



An Roinn Ealaíon, Oidhreachta,
Gnóthai Réigiúnacha, Tuaithe agus Gaeltachta
Department of Arts, Heritage,
Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs



Realising our Rural Potential

Action Plan for Rural Development



Interim Progress Report May 2017

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1. Background

Realising our Rural Potential, the Government's Action Plan for Rural Development was launched on 23rd January 2017. The Action Plan contains 276 actions for the delivery across Government, State agencies and other bodies over the next three years to support the economic and social progress of rural Ireland.

Each action has been assigned to a lead body which will be responsible for implementation of the action within a definite timescale. In all, 95 actions are due for delivery in 2017, with further actions classed as 'ongoing'.

Progress reports on the Action Plan will be published every 6 months, with the first report due to be published in July. Ahead of the first formal report, an Interim Progress Report has been prepared to provide a sense of the achievements to date under the Plan and to highlight some of the positive developments which have taken place to support rural Ireland.

2. Structure of Interim report

The 276 actions in the Action Plan are broken down across 5 thematic Pillars as follows:

- Pillar 1: Supporting Sustainable Communities
- Pillar 2: Supporting Enterprise and Employment
- Pillar 3: Maximising our Rural Tourism and Recreation Potential
- Pillar 4: Fostering Culture and Creativity in rural communities
- Pillar 5: Improving Rural Infrastructure and Connectivity

Each of these Pillars has a clear set of stated objectives.

This Interim Report provides a “headline” view of key achievements to date, just over three months into the implementation of the Action Plan, and demonstrates that the Plan has already established a great deal of momentum. The Government will maintain a high level of focus on delivering the actions in the Plan and communicating the results.

A more detailed account of progress on all of the actions for delivery in the first half of 2017, as well as “Ongoing” actions, will be provided in the six monthly Progress report in July.

3. Key achievements by Pillar

Pillar 1 – Supporting Sustainable Communities

If we want rural living to be viable and sustainable, we must support our rural communities. We must make rural Ireland a better place to live, enhance local services, build better communities and empower the people that live in them to ensure that their voices are heard.

Pillar 1: Supporting Sustainable Communities

Key Objectives:

- Make rural Ireland a better place in which to live and work by revitalising our town and village centres through the implementation of initiatives such as the Town and Village Renewal Scheme, the CLÁR and RAPID Programmes and measures to support people to live in town centres.
- Enhance local services in the community through the provision of support for rural GPs, through ongoing development of the primary care sector to deliver better care close to home in communities, through support for the rural post office network to adapt to a changing business environment, and through continued access to schools for children in rural Ireland.
- Empower Local Communities, including through the development and support of the Public Participation Networks and Local Community Development Committees, to ensure that a diversity of voices is heard and included in local decision-making processes and that communities continue to identify their own needs and solutions.
- Build better communities through ongoing investment in the LEADER Programme and support vulnerable rural communities through initiatives such as the Rural Social Scheme.

Key achievements to date under this Pillar:

- **The 2017 Town and Village Renewal Scheme was launched by the Minister for Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, Heather Humphreys T.D., on 13th April, with funding of €20 million over 15 months to support up to 300 towns and villages (Action 1).**
- **The Framework for Town Centre Revival was launched on 25th April by Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation, Mary Mitchell O'Connor T.D., to assist with the regeneration of rural towns (Action 4).**



- Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government, Simon Coveney T.D. launched the Rebuilding Ireland Housing Land Map, which includes details of over 700 local authority and Housing Agency owned sites totaling some 1,700 hectares. For the first time, we have a central database of land available for housing throughout the country. (Action 5)
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- Minister for Housing and Urban Renewal, Damien English TD, published the fifth annual progress report and seventh housing survey on tackling the issue of unfinished housing developments which revealed an 85% drop in the number of unfinished developments over the last 6 years. (Action 5)
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- The Repair & Lease Scheme under Rebuilding Ireland is now available nationwide. In 2017, €32m has been allocated and up to 800 vacant properties can be brought back into use this year, as new homes for families on Local Authority waiting lists in rural and urban areas. A further €24 million for the return of over 1,400 vacant Local Authority properties to productive use in 2017 was announced in May 2017 (Action 5)
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- The 2017 CLÁR programme launched on 31st March by Minister of State for Regional Economic Development, Michael Ring T.D., with funding of €5 million to support disadvantaged rural communities (Action 10).
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- A €4.8 million investment package under the *Built Heritage Investment Scheme* and *Structures at Risk Fund* for 2017 was announced by Minister for Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, Heather Humphreys T.D., on 3rd May (Actions 13 & 193).
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- The Report of the Post Office Hub Working Group was published on 30th March by Minister of State for Regional Economic Development, Michael Ring T.D. (Action 20).
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- A public consultation process was launched in March on the concept of a public banking model, as part of the on-going work by the Department of Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs and the Department of Finance on investigating the potential of such a model (Action 23).
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- In March 2017, Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment, Denis Naughten T.D., launched the National Dialogue for Climate Change which will allow rural communities to play a key role in contributing to our transition to an environmentally sustainable, climate resilient, low carbon economy (Action 41).
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- In February 2017, An Taoiseach, Enda Kenny T.D. and Minister for Housing, Planning and Local



