

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND RURAL AFFAIRS – INITIAL BRIEFING NOTE FOR MINISTER

The following functions are to be transferred from the Department of Environment, Community and Local Government, to the newly configured Department of Regional Development, Rural Affairs, Arts and the Gaeltacht:

1. Rural Development: LEADER

The new LEADER Programme 2014-2020 is now commencing, investing €250m in rural Ireland over the programme period. Initially, €220m will be allocated to 28 local action groups to implement Local Development Strategies in their respective sub-regional areas. A further €10m will be allocated over the course of the programme for co-operation projects, €15m for artisan food and €5m for REDZ (Rural Economic Development Zones) projects.

LEADER strategies have been submitted for all areas at this stage and are being assessed on a ‘first come/first served’ basis by an Independent Selection Committee. Contracts are to be signed with local action groups on a rolling basis from end-June, with the programme rolling out in the remaining areas as contracts are signed.

2. Commission for the Economic Development of Rural Areas (CEDRA)

The Inter-Departmental Group (IDG) established to oversee the implementation of the recommendations of the CEDRA report, is supported by this Department. In line with the commitments in the Charter for Rural Ireland launched in February 2016, it is anticipated that work will be brought forward in the coming period on the development of a Rural Development Policy Framework.

3. Rural Recreation

The Department funds a range of rural recreation projects and initiatives. This includes the Walks Scheme under which landholder participants receive modest payments for the development, enhancement and maintenance of sections of trail that traverse their lands. A scheme which will provide grant funding to public bodies and community groups towards the

provision of rural recreational type projects is due to be launched in summer 2016. This funding, in the region of €3.3 million, will support both the development and enhancement of variety of projects including walking, cycling, angling and kayaking. Work is underway on a National Indemnity Scheme, which will be submitted for consideration in due course. The aim would be to seek to indemnify private landowners against claims from recreational users for injury or damage to property.

4. Western Development Commission

The Western Development Commission (WDC), which was established under the Western Development Commission Act of 1998, is an agency under the aegis of the Department. It provides risk capital, by way of loans and equity (but not grant aid which is prohibited under the Act), through its Business Investment Fund and Local Investment Fund which supports community-based and not-for-profit enterprises. The WDC has to date, invested over €44 million in 122 micro enterprises, SMEs and social enterprises in the Western region (Counties Mayo, Roscommon, Sligo, Leitrim, Donegal, Clare and Galway).

5. Town and Village Regeneration Scheme

A total of €30m, over a 6 year period, has been provided for a scheme to support the regeneration of towns and villages under *Building on Recovery: Infrastructure and Capital Investment 2016 - 2021 Plan*. This will be administered mainly through local authorities, with projects funded being consistent with local development strategies.

The objective of this scheme is to support the revitalisation of towns and villages in order to improve the living and working environment of their communities and to increase their potential to support increased economic activity into the future. It is intended to announce the terms and conditions that will apply to the scheme in mid-2016.

6. Tidy Towns

The Tidy Towns Competition has been running since 1958. The primary focus of Tidy Towns is to encourage communities to improve their local environment and make their area a better place

to live, work and visit. The competition generally receives over 800 entrants per annum, with a record 862 entrants in 2015 and approximately €254,100 in prize money to be distributed to the winners.

7. Dormant Accounts Fund - €8.8m in 2016

The Dormant Accounts legislation provides a framework for the administration of unclaimed accounts in credit institutions (i.e. banks, building societies and An Post) and unclaimed life assurance policies in insurance undertakings. The legislation introduced a scheme for the disbursement of funds that are unlikely to be reclaimed, but only for the purposes of programmes or projects to assist the personal and social development of persons who are economically or socially disadvantaged; the educational development of persons who are educationally disadvantaged or persons with a disability.

A Disbursement Scheme sets out the moneys that may be disbursed from the Fund. The current scheme was approved by Government in 2013 and will run until November 2016. In addition, a Dormant Accounts Fund Action Plan is prepared each year in order to implement the Disbursement Scheme. The funding under the various measures is disbursed through a number of Departments.

8. Social Enterprise

Driving the development of a vibrant Social Enterprise sector is a key objective. As part of the Action Plan for Jobs, in July 2013, Forfás produced a Report on ‘Social Enterprise in Ireland – Sectoral Opportunities and Policy Issues’, which indicated that the sector has the capacity to double employment with the creation of an additional 25,000 jobs by 2020. Following on recommendations of the Report, an Inter-Departmental Group was set up to support the development of Social Enterprise in Ireland and to develop a policy framework for the provision of these supports.

Leveraging of Finance for Social Enterprises and harnessing assistance available via EU programmes is a major focus of the Group and the Department is represented on the EU

Commission's Expert Group on Social Entrepreneurship (GECES). The Group works closely with the Social Entrepreneurs Task Force and has been chaired at Minister of State level.

In addition to the functions outlined above, the Taoiseach has also stated that the new Department will have functions for the roll out of rural broadband and the development of the rural post office network.

National Broadband Plan (NBP): Rollout of infrastructure and services in Rural Ireland

Delivering the National Broadband Plan is a top priority for Government as reflected in the Programme for Government. The allocation of new responsibilities at Cabinet level also signals the Government's firm intention to address broadband and other telecoms challenges in rural Ireland.

