



BUDGET 2025

Investing in Communities,
Investing in Ireland



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Budget 2025 will be the last to be delivered by the current Government. This is a Government that, upon its formation in 2020, cited the delivery of a fair and balanced post-Covid economic recovery, the advancement of shared solutions over division and discord, and the renewal of our role in Europe and the world, among its guiding aims.¹

The events of the intervening years – the cost-of-living pressures that clouded our economic recovery, the invasion of Ukraine and the ensuing surge in the number of people seeking refuge from war in Ireland, deepening housing, health, and climate crises, and a proliferation of the politics of division – have made these ambitions all the more demanding, and, at the same time, all the more consequential.

Government, through the final months of its term, must continue to exercise its mandate in respect of these ambitions. The measures that we outline in our pre-budget submission align to the opportunities and imperatives that are most salient at community level, reflecting the ILDN’s view that communities are the arena in which the ideals of “fair and balanced”, of “shared solutions”, and even of a renewed role “in Europe and the world” will ultimately take shape.

Mindful of the need to re-connect the local and with the national, we are calling on Government, through the vehicle of Budget 2025, to Invest in Communities – Invest in Ireland.

Our main recommendations are summarised in the graphic below.



¹ Government of Ireland (2020). Programme for Government: Our Shared Future.



Parenting & Childcare

Increase capacity within Ireland's system of parenting and childcare supports.

Health Equality

Leverage existing programme infrastructure to deliver on the Sláintecare commitment of reduced healthcare inequality.



Rural Development

Support community-led local development in rural areas by reversing the long-term decline in funding allocated to LEADER.

Climate & Environment

Develop new streams of funding that integrate climate action and community development.



Migrant Supports

Continue to provide meaningful supports to those in the IPAS system, and for wider work in the area of migrant integration.

Social Enterprise

Support social enterprises through the new National Policy for Social Enterprise and ensure that complementary supports, such as the Community Services Programme, are sufficiently resourced.



Disability Services

Invest in quality occupational and employment supports for people with disabilities.

C&V Sector

Support the vital work of community and voluntary organisations by delivering on the commitments set down in the five-year Strategy for the Community and Voluntary Sector.



INTRODUCTION

Over the past twelve months, the narrative that “political representatives are out of touch with the communities that they serve” has grown increasingly dominant. While sentiments like these are not new, there is a deeply sinister edge to how they are now being expressed. For example, opposition to the Government’s migrant policy has led to numerous acts of intimidation and arson, to protests at politicians’ homes, and – at least in-part – to the Dublin Riots of 23rd November, 2023. The idea that climate measures are being enacted without regard for the wellbeing of people and communities, and that the Government has failed to grasp the true extent of the health, housing, and crime problems, has helped to fuel this sense of alienation.

The perception of a widening disconnect between our political representatives and the public that they serve should be of concern to all mainstream political parties, and not just to those currently in Government. Ireland no longer needs to look beyond its own shores to see how perceptions like these are cultivated and exploited by far-right agitators and by others with extreme political agendas. The continued erosion of social cohesion by those intent on sowing division does not stand the country in good stead to tackle the problems that it will face in the years ahead, irrespective of any substantive differences that might exist in the policies of different parties.

The need to counter the growing perception of a political system that does not give meaningful voice to local communities must therefore be taken seriously by all political parties. The emerging divisions and sense of disenfranchisement that we are now seeing in communities around the country provides a powerful illustration of why investments in climate justice, crime prevention, and migrant integration – necessary as those investments may be – are not enough. To truly engage the grassroots, those investments cannot focus only on climate, crime, and integration, they must focus also on community development: they must be used as a vehicle to build social capital, to grow and strengthen grassroots organisations, and to ensure that nobody feels left behind.

Much is currently being demanded of communities; unless they are equipped to respond in a way that is locally led and participative, the strains of those demands will continue to find expression in tension and division. With this in mind, all of the recommendations set down in this submission are linked by the overarching imperative to nurture a sense of empowerment within communities. We encourage Government to use Budget 2025 as an opportunity to advance its vision for Ireland through the lens of community and community development, and to use this Budget to prove to communities that they do not need to break from mainstream politics in order to feel valued, trusted, and heard.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Tackle the growing disparity between the most disadvantaged communities and the rest.

Despite the strong performance of Ireland’s economy, inequality remains prevalent. In fact, the post-pandemic upturn in our economy has coincided with a *rise* in income inequality, which had seen consecutive yearly decreases between 2014 and 2021. The idea that this emergent inequality is in any way benign – that it has come about because middle- and high-income households have seen their earnings grow more quickly than the earnings of low-income households, but that everyone is ultimately “winning” – does not hold up to scrutiny.

