

CONNECTING RURAL IRELAND:

**Labour's Vision for Safe Rural Communities,
Guaranteed Rural Transport and a Strong Rural Economy**

LABOUR

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INTRODUCTION

Labour has a vision for a connected, prosperous rural Ireland.

The Labour Party will prioritise a State-wide investment plan to revitalise disadvantaged rural communities, provide a clear pathway to affordable rural broadband, and support the self-sustainability of rural towns and villages.

Our Rural Transport Guarantee, Rural Hackney Scheme and School Bus Guarantee will ensure rural communities are connected to a reliable, affordable and integrated transport network.

Our strategy will deliver more Gardaí, more GPs and more post offices, libraries and community spaces, to ensure rural communities are connected to vital public services.

Our plan to fast-track Rural Broadband, to restore Town Councils and to lower insurance premiums will enable businesses and farmers to connect with more customers, to grow the rural economy.

For too long, the concerns of rural Ireland have been ignored by Fine Gael in government. The economy has recovered, but rural communities have not had their fair share.

Rural broadband has been delayed and will cost far more than initially estimated, due to the Government's mismanagement of the tendering process.

The Government's failure to provide adequate and affordable transport is isolating rural communities, while rural crime continues to rise, post offices close and there are fewer rural GPs.

Insurance costs are crippling local businesses, farmers and community groups, but the Government has no plan to address rising premiums.

Labour understands the challenges that rural communities face, and we have practical plans to solve these problems. We will ensure that no rural region, town or village is left behind.

We are committed to ensuring rural Ireland is socially, economically and digitally connected.

OUR COMMITMENT

Labour will ensure rural Ireland is socially,
economically and digitally connected

SUMMARY OF PROPOSALS

1. Rural Transport Guarantee
2. More Rural GPs
3. Combat Rural Crime
4. Rural Housing and Municipal Services
5. Rural Connectivity
- Broadband and Mobile Phone Coverage
6. Restoring Town Councils and Revitalising the Rural Economy
7. Lower Insurance Premiums
8. Supports for Farmers and the Fishing Industry
9. Farm Modernisation
10. Climate Action
11. Promote Rural Tourism
12. Protect Postal Services, Libraries and Community Spaces
13. Eradicate Illegal Dumping and Dog Fouling

1. RURAL TRANSPORT GUARANTEE

Rural communities have been cut-off from vital social and economic services due to the absence of a reliable public transport service. In 2013, Labour introduced the Local Area Hackney Scheme to serve isolated rural villages. However, since then no concrete action has been taken to promote, resource or expand this scheme, once again letting down rural Ireland.

Labour will:

- Provide a Rural Transport Guarantee so that every town will have access to a reliable, affordable and environmentally-friendly public transport service
- Expand the current Local Links program and fully integrate it with other transport modes
- Introduce a scheme to increase the availability of low-cost self-test breathalysers to provide assurance to motorists, such as in the morning after socialising
- Increase local authority funding for rural road maintenance, particularly for third class roads
- Increase the number of charging points for electric cars in rural Ireland
- Promote driving lessons for transition-year secondary school students, to improve road safety and seek a reduction in insurance premiums for young drivers upon completion
- Create segregated off-road cycle lanes which are safer for both rural cyclists and motorists
- Introduce segregated bike lines through rural town centres, secure cycle stands in towns and at schools, and safe routes for schoolchildren cycling to school

Labour will re-launch a simplified version of the Rural Hackney Scheme to serve isolated communities and provide a Rural Transport Guarantee to all rural towns and children attending public schools.

Labour will:

- Provide subsidies for operators in rural areas and promote hackney licences for publicans as part of the Rural Hackney Scheme to allow people to socialise without having to drive
- Ensure tenders and start-up grants for rural hackneys where no service currently exists
- Promote a Pooled Group Insurance scheme for hackney drivers to lower their premiums
- Introduce a School Bus Guarantee so that every child has a place on school transport

2. MORE RURAL GPs

Rural communities are ageing, increasing the need for rural GPs. However, it has become more difficult to attract young doctors to take up practice in rural communities due to constant Government cutbacks. As older practitioners continue to retire, large areas of the country are at risk of being left without an adequate GP service.

Labour is proposing a range of support measures aimed at recruiting and retaining rural GPs as part of our strategy for a community-based healthcare model.