Government, Simon Coveney T.D. launched a national public consultation on a new National Planning Framework – *Ireland 2040 Our Plan*, as part of the process of delivering a long-term spatial plan for the country (Actions 45 and 77).

- Local Development Strategies for the 7 Fisheries Local Action Groups (FLAGs) were launched in February by Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Michael Creed T.D. and the first call for applications announced for €12 million in funding available (Action 48).
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- Minister for Social Protection, Leo Varadkar T.D. announced an additional 500 places on the Rural Social Scheme in January 2017. These places are now being rolled out across the country (Action 50).
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- An intake of 200 Trainee Garda was completed in February 2017, with further intakes scheduled in May, August and November (Action 56).
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- In April 2017, the Tánaiste and Minister for Justice and Equality, Frances Fitzgerald T.D., announced in April a new grant-aid scheme for community groups to assist with the establishment of community-based CCTV systems which help deter crime and assist in the detection of offenders (Action 60).
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- A new €2m Communities Facilities Scheme was launched in March 2017 by Minister of State for Communities and National Drugs Strategy, Catherine Byrne T.D., which will fund projects that seek to enhance communities, address disadvantage and improve social cohesion at a local level across Ireland (Action 64).
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- In January, the 2017 Sports Capital Programme was opened for applications. A record 2,320 applications were submitted and allocations with a total value of €30m will be made in September which will impact positively in rural communities (Action 65).
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- In April 2017, Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment, Denis Naughten T.D. announced grant funding of €26 million for 44 community energy projects across Ireland (Action 55) and €5m for a new multi-annual scheme to provide financial support to people who want to upgrade their homes to an 'A' rating on the Building Energy Rating.
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- **In March 2017, Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment, Denis Naughten, T.D., launched a new anti-dumping initiative to support the clean-up of dumping black-spots and to target those who engage in this illegal practice.**

Pillar 2 - Supporting Enterprise and Employment

Increasing employment opportunities for people across all regions of the country is a key objective for the Government. Supporting the growth of enterprises at regional level – whether start-ups, scaling companies or FDI companies – will bring increased job opportunities for people who live in rural areas, and will increase economic activity in rural areas.

Pillar 2: Supporting Enterprise and Employment

Key Objectives:

- Grow and attract enterprise and jobs through the roll out of the eight regional Action Plans for Jobs and the development of an Atlantic Economic Corridor to promote balanced regional development.
- Support sectoral growth including the continued development of the agri-food sector through the implementation of *Food Wise 2025* and roll out initiatives to develop the renewable energy sector and International Financial Services in rural Ireland.
- Ensure rural communities have the necessary skills to meet the needs of the labour market and to encourage innovation and maximise assets.
- Support rural jobseekers through the Intreo offices and initiatives such as the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme, Tús and Community Employment.
- Support farm and fishing incomes through CAP payments, the Rural Development Programme and other Government supports.

Key achievements to date under this Pillar:

- **Employment has increased in all regions, supported by the on-going implementation of the Regional Action Plans for Jobs. 70% (45,600) of all new jobs filled in year-ended Q4 2016 were outside of Dublin (Action 68).**

- **IDA Ireland opened a new Advance Technology Building in Tralee in March, designed to provide high quality production and office accommodation suitable for future technology or Life Sciences projects (Action 71).**