The Minister for Regional Development, Rural Affairs, Arts and the Gaeltacht, and the Minister for Communications, Climate Change and Natural Resources will be working together to deliver key elements of the National Broadband Plan and to accelerate and prioritise the rollout of the programme in rural areas.

Under the new arrangements, the Department of Communications, Climate Change and Natural Resources will continue with the procurement process for the State Intervention which commenced in December 2015. The next stage in this process is to qualify potential bidders and to invite those shortlisted bidders to engage in detailed formal dialogue with the Department.

The Department of Regional Development, Rural Affairs, Arts and the Gaeltacht will have an important new role in relation to the rollout phase of the National Broadband Plan. The Department of Regional Development, Rural Affairs, Arts and the Gaeltacht will establish

county/regional broadband taskforces, in which Local Authorities/Local Enterprise Offices, Leader Groups and other relevant agencies, will immediately engage with communities and with the telecoms industry, to eliminate delay factors in advance and enable effective rural broadband delivery once a contract(s) has been awarded under the National Broadband Plan procurement. The taskforces will develop Rural Digital Strategies for specific rural areas which will:

- quantify and aggregate demand for services on a county-by-county or county-group basis,
- ensure that Local Authorities have the requisite structures and a standardised approach in place, providing a “one-stop shop” to accelerate various consent processes including road openings, wayleaves, planning, environmental issues etc.
- identify and recommend priority areas for rollout, which can be incorporated into the final contract(s) of the winning bidder(s).

The Rural Digital Strategies will also include measures to leverage the benefits of high speed broadband for rural communities and businesses. In this regard, they will consider a range of policy initiatives including:

- the development of Digital Enterprise Centres or Hubs,
- expanded digital learning activities, education activities, and
- new delivery mechanisms for an expanded Trading Online Voucher Scheme.
- Community and voluntary groups, farming groups and enterprise groups will input to the Strategies.

As committed to in the Programme for Government, within the first 100 days a mobile phone and broadband Taskforce will be established which will consider immediate measures to addressing telecommunications deficits in rural Ireland. The Taskforce will be co-chaired by the Department of Regional Development, Rural Affairs, Arts and the Gaeltacht and the Department of Communications, Climate Change and Natural Resources, and will also include the

Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport, the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government, ComReg, the County and City Management Association (CCMA), relevant agencies (such as Transport Infrastructure Ireland) and the telecommunications industry. The Taskforce will address existing barriers in the areas of infrastructure planning, road opening/reinstatement and environmental consents, industry investment and any other measures which could address telecommunications deficits in rural Ireland.

The two Departments will establish a joint-working group to ensure that the procurement and rollout planning are progressed in parallel and as a priority. It is essential that members of the public, businesses, the farming community and other stakeholders in rural areas have visibility on the timing of delivery of broadband services in their areas and when they can expect to be connected.

It is anticipated that a contract(s) will be awarded under the National Broadband Plan by June 2017. Rollout will commence once this contract(s) is in place. Based on industry consultations, it is expected that 85% of all premises in Ireland will have access to high speed broadband after the rollout commences, with 100% being connected within 5 years, or sooner.

Rural Post Office Network

Background

Following the publication of the Post Office Development Group Report in January of this year, the Post Office Network Renewal Group was established under the Chairmanship of Mr Bobby Kerr. Two other groups have also been convened, the first of which is evaluating potential additional financial services that can be offered through the Post Office Network while the second is dealing with the renegotiation of the Postmaster's contract. The Network Renewal Group has met at least monthly since the report's publication and will continue to meet over the coming months in order to finalise a suite of recommendations that will go to the Board of An Post.

Key Recommendations

The three key actions arising from the Final Report of the Post Office Network Business Development Group are:

- Basic Payment Account

- Motor Tax
- Network Renewal

The following policy initiatives outlined in the Programme for a Partnership Government will also be of particular relevance to the new Department's remit:

Development of a new Atlantic Economic Corridor: The new Government will deliver balanced national development. One way in which we will achieve this goal is by creating sufficient scale in the west of Ireland, through an Atlantic Economic Corridor, to match other areas in developing infrastructure, attracting Irish and multinational investment, and growing jobs and wealth in local communities.

€100million Capital Investment in Wild Atlantic Way & Greenways: One of the biggest achievements in revitalising tourism has been the creation of the Wild Atlantic Way. We will seek to set aside €100million in additional capital funding to take the Wild Atlantic Way to the next level, including an Atlantic blueway route, and the Ireland Way, and to invest further in developing a nationwide Greenway network. As part of this additional funding, we will double the funding available for the Rural Walks Scheme from €2million to €4million to increase the number of walks covered from 40 to 80. We will also direct Fáilte Ireland to develop the 'Ireland's Lakelands' brand as a separate proposition to sit alongside the Wild Atlantic Way and Ireland's Ancient East. To assist with sustainability of tourist accommodation and small tourism ventures, a support scheme will be introduced for businesses operating along these routes.

The Taoiseach has also told the Dáil on May 6th 2016 that the new Department of Regional Development, Rural Affairs, Arts and the Gaeltacht will be responsible for drawing up a new Action Plan for Regional Development, which will have a key co-ordinating role in policy implementation for rural Ireland.