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A Rural Charter for a Vibrant Countryside

Farming is the backbone of economic activity in rural Ireland. The farming and agri-food sector is Ireland’s largest indigenous productive sector, exporting food and drink worth over €10.5 billion in 2014 and providing employment to over 300,000 people directly and indirectly. Rural Ireland is unique by European standards with over 440,000 families choosing to live in the countryside and contribute to sustainable communities. This in turn leads to a high level of participation in education, sports, social activity and commerce in rural areas.

However, rural Ireland still faces many challenges. The most recent CSO figures show contrasting unemployment rates across the country, ranging from 8.8% in Dublin to 12 and 13% in the West, Midlands and South-East regions. This highlights the need for Government to introduce more targeted measures, to ensure the economic recovery is better balanced across the regions. Investment in rural enterprises outside of the main urban areas must be a strategic focus of Government.

As a priority Government must deliver on its funding commitment for farm schemes under the Rural Development Programme, to underpin the growth and exports targets of Food Wise 2025.

There is also a real need for Government to introduce a Charter for rural Ireland to drive economic recovery in all parts of the country. This Charter must include the following measures:

- Delivery on the commitment to provide a high quality rural fibre broadband network across rural Ireland, to support homes and businesses, job creation, investment and rural development.
- Introduction of tax-credits to encourage employers to take on apprentices and create sustainable employment in rural communities. Many of these communities have been badly impacted by emigration and have experienced high levels of youth unemployment.
- Incentives, such as double tax relief on rental expenditure and concessions on commercial rates, should be introduced to encourage businesses to locate in villages and town centres which have been decimated during the recession.

In addition the following measures should be introduced for the 440,000 households that live in rural Ireland and for those who holiday in or simply enjoy the countryside:

- Increased and measurable targets for policing hours and presence of mobile units in rural areas by An Garda Síochána, to reduce crime and create a greater sense of security in the countryside.
- An increased and ring-fenced annual rural roads budget from the Department of Transport, allocated to local authorities as part of a planned repair and maintenance programme.
- An increase in the number of voluntary rural walk schemes to support economic development and tourism in rural areas.
- A package of measures from the Department of Transport to facilitate the development of proposed Greenway projects, while protecting farmers’ rights.
- Increased fines and greater enforcement by local authorities to tackle the scourge of littering by passing motorists and users of the countryside.

IFA Countryside is dedicated to being the effective voice for rural Ireland by campaigning on rural issues, providing real cost-saving benefits and offering valuable support services for all those who live in, work in or simply wish to enjoy the Irish countryside for holidays and rural pursuits.
Making the Countryside a Better Place for Family and Business Life

The choice to live in rural Ireland remains an attractive and positive option. Many who live in the countryside enjoy a real sense of community.

However, there are many challenges. Communications infrastructure such as broadband is totally inadequate; rural roads are often left unmaintained for long periods and rural security continues to be a real concern.

Communications infrastructure

Inadequate and unnecessarily costly broadband service continues to undermine the enterprise potential of rural Ireland. Many farm families struggle with basic tasks on-line, such as completing Department of Agriculture application forms, due to broadband services failing. In addition, other rural businesses depend on the fragile rural broadband network when submitting orders to suppliers and servicing customers.

**IFA PROPOSALS**

- The Government must swiftly conclude the tendering process for the new rural broadband scheme. This scheme must ensure that every home, school and business in rural Ireland has access at a universal price to high-speed fibre broadband, no matter where they are located.
- In relation to general telephone infrastructure, the universal service obligation to maintain and develop the fixed line infrastructure that services all rural customers, must remain in place.

Rejuvenating rural towns and villages

Many villages and town centres have been decimated during the recession. This has resulted in rural communities been badly impacted by emigration and experiencing high levels of youth unemployment.

Support for small to medium size enterprises will be an essential part of supporting economic recovery in rural areas and rejuvenating rural towns and villages. However, small businesses starting up in rural Ireland are faced with significant administrative and regulatory costs. This often acts as a disincentive to increasing the number of employees. The high cost of local authority rates can often absorb cash-flow, which could alternatively be used to increase employment and to grow and develop the business.

**IFA PROPOSALS**

- New business start-ups should receive incentives such as exemptions from rates for an initial time period and relief from Capital Gains Tax to encourage innovation and enterprise in rural communities.
- Double tax relief should be provided on rental expenditure for businesses establishing in rural villages and town centres.