- An Atlantic Economic Corridor (AEC) Taskforce was established in March 2017 by Minister of State for Regional Economic Development Michael Ring T.D., with a view to progressing the AEC proposal which will have a positive impact on rural communities in the region (Action 78).
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- Innovation hubs are now operational in the Donegal and Kerry Gaeltacht areas to support entrepreneurship and start-up companies, with others to follow in Mayo and Galway (Action 85).
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- Minister of State for Employment and Small Business, Pat Breen T.D. announced an additional €4m in funding in January for the Local Enterprise Offices to stimulate new start-ups and jobs across the country and to help micro businesses to cope with challenges in the year ahead.
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- Shannon Group have commenced work on a new €10m high-spec office block to facilitate major inward investment and employment (Action 81).
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- There are now 236 verified members of Origin Green and 90% of exports of Irish food, drink and horticulture products are signed-up members of the Programme (Action 107).
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- The recruitment of entrepreneurs for Food Works 2017 has commenced. Food Works is run by Bord Bia, Enterprise Ireland and Teagasc, who have worked together since 2012 to support innovative food businesses in Ireland. A full marketing and PR campaign commenced at the end of March which will raise further awareness of the programme (Action 108).
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- Food Academy Advance commenced in February with 12 companies. The programme has been strengthened and will now include stronger support around finance and branding (Action 109).
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- The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine in co-operation with the Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland (SBCI), made €150 million available to farmers at interest rates of 2.95%. Distributed and administered through AIB, Bank of Ireland and Ulster Bank, the Scheme provides farmers with a low cost, flexible source of working capital, allowing them to pay down more expensive forms of short-term debt, ensuring the ongoing financial sustainability of viable farming enterprises (Action 110)
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- €28m was announced in February 2017 for on-going capital investment in Ireland's 6 fishery harbour centres and smaller harbours to support safety, maintenance and fisheries processing and development (Action 111)
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- A number of significant advances were made in progressing beef access and restoring market access for live crab exports to China. A formal protocol was signed on beef exports to China that paves the way for Irish beef to China.

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- A €3.75m Board Bia campaign was launched to promote Irish beef and lamb in China and Japan.

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- The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine and the Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation launched a new Report on the Future Skills Needs in the Food and Drinks Sector.

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- The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine held a Workshop on Skills Needs at farm level.

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- The Meat Technology Centre (one of the actions outlined in Food Wise 2025) which is located in Teagasc Food Research Centre, Ashtown was officially opened in April 2017.

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- Rural Development Scheme funding increased by 21% to €601m to support the agri-food sector

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- €3.87m in grant aid was awarded for the development of the commercial horticulture sector.

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- The GLAS (Green, Low-Carbon, Agri-Environment) Scheme reopened, with over 50,000 participants.

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- Establishment of an Inter-Departmental Group chaired by the Department of the Taoiseach on the strategic development of Ireland's bioeconomy, the carrying out of a scoping exercise on current activities and potential opportunities in the sector and, in February, the staging of a workshop for stakeholders in the sector. All of the aforementioned activities will inform the preparation of a national policy statement for the bioeconomy (Actions 116-118)

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- Ministers Bruton and Halligan announced 50,000 apprenticeships and traineeships to be filled by 2020. A second call for new apprenticeship proposals has been issued by the Apprenticeship Council. The Council is tasked with the expansion of apprenticeship into new sectors of the economy and identifying sectors where new

apprenticeships can make a real difference to both employers and employees. (Action 122).

- A new round of funding of €1.75 million from the Dormant Accounts Fund was announced by Minister of State Ring in March, to support social enterprises that assist disadvantaged people, with an emphasis on rural areas (Action 138).
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- Enterprise Ireland launched the 'Brexit SME Scorecard' to help companies self-assess their readiness for Brexit and will run a series of Brexit events featuring expert speakers throughout the country in May to promote the tool and encourage clients to prepare for Brexit. In addition, Departments across Government have been leading All-Island Sectoral Dialogues, which have taken place in a range of locations across the country - See more at: <http://www.merrionstreet.ie/en/EU-UK/Consultations/#sthash.6l3ig62U>. These have provided an invaluable opportunity to hear directly about the all-island implications of Brexit, from a variety of stakeholders and across a wide range of sectors
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- Changes have been implemented to the assessment of means for the Farm Assist Scheme by the Department of Social Protection – as announced in Budget 2017. As a result, low income farmers and their families are receiving an increase in their weekly social welfare payments to help support them in actively farming their land (Action 139)

Pillar 3 - Maximising our Rural Tourism and Recreation Potential

Tourism is a key driver of economic development in rural Ireland. In 2015, 85% of visitors to Ireland visited at least one region outside Dublin. With the revenue this generates in the regions, tourism has a significant role to play in supporting sustainable jobs and growth in rural areas and will be supported through targeted marketing initiatives and co-ordinated approaches at national and local level. There is also potential to develop and promote Activity Tourism and capitalise on our rich built and natural heritage.