The reality is starkly different. Trends revealed in the Pobal HP Deprivation Index show that deprived communities are not catching up; on the contrary, severely disadvantaged communities are falling further and further behind, and the most disadvantaged communities appear to have been – in socioeconomic terms – cut adrift altogether. Communities classified in 2016 as “extremely disadvantaged” or “very disadvantaged” were more than twice as likely to see a deterioration in their deprivation score over the following six years than they were to see an improvement (Figure 1). This deterioration was most pronounced at the “extreme” range of the disadvantage spectrum (Figure 2).²

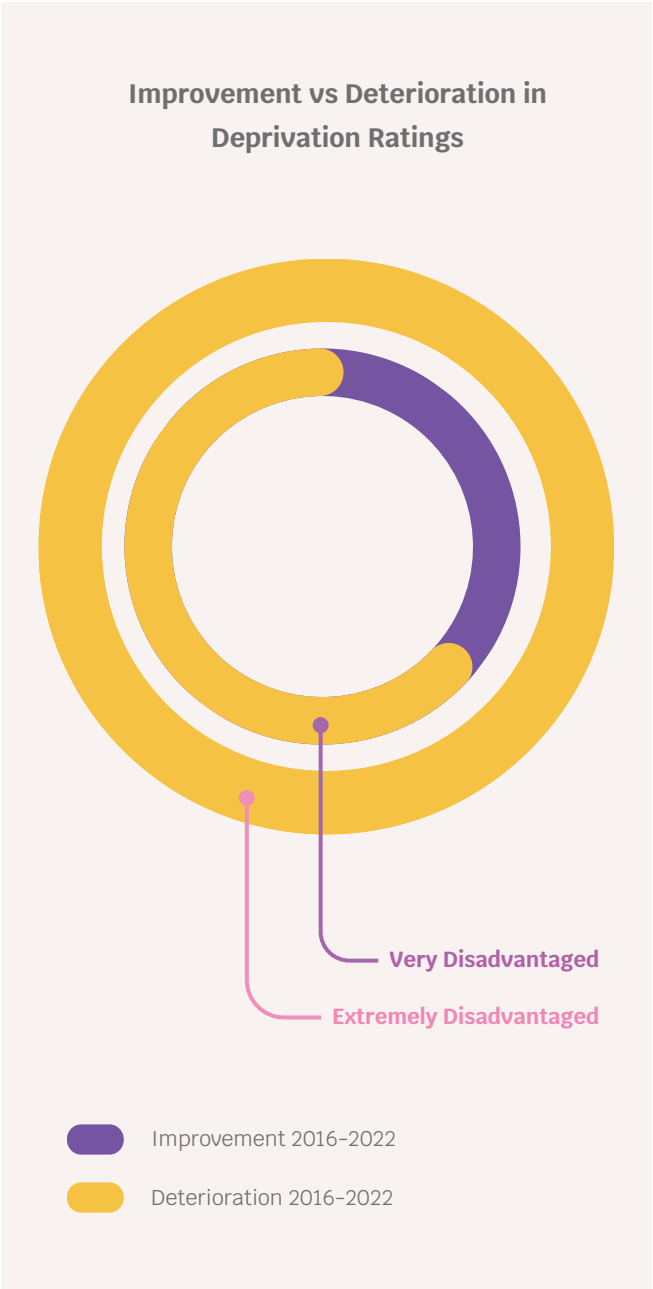


Figure 1: Share of extremely/very disadvantaged communities that saw their deprivation rating improve between 2016 and 2022, versus those that saw their deprivation rating deteriorate

² Analysis performed at small area level using data from the Pobal HP Deprivation Indices 2016 and 2022. “Extremely disadvantaged” communities are those with a deprivation rating of <-30; “very disadvantaged” communities have a deprivation rating between -30 and -20; “disadvantaged” communities have a deprivation rating between -20 and -10; etc.