Social employment in rural Ireland

The Rural Social Scheme which was introduced in 2004 has made a significant contribution to social employment in rural Ireland, while at the same time supporting local community projects in marginalised and disadvantaged areas.

**IFA PROPOSALS**

- The Rural Social Scheme must remain a stand-alone scheme for rural communities, where job opportunities are scarce.
- The number of places in the Scheme needs to be increased to 4,000.
- The means assessment for Farm Assist, which is an eligibility requirement for the Rural Social Scheme, needs to be more flexible and the income and child disregards must be restored in the assessment.
LEADER must continue to support rural enterprise

Since its inception in 1991, LEADER has played an important role in building small enterprises and services in rural areas. The delivery of the LEADER programme in the new CAP Rural Development Programme through Local Community Development Committees has raised concerns that proposals from local communities and promoters may not be fairly evaluated by local authorities.

**IFA PROPOSALS**

- The new LEADER programme must continue to be delivered by local groups, who have, over two and a half decades, very successfully supported rural communities and enterprises. This bottom-up approach is best suited to making investment decisions appropriate to the economic and social needs of the local community.

Rural security

Theft of valuables from rural homes and of livestock and machinery from farms continues to be a real concern in the countryside. IFA has taken a lead role to address these challenges and is working with An Garda Síochána and other agencies to support rural crime prevention. The Association has appointed a full-time Rural Crime Prevention Executive; established a €10,000 reward fund with An Garda Síochána and Crimestoppers to combat livestock theft; developed a community text alert initiative with An Garda Síochána, which provides a key role for IFA branch officers in crime prevention; as well as launching the Theft Stop theft prevention service, which reduces the risk of thefts by marking farm machinery and garden equipment with a unique security identifier.

**IFA PROPOSALS**

- Government’s commitment to improved policing in rural Ireland must lead to increased and measurable targets for policing hours and presence of mobile units in rural areas, to reduce crime and create a greater sense of security in the countryside.
- The Seniors Alert scheme, which provides financial support for the use of personal pendant alarms by elderly people, should be extended to cover the installation of house alarms.
- Legislation to curb metal theft, which was enacted in 2014 following lobbying by IFA, requires all scrap dealers to keep proper records and seek proof of identity from people supplying materials. This new law must be fully enforced by local authorities and An Garda Síochána.
Rural planning

Balanced regional development must be at the centre of economic recovery in rural Ireland. The ability of families to live and work in their local communities is an important element of this. This is being undermined by unnecessary difficulties being faced in securing planning permission.

The new building regulations, which prohibit the opening, occupation or use of buildings, until a Certificate of Compliance on Completion has been filed and registered by the Building Control Authority, have created excessive obligations that have made the self-build of homes extremely difficult.

IFA PROPOSALS

• The guidelines for rural housing published by the Department of Environment are now 10 years old and must be redrafted and put on a statutory footing, obliging local authorities to grant planning permission to families who wish to live and work in their local communities, and have an intrinsic link with the rural area.

• The current review of the building control regulations by the Department of Environment must reduce the cost burden involved for one-off houses, including self-build and extensions to existing dwellings.

Review of hedge cutting dates

Hedgerows are important biodiversity reservoirs and act as a shelter for wildlife in the countryside. However, if not managed correctly, they can also be a danger to motorists, pedestrians and other road users. Overgrown hedges are also often used as places where passing motorists dump rubbish.

IFA PROPOSALS

• The closed period for hedge cutting should be changed from 1st March - 31st August to 17th March - 31st July. This would bring hedge cutting dates into line with the nesting season, make roads safer for road users, allow farmers to spread their workload over a longer period and deter dumping in the countryside.
Enjoying the countryside

The tourism marketing body Tourism Ireland says, “Ireland has it all. From the haunting beauty of the pure, unspoiled landscapes and the drama of the coastline, to the urban buzz of the country’s dynamic cities mixed with the magic of thousands of years’ worth of culture and history, Ireland is a country that never fails to surprise.”

Farmers have been to the forefront in protecting and enhancing the countryside. We enjoy water quality that is one of the highest in Europe, with 92% of lakes and 71% of rivers classified by the EPA as unpolluted. Farmers have made a significant contribution to this high status, spending over €2bn upgrading farm-yards, increasing slurry storage facilities and developing farm buildings to ensure they meet the highest standards. Farmers have also recycled over 25,000 tonnes of bale wrap and silage covers each year.