Pillar 3: Maximising our Rural Tourism and Recreation Potential

Key Objectives:

- Increase tourist numbers to rural Ireland by 12% by 2019.
- Support sustainable jobs through targeted rural tourism initiatives, including through the support of key marketing initiatives such as Ireland's Ancient East and the Wild Atlantic Way, as well as developing the potential of Ireland's Lakelands.
- Develop and promote Activity Tourism in rural areas through the development of blueways, greenways and other recreational opportunities.
- Develop and promote our natural and built heritage through investment and development of our Gaeltacht areas, enhanced promotion of our National Parks and Nature Reserves and other natural and built resources.

Key achievements to date under this Pillar:

- **In December 2016, Minister of State for Tourism and Sport, Patrick O'Donovan T.D. announced a Fáilte Ireland capital funding package of €550k for Coillte as part of a strategic partnership to boost the tourist experience at a number of Coillte's sites (Action 172).**

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- **€500k in capital investment was announced in January by An Taoiseach Enda Kenny T.D., Minister of State for Regional Economic Development, Michael Ring T.D. and Minister of State for Tourism and Sport, Patrick O'Donovan T.D. to boost the tourism potential of Ireland's National Parks, as part of a strategic partnership between the Department of Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs and Fáilte Ireland (Action 186).**

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- **A new 46km Waterford/Dungarvan Greenway, along the former Great Southern and Western Railway line, was opened in March.**



- **March 2017 saw the staging of a Local Authorities Tourism Conference – "Collaborate Locally to Compete Globally", which brought together all the local authorities in the country to share best practice and to hear from tourism experts to ensure that, together, they continue to grow and develop their tourism offerings (Action 155).**
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- **€11.5m in funding was announced by Fáilte Ireland in April 2017 for 10 key Heritage Sites, including funding of €8.2m for 8 sites outside of the Dublin Region (Action 191).**
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- **The 2017 Outdoor Recreation Infrastructure Scheme was launched on April 28th by Minister of State for Regional Economic Development, Michael Ring T.D. and will provide €11 million in funding for the development of outdoor recreational infrastructure and for maintenance, enhancement or promotion of existing outdoor recreational infrastructure in rural areas across Ireland (Action 170).**
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- **Funding was awarded to 70 applicants in April 2017 under the Inland Fisheries Ireland Sponsorship Scheme to assist rural communities to engage with angling, angling tourism and environmental issues, with a further funding round anticipated later in the year (Action 179).**
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Pillar 4 - Fostering Culture and Creativity in Rural Communities

Many rural communities all over Ireland have a thriving arts scene and it is important that facilities and assets in rural areas are enhanced to strengthen the social fabric of rural life. This Pillar aims to increase access to the arts and to develop culture and creativity in rural communities. The Irish language is also a vital part of our culture and heritage and is a key resource in Gaeltacht communities.

Pillar 4: Fostering Culture and Creativity in rural communities

Key Objectives:

- Increase access to the arts and enhance cultural facilities in rural communities.
- Further develop and enhance culture and creativity in rural Ireland through the establishment of culture teams and creativity hubs as part of the Creative Ireland Creative Ireland Programme.
- Promote the Irish language as a key resource in Gaeltacht and other rural communities.

Key achievements to date under this Pillar:

- **€9 million was approved for investment in 56 arts and culture centres across the country by Minister for Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, Heather Humphreys T.D. in February. Over 80% of the investment will be in rural areas (Action 203).**



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- **Culture Teams have been established in every local authority to better co-ordinate and maximise local arts provision (Action 210).**

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- **All 31 local authorities hosted free, family-friendly Cruinniú na Cásca events on Easter Monday in their individual counties as part of the national Creative Ireland programme (Action 214).**



- **Additional funding of €22,000 provided for Ealaín na Gaeltachta Teo to support their work in fostering creativity and the arts in the Gaeltacht (Action 227).**
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- **As part of the Arts in Education Charter, Teacher/Artist partnerships as summer courses will be delivered in each of the 21 Association of Teachers/Education Centres in Ireland areas, as a model for CPD, this Summer (Action 219).**

4. Monitoring and Implementation

Monitoring Committee

A Monitoring Committee to oversee the implementation of the Action Plan was established in March and includes senior representatives of relevant Government Departments and key rural stakeholder interests.