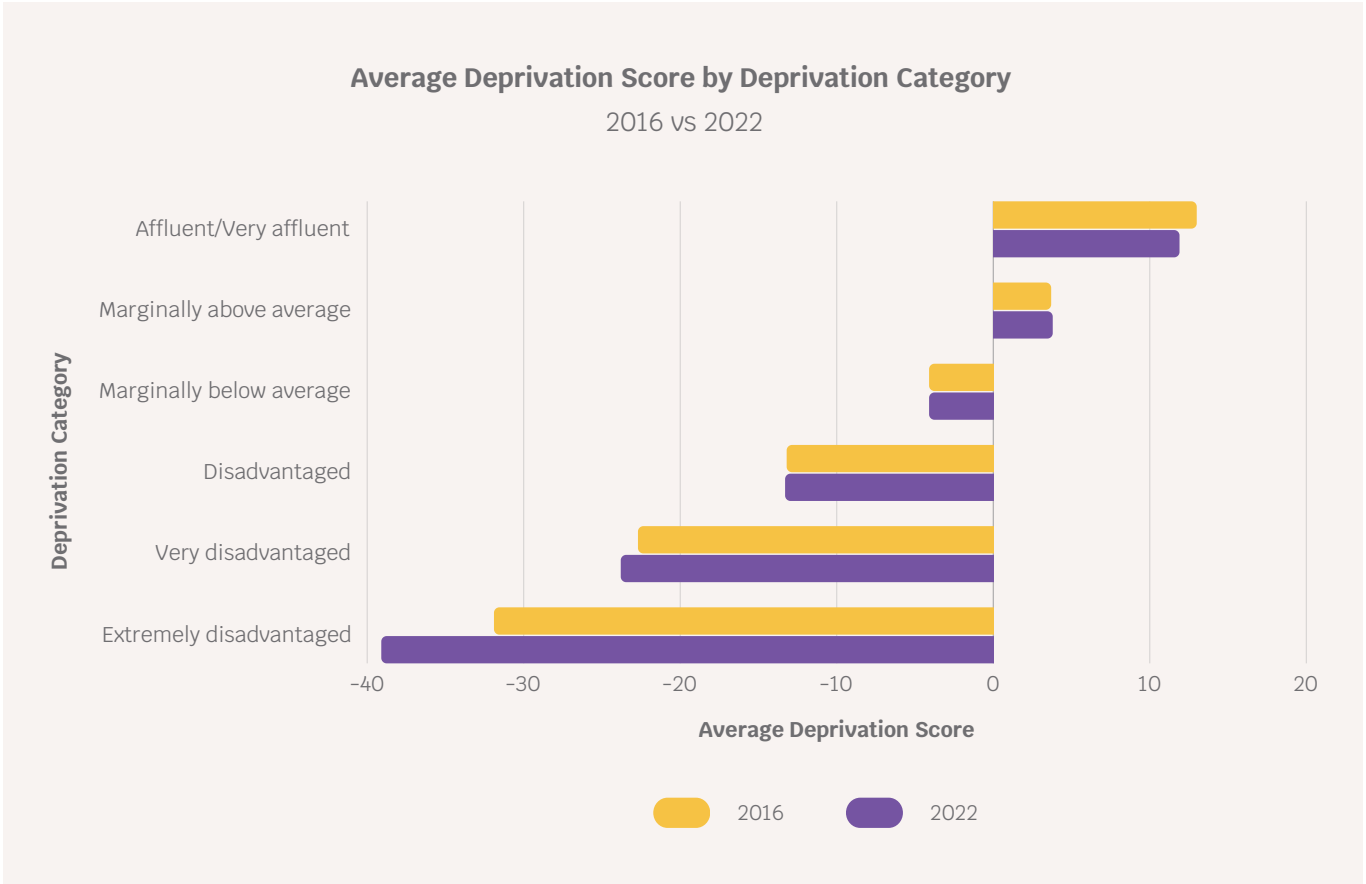


Figure 2: Extremely/very disadvantaged communities saw substantial decreases in their deprivation ratings between 2016 and 2022

This deepening of socioeconomic disparities between disadvantaged communities and “the rest” is not only a matter of severity, it is also one of scale. Between 2016 and 2022, the number of extremely/very disadvantaged

communities rose by more than 60%, and the number of people living in these communities more than doubled (Figure 3).

These trends are placing considerable pressure on SICAP (the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme), which works to address many of the symptoms of economic inequality – like poverty, social exclusion, unemployment, educational disadvantage, ill-health, and so on – at a local level. Overall, the number of people living in disadvantaged communities – a key target group for SICAP – has increased by more than 66,000 (20 per cent) over the past eight years.

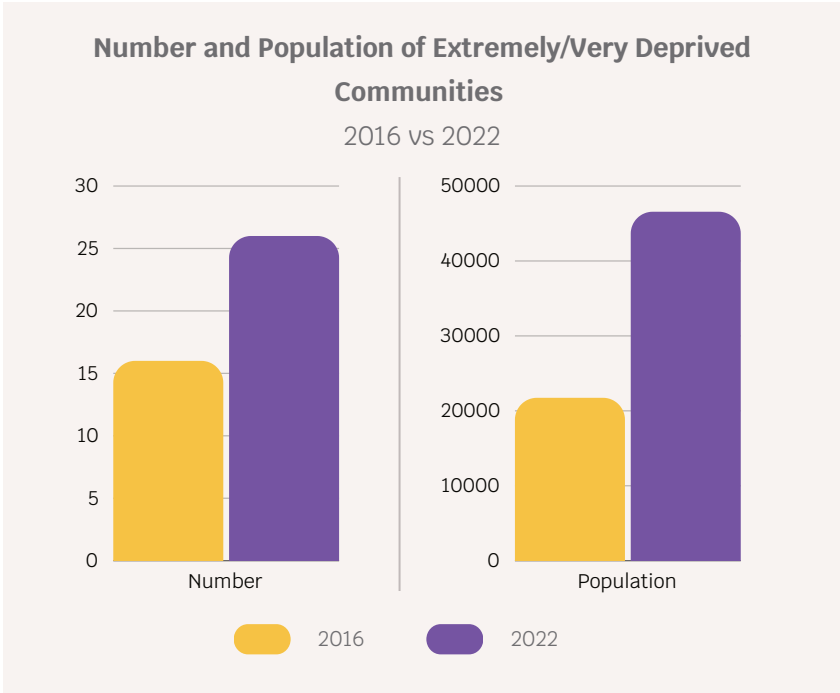


Figure 3: Extremely/very deprived communities grew significantly in both number and population between 2016 and 2022

Evidence of the increasing demands being experienced by SICAP can also be seen in the sharp upturn in the value of

grants issued to Local Community Groups (LCGs) and Social Enterprises (SEs). In 2019, those grants amounted to around €240,000; by 2022, they had more than doubled, to €508,000. These demands are compounded by the rising costs of programme delivery, with cumulative inflation from 2018 to 2024 reaching almost nineteen per cent.