Labour will:

- Promote the development of primary healthcare centres in rural towns to provide a more efficient medical service to communities
- Recruit additional staff (nurses and GP secretaries) to share the workload, making new primary centres more attractive for new rural GPs compared to old style single-GP practices
- Prioritise the delivery of old-age care centres to address the needs of our ageing population
- Pursue a regional quota and scholarship scheme to help recruit more young rural GPs, especially those coming from rural regions who best know the concerns of rural communities
- Ensure improved diagnostics and minor injury units as part of rolling out primary healthcare to all rural areas
- Deliver on bed capacity and ensure adequate staffing in regional hospitals
- Provide more resources to the National Ambulance Service to reduce rural response times
- Introduce a Community First Responders scheme to train members of rural communities to help answer high priority calls and stabilise the situation until paramedics arrive on the scene
- Expand funding for the First Aid for Schools programme, prioritising isolated rural areas
- Pilot a Lifestyle Medicine scheme to help communities to combat lifestyle diseases
- Provide additional funding for Community Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services, with priority given to filling vacant child and adolescent psychiatrists' posts across the country
- End the widespread use of restrictive practices such as seclusion and physical restraint in mental health services

3. COMBAT RURAL CRIME

Rural crime is on the rise, and many communities are extremely worried. The benefits of local policing forums when it comes to combating crime cannot be denied and Labour will work with local councils to improve community policing.

Rural CCTV can be influential in deterring criminals, but its promised rollout has been continuously delayed. Labour was the first party to fund the rural CCTV scheme, and we want to see it developed further to deter criminals and speeding.

Labour will:

- Provide more resources to Gardaí in rural areas to combat rural crime
- Build safer communities through an increased Gardaí presence in rural areas
- Ensure more Home Security schemes are put in place to help people, especially older members of our community upgrade the locks and security systems on their homes
- Promote Community Policing and ensure greater responsiveness to local concerns through local policing forums
- Provide resources to roll out a rural programme of CCTV installations in order to deter crime and to promote road safety in rural communities

4. RURAL HOUSING AND MUNICIPAL SERVICES

To attract jobs and investment to rural Ireland, we need to ensure more homes are built with access to quality municipal services. However, amid a national housing crisis, the capacity of local government to deliver social and affordable housing has been significantly diminished. Local authorities need to be empowered to design, plan and deliver homes: including traditional social housing, cost-rental housing and affordable purchase under the cooperative housing model.

Labour will ensure that every rural town and surrounding area has a masterplan developed, which will demonstrate how necessary municipal services and amenities will be provided so that housing is integrated into sustainable and thriving rural communities.

Labour will:

- Restore the capacity of local government to deliver social and affordable housing
- Provide local authorities with additional resources, capacity and expertise to function as Housing Executives on a regional basis
- Increase funding and support for reformed Living Over the Shop and Living City Initiative schemes
- Ensure municipal services are adequately funded, delivered and maintained in rural areas
- Promote citizen participation in the affairs of the local authorities and advocate for increased partnership with the community in service delivery
- Campaign for public ownership and the direct delivery of vital services by local councils
- Make the necessary investment to eliminate the risk of water contamination and end the scandal of long-running boil water notices across the country
- Support Group Water and Group Sewerage Schemes through the Rural Water Programme

5. RURAL CONNECTIVITY - BROADBAND AND MOBILE PHONE COVERAGE

Labour will deliver broadband for rural Ireland. Superfast internet connectivity would promote growth and regeneration. However, nearly one million people living and working in the 540,000 premises around the country do not have access to high speed broadband.

This is simply unacceptable in the 21st century and is severely restricting the growth of the rural economy. Labour ministers oversaw the initial development of the national broadband plan, and we have detailed knowledge on what is possible. By fast-tracking broadband through the creation of “digital hubs”, we will attract more foreign and domestic investment to our regions which will create additional employment opportunities in rural Ireland.

Labour will:

- Create a commercial semi-state national broadband company to deliver high speed broadband instead of giving a massive subsidy and ownership to a private monopoly, as Fine Gael intends to do
- Provide the necessary funding to fully deliver the National Broadband Plan, as long as the broadband network becomes publicly owned
- Fast-track access to high-speed broadband in rural areas, by pushing out broadband access from digital hubs in regional centres to rural businesses and communities
- Create new digital hubs in regional centres with high-growth potential, such as the Ludgate Hub in Skibbereen, enabling business growth, digital learning and an enhanced quality of life
- Promote co-working spaces and innovation hubs to attract workers to live in rural Ireland
- Deliver additional innovation hubs to create more jobs along the Atlantic Economic Corridor
- Oblige all mobile phone operators to guarantee a greater level of coverage in rural areas as part of their licences, including Internet/data access via phones
- Ensure that if the UK leaves the EU, border areas will not be subject to accidental connection to NI networks or roaming fees

6. RESTORING TOWN COUNCILS AND REVITALISING THE RURAL ECONOMY

Irish councils have less independent decision-making ability than local councils in 39 other European countries. We believe that citizens know the needs of their own areas. That is why we will give real power back to rural towns and communities around the country. By restoring Town Councils, we will ensure councillors have a singular focus on the development, prosperity and well-being of their towns, which are central to the rural economy.