The first meeting of the Monitoring Committee took place on 23rd March 2017 and was chaired by Minister for Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, Heather Humphreys T.D. The Committee agreed its Terms of Reference (see Appendix 1) and precise details for the monitoring process were established and agreed.

Priority actions and milestones will be identified for the forthcoming six months on a rolling basis. Progress on the delivery of these actions and milestones, along with “Ongoing” actions, will be scrutinised at the end of the six-month period by the Monitoring Committee. This process will enable clear time-bound targets to be set and reported on over the lifetime of the Plan.

The actions to be delivered in the first half of 2017, along with Ongoing actions, will be the focus of the first full Progress Report, to be published in July. There will be ongoing engagement with relevant Departments, agencies and stakeholders between meetings of the Monitoring Committee to ensure that progress is on track.

The Minister also intends to use the Monitoring Committee structure for the Action Plan to identify, formulate and introduce new actions relating to rural development on an on-going basis. These new actions may arise from engagement with local communities, emerging rural development priorities, or from the input of the Committee itself.

The Monitoring Committee will meet on at least two more occasions in 2017.

Measuring the Impacts of the Action Plan

In addition to measuring progress on the delivery of individual actions, measuring the economic and social impact of the Plan on rural communities will be an important part of the monitoring process. In that regard, the Department of Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs has established a sub-Committee of the Monitoring Committee, led by Dr. Maura Farrell (NUIG/National Rural Development Link), to work on formulating appropriate indicators. It is intended that this suite of indicators will be agreed by the Monitoring Committee during 2017

5. Communications Strategy

The Action Plan for Rural Development represents a whole-of-Government approach to rural development. There is a great deal of positive effort being made across local and national government to support rural development, but a more coordinated approach to

communicating this message to various audiences is needed, particularly those who live and work in rural Ireland. A Communication Strategy is being developed to address this.

Key elements of the Action Plan for Rural Development Communications Strategy are as follows:

- All Departments will have a designated contact point with the Department of Arts, Heritage, Regional Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs to assist in communicating the progress taking place across the various Pillars and any other relevant issues which may arise in the context of the implementation of the Action Plan.
- A upgraded www.ruralireland.ie website will be launched shortly (Action 96), which will act as a central portal to provide news, information on relevant supports, and to showcase good practice examples that underpin rural development. The Department of Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs will also produce a series of short video segments of good practice case studies for the website.
- Mr. Pat Spillane, Ambassador for the Action Plan for Rural Development, is engaging with key rural stakeholders across the country to assist in communicating the Government's message and vision for the Action Plan to rural communities, and to encourage business and community engagement in the implementation of the Plan.

Mr Spillane will also assist with identifying the impact the Action Plan is having in practice on rural Ireland, through his involvement on the Monitoring Committee.

Mr. Spillane has already met with a number of rural stakeholders, rural enterprises and individual rural community groups. He is sharing his findings with the Department of Arts, Heritage, Regional Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs and the Monitoring Committee with a view to identifying overcoming any potential obstacles to the implementation of the Action Plan in rural communities.

- The Minister for Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs is engaging in a series of meetings with local authorities and rural community development projects across the country to explore the opportunities presented by the Action Plan.
- Minister Humphreys and Minister of State Ring are engaging in series of bilateral meetings with Ministerial colleagues to discuss key objectives within the Action Plan and to continue to drive implementation across Government.

Appendix 1

Role of the Action Plan for Rural Development Monitoring Committee

The key tasks of the Monitoring Committee are to:

1. Identify priority actions for delivery under the Action Plan for Rural Development on a rolling 6-month basis, and monitor progress on all actions on an on-going basis.
2. Highlight any potential obstacles to the delivery of the Action Plan or individual actions and identify solutions to avoid delay in implementation.
3. Identify examples of best practice emerging from the Action Plan and determine how best these practices could be replicated in other rural communities.
4. Monitor the social and economic impact of the Action Plan for Rural Development on rural communities and develop indicators to measure this impact.
5. Monitor key national and international developments in relation to rural development to ensure that the Action Plan stays relevant and is informed by best practice.
6. Identify new actions to be added to the Action Plan for Rural Development as required over the lifetime of the Plan.
7. Agree six monthly progress reports on the Action Plan for Rural Development to be submitted to the Cabinet Committee for Regional and Rural Affairs and published by Government.