Figure 4: Rising pressures on SICAP

Reflecting the growing pressure on SICAP and wider patterns of increasing socioeconomic inequality, we are calling on Government to increase its annual budgetary allocation for SICAP by 15 per cent, or €7.4m.

Insulate people and families against poverty – directly.

Although the sharp increase in cost-of-living pressures that people and families have experienced over the past two years has subsided, those pressures continue to weigh heavily on low-income households. To-date, Government has deployed a series of once-off budgetary measures to insulate low-income households against the effects of rising prices. While these measures were appropriate for a period of extreme price uncertainty, the settling of prices – at permanently high levels – over the past twelve months or so necessitates an approach which affords vulnerable people and families a greater deal of certainty in respect of their capacity to meet basic needs.

Adjusting social welfare rates in line with inflation – and with upward movement in the cost of a Minimum Essential Standard of Living³ – is the most effective means for Government to deliver this certainty. We therefore recommend that rates of core social protection for working age adults be increased by €20 per week.

In addition, we recommend:

- An increase in Qualifying Child Payments – of €6 for children under twelve and €15 for children aged twelve and over – to mitigate the impact of inflation and to reflect the Government’s commitments to ending child poverty.
- The introduction of a system of refundable tax credits aimed at alleviating in-work poverty. Whereas an increase in tax credits would benefit middle- and high-income earners – i.e., those whose income levels

³ Vincentian MESL Research Centre (2024). [MESL 2024](#).

are sufficient to “max out” a person’s tax credits – refundable tax credits – where unused tax credits are paid out to the individual at the end of a tax year – would benefit workers whose incomes are too low to enable them to avail of their full allocation of tax credits.⁴

- The introduction of a cost of disability payment of €40 per week – building on once-off measures deployed in previous budgets – to offset the additional costs of disability.

Support communities that are most severely impacted by drugs and drug-related crime.

Drug use is prevalent across numerous sociodemographic groups, but the social problems that accompany drug use are much more acute in areas where deprivation is highest. In the most recent Drug and Alcohol Survey, respondents from deprived communities were more than twice as likely to report a drug problem in their area, or to have experienced drug-related intimidation.

The damage being wrought in deprived areas by drugs was a prominent theme of the Report of the Citizens’ Assembly on Drug Use, which was published in January of this year. Among the 37 recommendations set down in that report, there are calls for greater investment in community development and youth diversion (Recommendation 14), and for policy to prioritise the needs of vulnerable and marginalised groups and disadvantaged communities (Recommendation 15).

The new National Drugs Strategy, which is to

be finalised in early 2025, must provide a clear and long-term framework for investments aimed at delivering on these recommendations. In the short term, we are calling on Government to provide additional resources to Local Drug and Alcohol Task Forces (LDATFs) to ensure that they are equipped to deal with the mounting pressures that they are facing in deprived communities.

Increase capacity within Ireland’s system of parenting and childcare supports.

We welcome the commencement of Equal Start, a multi-year programme designed to make early learning and care (ELC) and school-aged childcare (SAC) more accessible to children that experience disadvantage of one kind or another. The implementation of a programme of this kind is long overdue, and Ireland now has considerable ground to make up in our efforts to equalise access to ELC and SAC. During a recent Dáil sitting, for example, Minister Roderic O’Gorman cited the fact that Traveller children are ten per cent less likely than children from the settled community to take up the free two-year Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE), a disparity that has long-term ramifications for educational attainment and social inclusion.

Equal Start provides a comprehensive and robust framework of measures for tackling such disparities, but it is essential that it is resourced to deliver on its ambition. Funding for Equal Start amounted to just over one per cent of the total funding provided to the early learning and childcare sector by DCEDIY in 2024,⁵ an allocation which does not reflect the

⁴ For further detail on the operation and projected impact of refundable tax credits, see Social Justice Ireland (2020). [Refundable Tax Credits Key to Helping the Working Poor](#).

⁵ For the four months of 2024 during which the programme will be live, the actual allocation for Equal Start was €4.5m. For the purposes of this calculation, we have adjusted the allocation to €13.5m, which is what the full-year allocation would have been if the rate of €4.5m was applied for twelve months rather than four.

pivotal role that this programme will play in enabling the Government to deliver on its wider commitments around child poverty. We are calling on Government to allocate an additional €7m in funding to Equal Start – an approximately 50 per cent increase – in 2025.