Labour will promote inward investment by the IDA and Enterprise Ireland to help attract and create additional employment in regional centres and their surrounding hinterlands.

Labour will:

- Restore Town Councils to strengthen local democracy in at least 80 towns and reconfigure existing Municipal Districts to cover the areas not covered by Town Councils
- Empower Town Councils to act as rating authorities, allowing them to reduce commercial rates for local shops and businesses, as they did in the past, to promote the return of busy and vibrant main streets in rural Ireland
- Support initiatives to ensure the viability of local towns and community shopping streets such as ensuring councils provide affordable parking, helping the establishment of local business associations and promoting farmers' markets
- Provide extra resources for the IDA and Enterprise Ireland to promote regional investment
- Support the Western Development Commission to help generate new jobs in rural Ireland
- Promote State-funded initiatives to ensure access to affordable finance for small businesses and the agri-food sector
- Explore the possibility of launching publicly-owned regional banks with a focus on lending to small and medium enterprises
- Protect the Community Services Programme which support nearly 200 enterprises across rural Ireland and commit to providing an additional €5 million in funding

7. LOWER INSURANCE PREMIUMS

Insurance premiums are continuously on the rise and crippling local community groups, businesses and farmers marts. Labour is committed to making it easier for businesses, farmers and community groups to overcome barriers like insurance costs which will maintain and generate more jobs and help grow the rural economy.

Labour will:

- Promote a Pooled Group Insurance scheme for businesses, community groups and farmers marts to ensure lower premiums
- Explore legislation to deter scam insurance claims for inconsequential injuries
- Demand a stronger scrutiny of insurance claims by the Personal Injuries Commission and reduce the claims period for minor soft injury tissue injuries
- Establish an independent Insurance Fraud Unit funded by insurance companies

8. SUPPORTS FOR FARMERS AND THE FISHING INDUSTRY

Agri-food is our most important indigenous sector and its continual success is essential for ensuring employment in rural Ireland, but Irish farmers are facing a period of unprecedented uncertainty due to Brexit. The reform of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) pose significant challenges, as well as opportunities which we must be ready to meet. Rather than punishing hard-pressed farmers, Labour will ensure that the small to medium family-run farms which dominate the sector are protected and provide additional supports for farmers to expand into new markets at home and abroad.

A no-deal Brexit would also be catastrophic for the Irish fishing industry. Irish fishermen stand to lose half of the water they fish in if no agreement is reached. Labour will demand that the voices of Irish fishermen are heard during the ongoing Brexit negotiations and ensure that both EU and State support is mobilised to protect the industry.

Labour will:

- Expand the Rural Social Scheme to support low-income workers in the farm and fish industries
- Demand a fairer distribution of income for small and disadvantaged farmers under CAP and end historical inequalities of direct payments to ensure every farmer gets their fair share
- Ensure that EU State Aid limits are relaxed in the case of a no-deal Brexit, and that the EU Globalisation Adjustment Fund is available to support the Irish agri-food and fishing sectors
- Provide a new round of the Agricultural Cashflow Loan Scheme to ensure low cost finance is available to farmers, especially in the context of fluctuations in the value of Sterling
- Introduce a Farmers Market Incentive Programme so farmers and fishing companies have increased opportunities to sell their high-quality products to local communities
- Support farmers in exploiting new markets by expanding the Organic Farming Scheme to meet the growing demand for high-quality Irish organic produce at home and abroad

9. FARM MODERNISATION

Our farmers are getting older and often work alone on their farms. In 2018, 14 farmers aged over 65 were killed in farm accidents. Farm safety should be a priority on every farm and support is needed to ensure safer working environments.

Labour will provide grants for farm safety measures and incentives to support the next generation of farmers. Under our farm modernisation proposals, farmers will also be able to save money by increasing efficiencies and cutting fossil fuels. If farmers want to put part of their farms into alternative activities, we will also ensure that funds are available to achieve this, including from CAP.

