-based midwife care** to mitigate the effective ban on having a home birth in parts of rural Ireland, particularly in the West.
- Establish **birthing centres in rural areas** which will also provide post-natal supports for parents such as breastfeeding support provided by IBCLCs.
- Introduce a **transport scheme for patients in rural areas** who attend hospital appointments in cities regularly. This will also help streamline appointment systems.

Housing and Planning/Development

A curtailing of one-off housing in rural areas in favour of more concentrated development places responsibility on government and on local authorities to ensure that alternative options for housing are available to allow so that people can live and raise a family within their community.

These alternative options should **promote compact growth to ensure that rural towns can enjoy some of the benefits** of their more urban counterparts, such as being able to support public transport connections.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Make funding available to local authorities to **buy key sites in rural towns and villages with which to create serviced plots** to promote compact urban growth. These sub-divided serviced plots would be available for cooperative, public and commercial housing projects.

- Work to **establish Class 1 Parks in all towns**, to ensure that everybody has access to vibrant open green spaces in their communities.
- Build right-sized, energy efficient sustainable homes within towns and villages **so that pensioners have the option to move within their community**. This measure would promote compact urban growth, while fighting rural isolation and energy poverty, and making existing larger homes available for young families.

Public Transport

The **lack of an accessible, reliable and integrated rural transport system** is one of the key challenges facing people living in rural areas. People rely heavily on private cars to avail of employment opportunities and public services like healthcare and education, as well as recreational activities.

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 little rural public transport of which to speak**. The situation has a particular impact on people on low incomes, those with a disability, or the elderly, who may not have access to a car and therefore depend on public transport.

Offering real connectivity to rural Ireland requires innovative, locally-driven approaches. Local Link is welcome, and 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, but does not have sufficient reach or ambition. Current funding is completely insufficient.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- **Double funding for Local Link** over the course of a Government term.
- Increase funding for the **Rural Transport Scheme**.
- Invest to make **public transport fares more affordable**.
- Support the findings of the **All Island Rail Review**, including the development of the **Western Rail Corridor**.

- Fund the return and upgrade of bus-stops on rural routes, and invest in **bus-tracking software** to improve user interface and accessibility.
- Develop a subsidised **Local Area Hackney Scheme** in designated areas of rural Ireland which are too small or remote to support a full-time taxi or hackney service.
- **Make school transport completely free**, as part of our policy around fully free education.

Tourism

Tourism is a huge contributor to the Irish economy, benefiting all parts of the island and supporting the employment of hundreds of thousands of people. However, it is in the regions and outside the major cities that tourism has a disproportionate potential to provide employment where options might be limited. In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Increase investment in **Tourism Ireland and Fáilte Ireland**, to improve and promote Ireland's overall tourism offering.
- Build on the success of the **Wild Atlantic Way** to continue to develop sustainable tourism along the Western Seaboard, and develop and market **Ireland's Hidden Heartlands** and **Ireland's Ancient East** tourist trails to ensure a more even geographic spread of the benefits of this vital industry.
- Invest in **new greenways and cycle routes**, with the goal of developing an integrated nationwide network.
- Extend the budget for the **Walks Scheme** to build sustainable tourism.
- Develop Ireland's **outdoor activity sector** in a strategic and coordinated manner to maximise tourism benefits and create employment opportunities in rural communities.

Financial Inclusion

Post Offices, Credit Unions, and Community Banking

The local post office is part of the heart of many towns, villages and rural townlands. It plays both an economic and a social role in society, including providing social welfare payments and providing a link for residents in isolated areas.

We will improve the viability of the post office network by expanding the range of public services available through the network. An Post has the potential to serve as a point of access for the services of a range of public bodies.

We will also create and implement a **Public Service Obligation** for the Post Office network.

It is well known that the physical provision of financial services in Ireland has been greatly scaled back in recent years. The groups that suffer most as cash access has declined are older people, those with mobility issues, and those in rural communities.

This is a question of democracy, being part of society and living a normal life. Although digital payments will increase, we will still have cash for a long time.

Access to financial services is vital for a sustainable economy, especially outside the major population centres where employment is so much more reliant on the local/Irish SME sector.

There are times in the economic cycle when households and small businesses find it more difficult to secure loans, and there is **international evidence to suggest that local bank branch closures have a negative effect on the formation of new businesses.**

Indeed, the further a firm is located away from the bank, the higher the monitoring costs will be for the banks and other problems like this – including high risks associated with the lack of information and uncertainty – make banks less willing to extend credit.

Community Banking has more potential than mainstream retail banks to overcome these deficiencies in the sector. This may involve an expansion of the financial services provided by credit unions and/or post offices. However, to date, no honest analysis of the capacity of these sectors to provide this has been

allowed by Government, which seems determined to persist with an increasingly consolidated model of retail banking that continues to fail the public.

Ireland has about 380 credit unions and around 900 post offices across the country, **giving them a physical presence in towns and villages in every county.**

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- **Build a strong community banking sector** in Ireland. This would result in credit union and post office customers having full current account facilities, including debit cards and online banking.
- Ensure **enhanced loan facilities** can be provided by credit unions (on an opt-in basis, by branch).
- Conduct a feasibility study for post office branches to offer **enhanced services**, potentially via the broker model used by the Royal Mail in the UK.