In addition, farmers have worked with local tourist groups and developed over 2,000km of walkway trails, built over 3,000km of stonewalls and created over 10,000km of new carbon sequestering hedgerows.

Despite this, many challenges exist – users of the countryside fail to act responsibly by not taking their litter home, dog attacks cause devastation to sheep flocks, some recreational users do not have adequate insurance cover and landowners impacted by proposals to develop greenway cycle tracks are not being treated fairly.

Country pursuits

Field-sports are estimated to generate €100m for the Irish economy each year, with thousands of people taking part in activities including hunting and shooting across the country.

Over one-third of those involved in hunting are not from a farming background and are guest users of the countryside. These guest users are often dependent on the goodwill of local farmers and may not have a direct connection with the rural community that they are hunting in.

### IFA PROPOSALS

- All guest users of the countryside must respect the countryside and have adequate insurance cover in case of accidents
- Any changes to legislation affecting field-sports must be progressed only after direct discussions and agreement with all stakeholders, including the Irish Farmers’ Association.

Rural Walks Schemes

The development of the Walks Scheme has been a very successful initiative, increasing the number of recreational tourists, particularly in non-traditional tourist areas. Already 40 walks have been developed under the Walks Scheme, with significant potential for the number to be increased.

#### IFA PROPOSALS

- The Walks Scheme should be extended to create a further 40 walks throughout the country over the next two years.

Programme of measures for Greenways

There are over 300km of Greenways proposed across the country including in counties Kerry, Sligo, Galway, Roscommon and Westmeath. Greenways have an important role to play in promoting tourism and economic activity in rural areas.

#### IFA PROPOSALS

- A package of measures is required, which facilitates the development of proposed Greenway projects, while protecting farmers’ rights. This package must recognise the significant impact the proposed Greenways will have on farmers, landowners and rural dwellers and ensure their interests are protected. It must also recognise the inconvenience, severance and injurious affection caused and goodwill required.
Tackling litter in the countryside

Each year farm families and rural dwellers do great work keeping their communities litter free by participating in initiatives such as IFA’s Rural Spring Clean campaign. However, this excellent work continues to be challenged by the practice of fly-tipping and littering. Passing traffic is the main cause of all littering in rural areas. Poor enforcement activity by local authorities is also a factor that contributes to increasing levels of rural littering.

In addition, the heavy-handed approach by some local authorities, who issue warning letters to farmers, landowners and rural dwellers to clean up the mess left by others in the countryside, is unacceptable.

IFA is proactive in tackling the issue of littering in rural areas. The Association runs a rural spring clean initiative encouraging rural dwellers to keep hedgerows in the proximity of their farms and homes clean and an awareness campaign called, “The Countryside is Watching”, highlighting the problem and asking rural users to take their litter home. As part of the campaign IFA has made specific proposals to tackle the problem of littering in the countryside.

IFA PROPOSALS

- Stronger penalties to tackling litter dumping - Over 95% of IFA members’ surveyed support the introduction of tougher penalties being imposed on anyone who dumps litter in the countryside.
- Enforcement of anti-littering laws - Each County Council must enforce anti-littering laws effectively and encourage the general public to report offenders.
- Changes to litter legislation - The Department of the Environment must review the anti-litter legislation, and remove the threat of fines and prosecution of farmers on whose lands others dump litter recklessly.
- Civic amenity sites on the outskirts of towns and villages - County Councils must establish a network of strategically located skips on the outskirts of all towns and villages, where people can safely dispose of rubbish, rather than litter the countryside.
- Communication and education campaign - County Council environmental enforcement officers must liaise directly with the public to highlight the problem of rural littering, and encourage people to take their litter home and dispose of it correctly. This should be supported by a major national television, radio and print media campaign to highlight the issue.

Dog attacks on sheep flocks

Dog attacks on sheep flocks continue to be a growing issue in the countryside. While farmers have a right to protect their flock, in the first instance dog owners must take responsibility for their pets. Under the law, dog owners can be held responsible for the losses involved, with serious financial and legal consequences.

IFA PROPOSALS

- IFA’s protocol for farmers who encounter a dog attack on their sheep flock must be fully implemented by stakeholders, including the Department of the Environment, local authorities and An Garda Siochana.
- The Department of the Environment must resource a well-timed and targeted communications campaign to make dog owners fully aware that they must take responsibility for their dog and prevent unnecessary and avoidable losses to farmers.
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