Labour will:

- Re-introduce the Early Retirement Scheme (ERS3) which operated up until 2008/9
- Extend the Targeted Agricultural Modernisation Schemes (TAMS) beyond the 2020 deadline to promote farm safety measures, with targeted supports for younger, smaller and disadvantaged farms
- Provide opportunities for farmers to save money while replacing fossil fuels by investing in energy saving measures, such as plate coolers, heat exchangers and solar panels
- Develop a framework and provide adequate funding for improving animal health, which will reduce antibiotic use in livestock and decrease costs for farmers, creating a win-win scenario
- Establish a Farm Income Diversification Task Force to help farmers develop alternative ways of generating incomes
- Create a coherent national investment strategy for biomethane production which will help farmers dispose of waste, reduce costs and provide additional revenue opportunities
- Establish an effective early warning system to prevent a reoccurrence of fodder shortages and maintain support for the Fodder Import Scheme to help in times of crisis
- Implement a standardised and simplified Hedge Cutting Grant Scheme in line with best practice to incentivise farmers to manage roadside vegetation during cutting season

10. CLIMATE ACTION

The climate emergency is now. Labour gets it, and we know how to provide leadership for communities and businesses to promote climate action.

As part of our Green New Deal, Labour will establish a win-win model so that communities and businesses can create new jobs and save money while achieving a low carbon economy.

- Set an ambitious national target of up to 100,000 houses to be retrofitted annually which will lower energy bills and create more local construction jobs while tackling climate emissions
- Fund schemes to reduce energy poverty, especially for older people and those with disabilities
- Invest additional resources in constructing flood defences and flood risk management
- Implement flood relief and other land management measures to protect rural infrastructure
- Develop an expanded network of rural charging points and introduce a package of additional incentives aimed at rural communities to make electric cars more affordable
- Increase support for broadleaf species and continuous cover forests to drive higher-value, labour-intensive jobs which will improve local biodiversity, capture carbon emissions and generate more recreational tourism
- Establish a “Just Transition Fund” at national level to support jobs displaced by the move to a low carbon economy, such as jobs in peat extraction, and we will support the re-wetting of peatlands to capture carbon emissions, creating new green jobs
- Prioritise community ownership of small-scale renewable energy projects (wind, solar) and ensure they can connect to the national grid
- Ensure strict planning guidelines to overcome concerns about wind farms

11. PROMOTE RURAL TOURISM

Tourism plays a pivotal role particularly for regional and rural economic activity. Our landscape is one of our most precious assets, and maintaining our rural walkways, greenways and blueways is vital for the growth of this sector.

Labour understands that these schemes not only foster employment, but also serve as valuable recreational activities for rural communities. We will promote a sustainable tourism model that benefits both the rural economy and local communities.

Labour will:

- Promote the regional spread of tourism, particularly in the midlands and around the Lakelands, with additional support for Fáilte Ireland's Hidden Heartlands campaign
- Increase the development of walkways, greenways and blueways under the Outdoor Recreation Infrastructure Scheme to support and grow Activity Tourism
- Expand the Rural Social Scheme to provide more employment in maintaining routes
- Fully support traditional festivals and parades, including promotion of the Irish language
- Promote Ireland's cultural and language heritage through investment in Gaeltacht areas
- Advocate for councils to have the option of introducing tourist levies, to fund local arts, culture and heritage facilities and festivals
- Invest in our National Parks and Nature Reserves and other natural and built resources

12. PROTECT POSTAL SERVICES, LIBRARIES AND COMMUNITY SHOPS

The closure of 159 post offices is another example of rural Ireland being left behind. By closing the post office, the shop becomes unviable and by closing the shop the community slowly dies.

Labour will stop the further decimation of rural Ireland for short-term economic gain. Post offices, libraries and community spaces are vital public services which help keep rural communities connected and we will ensure these are protected and supported.

Labour will:

- Make it government policy to maintain post offices in town and villages to help their revival
- Review the closures of post offices and ensure communities are fully consulted with before An Post can close or relocate branches
- Pilot a Mobile Post Office scheme for communities who are currently without a branch
- Pilot a PostBus scheme to combine rural transport with the delivery of vital services such as bulky goods, postal deliveries and medical supplies to the most isolated rural areas
- Expand the use of mobile libraries, especially in rural areas and ensure libraries and arts centres have longer opening hours, especially at evenings, weekends and on bank holidays
- Ensure that public buildings are available after hours to serve as community spaces
- Promote schemes to enable the temporary use of empty shops by community groups
- Introduce a 50% mandatory rate relief to village shops, pubs and/or garages where they are the last remaining services in their communities.

13. ERADICATE ILLEGAL DUMPING AND DOG FOULING

Illegal dumping has reached epidemic levels in rural Ireland. This has a significant economic, social and environmental impact on local communities and creates difficulties for farmers.

Labour believe more effective enforcement is required to help stamp out these problems.

Labour will:

- Ensure strong enforcement of regulations on private waste collection operators
- Utilise forensic science to find out who is responsible for dumping, littering and pollution
- Create a new Community Warden role – with the power to issue fines – whose responsibilities will include monitoring illegal dumping and identifying those responsible

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