The National Model of Parenting Support Services (NMPSS) has a vital role to play in ensuring that outside-the-home interventions such as Equal Start are complemented by effective home- and family-based interventions. Publication of the NMPSS, as well as Túsla’s Parenting Support Strategy 2022–2027, paves the way for a much-enhanced suite of support services for parents in Ireland, but funding levels must again reflect the scale of improvements that are necessary.⁶

Parenting supports and ELC/SAC supports are mutually reinforcing, and need to be considered side-by-side. As such, we are calling on Government to match additional funding for Equal Start with a corresponding increase for parenting supports. Furthermore, Equal Start is strengthened by its grounding in the principle of progressive universalism – that is, help for everyone, but extra help for those that need it – and we encourage Government to approach parenting supports in a similar way.

Leverage existing programme infrastructure to deliver on the Sláintecare commitment of reduced healthcare inequality.

Economic status, such as the level of a person’s income or whether they live in an

area that is affluent or deprived, is a strong predictor of health status. In Ireland, those living in deprived areas are more likely to be overweight or obese, to smoke, to experience negative health impacts around childbirth and parenting, and to report poorer overall health.⁷ Data also illustrates that poverty and poor health are mutually reinforcing: poverty engenders ill health, and ill health exacerbates poverty. Those with a chronic illness, for example, are more than two-and-a-half times more likely to experience chronic poverty.⁸

The amelioration of healthcare inequalities is one of six core objectives of the Healthy Ireland Strategic Action Plan 2021–2025. Contained within this Action Plan is a commitment to “Develop and implement the Sláintecare Healthy Communities Programme to facilitate an area-based approach to health and wellbeing.” Since 2021, Sláintecare Healthy Communities (SHC) has been operational in 19 high-priority areas, where it has proven to be an effective vehicle for delivering health and wellbeing supports to “hard to reach” sociodemographic groups (see infographic below).⁹ The programme is delivered at community level by LDCs and Family Resource Centres, who work in collaboration with various community partners, the HSE, and Local Authorities.

⁶ See, for example, the findings of a 2020 survey which was performed by Amárach Research to inform the development of the National Model. Among the survey’s findings was that 58 per cent of parents are unaware of parenting supports available in their area, and that this number is higher within socioeconomically disadvantaged groups (i.e., those that are in greatest need of such services).

⁷ Department of Health (2019). [Healthy Ireland Summary Report 2019](#). Note that more recent iterations of the Healthy Ireland Survey do not capture levels of deprivation, which limits our understanding of how trends in healthcare inequality are evolving.

⁸ CSO (2024). [Poverty Indicators by Health Status – Survey on Income and Living Conditions SILC 2023](#).

⁹ For further information on programme effectiveness, see: Tasc (2023). [Healthy Communities Project: Impact Evaluation Support](#); Government of Ireland (2023). [Sláintecare Healthy Communities Progress Report 2022](#).

Local Development Companies and Sláintecare Healthy Communities
A Snapshot of Impact in 2023



We believe that a wider rollout of SHC – beyond the 19 designated areas – is now warranted, and we are pleased to see that this is planned for 2025. There is a need, however, to ensure that the programme is placed on a more stable funding footing. Overhead and management costs have risen sharply during the programme’s three years of operation and, in many cases, SHC budgets are insufficient to cover these costs in their entirety. For the current SHC delivery model to be sustainable, it is important that the funding provided to community partners is reflective of the substantial and wide-ranging management and overhead costs that are involved.

Support community-led local development in rural areas by reversing the long-term decline in funding allocated to LEADER.

Funding for the new LEADER programme, which is now commencing nationwide, is around 21 per cent lower than funding for the previous LEADER programme.¹⁰ Across the four-year lifetime of the programme, this represents a shortfall of €47.3m. This decrease is in-keeping with longer-term trends in LEADER funding, which have shown a steady decline across successive

¹⁰ €250m was allocated to LEADER 2014–2020, which commenced in Aug-2016. This equates to an allocation of €56.8m for each of the 4.4 years that the programme was in operation. €180m has been allocated to LEADER 2023–2027, which commenced earlier this year. This equates to an allocation of €45m per year for each of the 4 years that the programme will be in operation. The difference is €11.8m per annum, or 20.7%.

programmes. Cumulative decreases across the three most recent LEADER programmes mean that per annum funding for the forthcoming programme will be 47% lower than per annum funding for LEADER 2007-13.



Figure 5: Annual allocation across LEADER programme periods

ILDN’s concerns about this trend have been echoed by the European Commission, which has been critical of Ireland and other member states for their failure to invest sufficiently in LEADER and, in turn, in the ability of rural communities to shape their own development.

“Local development strategies implemented through LEADER are a key (and usually the only) tool used in the CSPs [CAP Strategic Plans] to respond to the multiple needs of rural areas in fields such as employment, social inclusion, rural services, and rural economies’ innovation and competitiveness. [...] [T]he absolute amounts assigned to LEADER have fallen while the overall ambition in terms of coverage of rural population has risen. LEADER is expected to do more with less. Additional efforts are needed that complement this tool.”¹²

LEADER has an established track record of delivering excellent value for money – it has been estimated, for example, that every €1 investment in LEADER yields a social return of €1.75.¹³ Furthermore, the bottom-up LEADER methodology brings with it a unique array of secondary benefits, such as supporting actors and groups that generally do not engage with other funding schemes, bringing Europe closer to its citizens by showcasing how EU supports can have a grassroots impact, and cultivating trust and cohesion (i.e., social capital) within local areas through its participative and collectivistic design. Cuts to LEADER funding mean that communities will forego these benefits, and will inevitably result in local needs and objectives going unaddressed.