The proposal would have numerous benefits, including:

- **Access to financial services** in smaller towns and villages.
- **Increased access to credit** for local businesses and the self-employed, including the approximately €8bn of credit union deposits which are currently unused.
- Local savings being available for **local investment**.
- The choice to bank with **publicly-owned institutions**.
- **Profits reinvested locally** and distributed to members.
- **Increased sustainability** for credit unions, and in particular for post offices, which are under sustained financial pressure.

As part of this, the Social Democrats propose enhanced services for credit unions, to include:

- Provision of **full current accounts** for personal and small business banking, including debit cards that can be used on the full national and international ATM network.
- Provision of **mortgage lending**, with expertise and financial aggregation of risk provided at a county and/or regional basis.

- The provision of **online banking and associated services** including electronic payments.
- Support for **on-going development of lending expertise**, in particular with regard to mortgages and business lending, as well as for corporate governance changes to ensure compliance for any new financial activity.
- Wider investment options for credit union deposits than current options (limited mainly to government bonds, bank bonds and cash deposits).
- Allowing credit unions to become conduits for small savings loans underwritten by the Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland, as per the model currently used in the retail banks.

Agriculture

Agriculture is critical to the Irish economy and is the lifeblood of rural communities. It must therefore be the focus of agricultural policy to make the sector economically and socially sustainable, ensuring fair prices paid to farmers for their produce, a living income for farming families, the creation of positive economic spill-over benefits for rural communities, and the production of high-quality food in a sustainable manner.

Agriculture in Ireland is under pressure in a number of areas, most notably in relation to food prices and farm incomes, but also in relation to impending changes to practices necessary to ensure the sector reduces its emissions in line with Ireland's climate-related obligations. Ensuring a just transition is imperative.

The sector is also afflicted by a significant amount of policy incoherence. Government states that its environmental goals include emissions reduction, yet the policies it has pursued will push emissions from the farming and food production sectors in the opposite direction.

Significant resources are allocated to the agriculture sector every year by both national government and the European Union. Too often, those resources incentivise practices that contradict stated government goals, and have negative consequences for the environment, society, and farmers themselves. This must change. Agriculture policy requires a new focus, founded on coherence of purpose, and ensuring that:

- The industry is both economically and socially sustainable.
- The high quality of Irish agricultural produce is maintained.
- Farmers and food producers receive a fair price for their produce.
- Money flowing into the sector, including the Single Farm Payment, is structured in a way which incentivises practice in line with our economic, social and environmental goals.
- Rural economies benefit from a sustainable farming sector that provides secure incomes.

You can read the full details of our policies on Agriculture in our General Election Manifesto 2024.

Fisheries and Coastal Communities

Ireland's current fisheries policy shares some of the drawbacks of its agriculture policy.

For example, just as the CAP gives far greater benefits to larger farmers than smaller ones, Ireland's fisheries policy gives the vast majority of Ireland's overall quota of mackerel allocated to around 50 larger Irish vessels, while a tiny proportion is allocated to the inshore fleet of small boats which employ more people, proportionately.

This needs to change. The Irish inshore fleet comprises approximately 91 per cent of all our fishing vessels, and supports between 2,500 and 3,000 full-time jobs in rural and coastal communities.

Short fishery supply chains with high value, low volume species are vitally important for island and coastal communities, and it is imperative that we spread the economic, social and environmental benefits of access to our renewable fishery resources across the country, as per Article 17 of the Common Fisheries Policy.

Article 17 has been one of the most neglected elements of the Common Fisheries Policy. It requires EU member states to allocate fishing opportunities using transparent and objective criteria with a focus on social, environmental, and economic criteria. This includes, for example, the use of fishing gears with low environmental impact and reduced energy consumption.

Article 17 offers the opportunity to incentivise sustainability by providing for priority access to fishing opportunities for environmentally low impact fishing, while delivering social and economic benefits. It can be used to ensure a Just Transition to a low carbon, low environmental impact, and socially just fishing fleet across the EU and in Ireland.

You can read the full details of our policies on Fisheries policies can be read in our General Election Manifesto 2024.

Energy Resilience and a Just Transition

A just transition must be 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.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Launch a huge campaign to make Irish homes more resilient to energy price and supply shocks by **installing solar panels on 100,000 homes over two years**. Around one million homes in Ireland are suitable for solar panels but do not have them installed.
- Expand eligibility for the Warmer Homes Scheme, and **include access to solar panels in the scheme, with 100 per cent grants** for the lowest income households.
- Initiate a parallel project to install panels on public buildings, including **grants for schools**. There's a strong case for Local Government bulk-buying the solar panels to allow households to avail of further economies of scale. **A standardised approach has the potential to cut costs by up to half.**
- Introduce a **'pay as you save' loan and grant scheme for people to insulate their homes**.
- Scale up anaerobic digestion, bio energy, solar and small-scale wind generation on farms to **allow farmers tap the natural energy resources** on their property.
- Work to **ensure community-ownership of wind farms** so that local communities can benefit from developments in their area.
- Prioritise the development of **microgeneration of renewable electricity**, allowing people sell excess power back to the grid.
- Expand the **Sustainable Energy Communities Network** to involve more local communities directly in how energy is used for the benefit of their community.
- **Engage with local communities** to develop viable solutions to the challenges they face around climate action.

The government narrative for too long has suggested that climate action will negatively affect rural areas and negatively reshape Irish agriculture. The result is that the very communities that will be the most severely impacted by climate change are the ones who are most scared of climate action.

Coastal communities are at even more risk. We talk about climate change like it is something in the distant future, but many coastal areas are already seeing the devastation of extreme weather events.

We will only get strong rural support for the kind of climate action we need if we make rural communities feel like they are a part of it. To find out how we do this we need to ask those communities.

Few economic sectors have more to lose from failure to tackle the climate crisis than farmers, and fisherman and women. It is clear that sustainability must be central to any model for rural development. Changes in the sector are inevitable. A just transition can and should be at the centre of all Climate policy, and farmers need that reassurance. This would require a more flexible policy system to enable local adaptation to local issues

An ongoing dialogue on how to support transition and adaptation is essential to ensure that vulnerable rural communities are protected, supported to meet future challenges, and not disproportionately impacted.

An on-going social dialogue structure at regional and national level is required to ensure the appropriate services and infrastructure are delivered, and that there is ongoing public support for the pathway by which these services and infrastructure will come on-stream.

This dialogue should also focus on what is required to transition Ireland to a low-carbon future, and how such services and infrastructure can be delivered and managed in a sustainable way. This requires input from all stakeholders. Such a mechanism would ensure that there is support and understanding as to how services and infrastructure are to be resourced and rolled out at local, regional and national level.

Community Ownership of Energy

The benefits for individuals from the roll-out of renewable energy need not be limited to solar panels on roof tops. There can also be **significant benefits at a community level from the shared ownership of other energy projects**. Local populations can retain wealth in their local area through the community

ownership of projects like windfarms. Such ownership has been shown to also increase local support for such projects.

There is now a clear pathway to allow communities, primarily through the **Sustainable Energy Community (SEC) model**, to own and generate their own renewable energy, the revenues of which will return to the community, reinforcing community support for decarbonisation. Despite this, the Government is far off its 500MW target to be produced by community-owned renewable schemes.

Currently SECs undertaking this process can receive funding from the SEAI. However, the process for the release of this funding is far too cumbersome. To remedy this, the Social Democrats would introduce two new measures:

- **Increased funding to local authorities and their relevant energy agencies**, to provide greater technical, financial and business planning expertise to SECs undertaking this process, as well as funding to provide long-term no-cost loans to help SECs through this process.
- Provide **government-backed low-interest green-loans** to SECs in the construction of these renewable energy projects. Given the high cost of construction of Community Owned Renewable Farms, it is imperative that the Government extends financial supports to these schemes. It is not enough to solely rely on European Investment Funds.
- Ireland has a Strategic Investment Fund that already identifies 'climate' as one of its main impact themes, and the Social Democrats would extend the ability for Community Groups to access government low-interest green loans.

The Social Democrats have a **target at least 20 per cent of our new renewable energy generation** to be community-owned by 2030, providing direct funding to assist capacity building and technical expertise.

Our Councillors will also work to ensure that all new housing developments include facilities for microgeneration and storage that enables maximum retention of energy produced, allowing households to reduce energy costs and generate income. Bodies such as the Tipperary Energy Agency have shown the enormously positive impact communities can have. We will work to emulate this right across the country.

Reform of Local Government

The Social Democrats believe in the principle of subsidiarity: that **decisions that affect localities should, as far as practicable, be taken at local level.**

Ireland's system of government is overly centralised. Indeed, we cannot achieve real reform of government generally until we have reform of local government.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Reform Local Government in Ireland, **providing greater powers for communities** to make decisions that affect them.
- Identify the appropriate level – national, regional, county, or municipal – to deliver public services, **and devolve powers accordingly.**
- Create large **regional authorities** centred on the major population centres, tasked with policy development, budgetary oversight, service provision in a number of key areas.
- Acknowledge that we cannot achieve proper balanced regional development without **strong regional government**, and accordingly devolve to new regional assemblies a certain amount of power related to economic development strategy.
- Develop community-focused **Municipal Councils** charged with a specific remit of 'place shaping', leading to a new kind of local representative with a broader remit and greater accountability.
- Establish a **Rural Youth Council** which will allow young people living in rural Ireland to be involved in decision making processes that effect their futures. This Council could feed into PPNs in an effort to create sustainable, "smart" rural towns and villages.
- Increase funding for local authority **gyms, swimming pools**, and other facilities.
- Encourage Local Authorities to use their powers under CPO, where appropriate, to **tackle vacant and derelict properties in Town Centres**, to bring vacant properties back into use.

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