As such, we are asking Government to allocate €47.3m in supplementary LEADER funding (to be spread over the 2025-2027 period) to keep funding rates on-par with the last iteration of the programme.

¹¹ The transitional LEADER programme, which ran from 2021-2022, is omitted here.

¹² European Commission (2023). Report from the Commission to the European Parliament and Council – Summary of CAP Strategic Plans for 2023-2027: joint effort and collective ambition, pp.10.

¹³ Chatzichristos, G. & Perimenis, A. (2022). Evaluating the social added value of LEADER: Evidence from a marginalised rural region. Journal of Rural Studies, 94, 366-374.

Develop new streams of funding that integrate climate action and community development.

Successive Climate Action Plans have placed an emphasis on the need to inform and engage communities, and to motivate and empower them to take climate action. Significant resources are being channelled into communities via an array of new and existing structures, including Local Authorities (LAs), CAROs, and the SEAI, all of which have an important role to play in supporting the bottom-up response to the climate crisis.

None of these entities, however, specialises in the kind of broad-based, grassroots animation that is needed to lay the foundation for collective action and capacity building. This speaks to an important distinction that is integral to the practice of community development: to mobilise and empower communities, we need to support the *process of organising* as well as the *organisations* that ensue. Supporting the *process of organising* involves, among other things, helping people to identify common interests, to develop a shared mission, and to access institutional supports (e.g., via the LAs or SEAI) that are available to help them to advance that mission. Support for the *process* is especially vital for disadvantaged communities and other marginalised or vulnerable groups, who may lack an understanding of the relevance or urgency of the climate agenda, and who may not have experience of collective action or civic engagement.

Government's investment in the community response to the climate crisis has been sizable, but those investments – and the structures through which they have been channelled – have been oriented towards organisations, rather than towards the process of organising. Ample supports exist for organisations that are grant-ready, but basic animation and early-stage developmental supports are underdeveloped by comparison.

While this imbalance persists, Government's ability to mobilise communities in the way that is envisaged by the Climate Action Plan – that is, in a way that is inclusive, participative, and co-ordinated – will remain limited.

To mobilise communities, it is necessary to support them from within. Programmes like SICAP and LEADER have done so successfully for over three decades, so much so that several complementary programmes – in areas like health and wellbeing, rural recreation, and employment and enterprise – now leverage the grassroots reach of these pillar programmes. While Local Authorities have an important role in the administration of both programmes, it is LDCs that are relied upon to provide this grassroots reach, and that carry responsibility for the “last mile delivery” of SICAP and LEADER. In this way, these programmes are designed to capitalise on the unique capacity of the local development sector to leverage local knowledge, networks, and assets; to help individuals and community groups to navigate the various supports available to them; and to ensure that vulnerable and marginalised groups are able to meaningfully engage.

The potential for the local development sector to contribute in similar way to our national climate response is vast, but there is much more that Government could do to ensure that potential is realised. A standalone programme – with a focus on putting boots on the ground to *stimulate* local action, rather than merely *funding* it – is an important starting point. Both SICAP and LEADER support climate action of various kinds, but both programmes carry a broad thematic remit, and neither one is sufficiently resourced to deliver the kind of focused and intensive support that our climate goals demand. In this context, and against the backdrop of communities increasingly feeling that they are being pitted against the environment, a programme that embeds climate justice within the broader practise of community development is now essential. It is

important to stress that such a programme would not duplicate or displace the services currently being delivered via the Local Authorities and SEAI; instead, it would add value to these services by building the kind of grassroots capacity that services like these are designed to tap into, but which, in many cases, remains lacking.

Given the existential challenges presented by climate change, we call for the development of a National Climate Activation Programme of a similar size, scale and vision to the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme.

Continue to provide meaningful supports to those in the IPAS system, and for wider work in the area of migrant integration.

The savings to the exchequer that will be achieved by the means testing of the Daily Expense Allowance that is currently paid to all asylum seekers (and that will be paid in future only to those that do not earn more than €125 per week through employment) will be marginal, but the impact on many individuals and families in the IPAS system will be very significant.

While it is clear that the over-riding aim of this measure is to make Ireland a less

attractive country in which to claim international protection, Government remains duty-bound to ensure that basic standards of welfare and dignity are upheld. At a minimum, we ask that Government uses the meagre savings that this measure will deliver to lessen its impact on more vulnerable migrant cohorts. Specifically, we recommend that:

- The Daily Expense Allowance (for those that remain eligible to claim it) be increased from €38.80 to €46.90 for adults living in state-provided accommodation and from €113.80 to €161.60 for adults that are not living in state-provided education. This increase aligns to cumulative inflation since 2018, when this payment was last increased.
- The Daily Expense Allowance be increased from €29.80 to €39.80 for children. As well as the need to account for the effect of inflation, there is a need to ensure that children are insulated from the impact of new restrictions on adult payments.
- The €10m in non-core SICAP funding that was provided in Budgets 2023 and 2024 to support grassroots integration measures and the wider community response to rising refugee numbers be committed on a multi-annual basis, beginning in 2025. Services for vulnerable migrants must be placed on a more stable resource footing, reflecting the Government's acceptance that elevated levels of immigration and displacement are now the norm.

The National Ukrainian Choir in Ireland, with Phil Coulter on piano, putting together a unique rendition of Coulter's song Steal Away as part of an integration initiative led by Cavan County Local Development and Empower.



Support social enterprises through the new National Policy for Social Enterprise and ensure that complementary supports, such as the Community Services Programme, are sufficiently resourced.

At the time of writing, the National Policy for Social Enterprise for the period 2024–2027 has yet to be published. However, we commend the Department of Rural & Community Development for the extensive consultation it has undertaken in the preparation of this policy, and we look forward to seeing the specific measures that it contains. More generally, this is a challenging time for social enterprises, many of whom are struggling to cope with the elevated cost of overheads and with the challenges of attracting and retaining staff in a market of full employment. We are hopeful that the resources allocated to the implementation of the new Social Enterprise Policy will be commensurate with the scale of these challenges, and with the immense value that these organisations bring to their communities.

Aside from any new measures that may be introduced under the new Policy, we ask Government to consider providing a new round of funding under the Community Services Programme (CSP), the last open call having been issued in March 2023. CSP is a crucial support for Ireland’s growing social enterprise sector, and the value that it generates – through the development and operation of civic infrastructure such as communities centres, the provision of supports to marginalised groups, and the creation of career opportunities to people from designated target groups – is well-

established.¹⁴ We ask Government to allocate €1.5m to launch a new round of funding in the first quarter of 2025.



The Shona Project was one of six awardees at the ILDN Social Enterprise IMPACT Awards in February. Ellen Conway of The Shona Project is pictured accepting her award from Martina Earley, Chairperson of ILDN, and Robert Nicholson, Principal Officer for Rural Strategy & Social Enterprise at DRCD.

Invest in quality occupational and employment supports for people with disabilities.

Extensive consultation has taken place in recent months around the Department of Social Protection’s Green Paper on Reform to Disability Payments. As a network whose members are heavily relied upon to provide employment supports to people with disabilities, ILDN was deeply concerned that the proposed reforms were designed to incentivise greater engagement with employment activation services that – due to funding and personnel constraints – are already struggling to meet demand.

While we are wholly supportive of Government

¹⁴ Indecon (2020). [Review of Community Services Programme](#).

aims to tackle the chronically high rates of poverty and unemployment among people with disabilities, we – like many other organisations in this space – believe that services and supports, rather than welfare conditionality, should be the Government’s primary focus. Along these lines, we recommend:

- That a new Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities – a successor to the ten-year strategy that ran from 2015-2024 – be developed.
- That funding commitments made under the Roadmap for Service Improvement 2023-2026 (Disability Services for Children and Young People) be reviewed and expanded as necessary.

Support the vital work of community and voluntary organisations by delivering on the commitments set down in the five-year Strategy for the Community and Voluntary Sector.

2024 marks the final year of Ireland’s five-year strategy for the Community & Voluntary (C&V)

sector. This Strategy was founded on a recognition of the “importance of the community and voluntary sector to a healthy, just and prosperous society” and a commitment to ensure “that the needs of communities and the organisations that support them are properly addressed.”

The time period during which this Strategy was live was one in which the importance of the C&V sector was brought into sharp focus: the Covid pandemic, cumulative inflation of over 19 per cent and the cost-of-living crisis that it precipitated, a deepening housing crisis, and a surge in the number of people seeking refuge from war and persecution in Ireland were among the more momentous challenges of the period, and C&V organisations were – and still are – at the forefront of the national response to all of them.

But as we approach the end of the Strategy’s lifetime, the ongoing lack of Government follow-through on key actions – even on the commitment to undertake formal review of the Strategy – has left the C&V sector in a deeply precarious position. This precarity is most evident in the challenges that the sector faces

in attracting and retaining staff, large numbers of whom have moved to Local Authorities and other statutory bodies like the HSE and Tús, where similar roles carry vastly superior terms of employment.¹⁵

Consistent with the Strategy’s underpinning commitments, long-term investments are needed to ensure that Ireland’s C&V sector remains equipped to



¹⁵ The Wheel & Tasc (2023). *The Future of Public Service Delivery by the Community & Voluntary Sector: Working on the Cheap – Assessing the Need for Pay Restoration to Ensure Sustainable Services*.

support the Government in its efforts to bring about a more just and equal society, and to respond to future challenges that we cannot

currently foresee. The following actions, all of which were set down in the Strategy as they are worded below, must be prioritised.



Develop and support a continuum of education and training opportunities for those working – either on a voluntary or salaried basis – in the C&V sector (Objective 2, Action 2.5).

Limited opportunities for continuous professional development (CPD) are fuelling the chronic difficulties that C&V organisations are experiencing around the attraction and retention of staff. Career paths within the sector are generally uncertain, and C&V organisations are typically prevented by the terms of their funding – and by wider resource constraints – from making significant investments in CPD. The area of community development is in particular need of support; ILDN is currently working to develop an apprenticeship programme aimed at helping people – particularly those from marginalised groups – to develop the competencies necessary to work in this area, and to assist those already working in the area to progress their careers. The support of Government will be critical in advancing this initiative, and, more broadly, in addressing long-term shortcomings in education and training provision.



Scope and develop a sustainable funding model to support the community and voluntary sector, recognising the importance of – among other things – core funding for autonomous community development and local development at local level (Objective 4, Action 4.1).

PPNs aside, funding for community development continues to be distributed via a model of competitive tendering, rather than on a core funded basis. The transactional nature of the current funding model is out of step with the principles of collaboration and partnership that Government and the C&V sector have jointly subscribed to,¹⁶ and it imposes considerable uncertainty on C&V organisations and their staff. Organisations are forced to adopt shorter planning horizons, to dedicate a substantial amount of time and resources to tendering, and to assume considerable financial risk arising from the requirement to move staff to contracts of indefinite duration after successive fixed-term contracts. If Government's commitment to autonomous local and community development is genuine, it is vital that this action is urgently progressed.



Develop appropriate compliance and monitoring arrangements and support capacity in the community development, local development and the broader community and voluntary sector to meet them, including reviewing the appropriateness of regulatory compliance requirements, and resourcing and supporting organisations to fulfil compliance requirements (Objective 4, Action 4.2).

Most C&V organisations are small in size and local in scope, yet the regulatory burden that is imposed on them is substantial. While the need for transparency and accountability in C&V governance is self-evident, there is also a need – as this action illustrates – for balance and proportionality. Compliance responsibilities that far outweigh operational scale are not only proving to be a drain on organisations' time and resources, they are also making it extremely difficult for C&V organisations to staff their voluntary boards. In this regard, there is a genuine risk that, unless a more appropriate balance is found, compliance requirements will become self-defeating: as the regulatory burden on voluntary boards continues to grow, the number of people willing to staff those boards will continue to decline. Government must understand that, for C&V organisations, excessive compliance requirements are not merely a nuisance; they are in fact a major source of fear, and for the many community organisations that are struggling to fill board positions, they pose an existential threat. We therefore ask Government to treat the issue of compliance reform with the urgency that it merits.

Reflecting the higher-level commitments set down in the Strategy, there is a fundamental need to invest in the capacity – and in capacity building structures – of the C&V sector. By capacity, we are referring not only to funding, but to the wider ability of people and organisations to ‘make a project happen’ and, in a broader sense, to meet the needs of their communities.

Such capabilities generally do not emerge organically; community groups, for the most part, require extensive support in areas like procurement, fundraising, assessing risk and responsibilities, performing needs analyses, developing financial projections, governance, project management, publicity and PR, and so on.

Capacity building activities such as these are

core to the work of LDCs, and they are core to the success of programmes such as Town Centre First, the Rural Regeneration and Development Fund, CLÁR, the National Outdoor Recreation Strategy, and many others. Without these supports, the community groups upon which programmes like these rely either do not form or do not reach the point of grant-readiness. It is important, therefore, that capacity-building is not equated simply with grant-giving, and that the more foundational aspects of capacity-building are recognised and valued. We encourage Government to explore the creation of new funding streams which take a holistic view of capacity building, reflecting the potential of such supports to deepen the impact of the various funding programmes that have been initiated in recent years.



The Donegal Food Response Network, supported by Donegal Local Development Company via the SICAP programme.

¹⁶ Government of Ireland (2022). Values and Principles of Collaboration and Partnership.

ILDN MEMBERS



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ABOUT THE ILDN

Irish Local Development Network CLG (ILDN) is the national representative body for Local Development Companies (LDCs) in Ireland. LDCs operate in all urban, rural and island communities and are overseen by voluntary boards that are constituted to ensure a community-led, socially inclusive focus.

Current programmes include the Social Inclusion & Community Activation Programme (SICAP), LEADER, Rural Social Scheme, Tús, Local Area Employment Services, the HSE Sláintecare Healthy Communities Programme, the Rural Recreation Programme, the Walks Scheme, Back to Work Enterprise Allowance, Social Farming, and various supports for Social Enterprises.

Each of our member LDCs are unique and provides services that reflect the needs of their communities. Beyond the core programmes listed, LDCs also deliver national and European initiatives that enhance the development of their communities through enterprise, training, activation, education, health, and community supports.

ILDN as a representative body liaises with funders and policymakers to ensure the voice of communities and programme delivery specialists are highlighted in national, regional and local community policy and provision.



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