Charter for Rural Ireland
Status of Commitments

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1. Background - the Charter for Rural Ireland

The Charter for Rural Ireland was published in January 2016. The Charter is "a statement of Government commitment to support Rural Ireland's regeneration and to underpin the future sustainable development of Ireland's rural communities."

The Charter's vision recognised the need for strong support for the country's rural communities and set out a number of specific commitments which would establish frameworks and practices to support the rejuvenation of the rural economy and rural society, particularly in the areas of enterprise creation and development, the maintenance and restoration of the rural cultural heritage, support and protection for existing towns and settlements, safe and secure rural communities and an increased quality of life for all rural dwellers. The Charter also stressed the importance of facilitating the full participation of rural communities in decision-making which impacts upon them, at all stages of policy making and implementation.

Commitments in the Charter were made under four headings:

- A National Framework: Rural Development Policy
- A National Conversation: Effective Communications
- A Local Conversation: Local Authorities and Local and Community development Committees (LCDCs)
- The Common Agricultural Policy and Rural Development: The International Dimension

The Government also reiterated its commitment to sectoral policies and strategies already underway which would have significant impact for rural communities, such as Food Wise 2025, the National Broadband Plan and the Action Plan for Jobs.

The purpose of this document is to examine the commitments made under the Charter and review their implementation, particularly in the context of the publication of the Action Plan for Rural Development.
2. Action Plan for Rural Development

The *Programme for a Partnership Government (2016)* established rural development as a key priority for the new Government, setting out a series of commitments for delivery across a range of Departments and State agencies to revitalise rural Ireland.

Following the formation of the new Government, responsibility for rural development policy was transferred from the Department of the Environment to the Department of Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs. Following the appointment of a new Taoiseach in June 2017, a new Department of Rural and Community Development was created in July 2017.

The Department of Rural and Community Development is responsible for overseeing the implementation of *Realising our Rural Potential*, the Government's Action Plan for Rural Development, which was launched in January 2017. The Plan is a whole-of-Government initiative and contains over 270 actions across five related pillars, to be delivered by Government Departments, State agencies and other groups. The Plan sets out to support sustainable communities, support enterprise and employment, maximise our rural and recreation potential, foster culture and creativity, and improve rural connectivity.
3. Current Status of the Charter

The Action Plan for Rural Development is an all-encompassing rural development policy framework, which aims to address the economic, social and cultural development of rural communities across the country.

Action 86 of the Action Plan states that the Department will, in conjunction with relevant partners, "review the recommendations of the CEDRA Report and the Charter for Rural Ireland and identify how best to progress any recommendations that have not yet been implemented."

This report has been produced on foot of this action. Each of the commitments set out in the Charter for Rural Ireland is reviewed below, to include its current status and any further action required by Government.
4. Commitments in the Charter

4.1 A National Framework: Rural Development Policy

The first three commitments in the Charter relate to the development of a Rural Development Policy Framework, to be delivered by the end of 2016. The Charter argued that support for rural development required a multi-faceted approach involving full public consultation and the involvement of Government Departments, State agencies and other relevant stakeholders. The policy framework envisaged by the Charter would create systems to support the economic, social and cultural development of rural Ireland.

**Commitment 1** - A wide-ranging Rural Development Policy Framework will be developed by end 2016 and will feed into the development of the National Planning Framework due to be completed by end 2016.

**Commitment 2** - A National Rural Development Forum will be held in early 2016. This all-inclusive Forum will highlight key issues needing to be addressed in the new policy framework and identify both the opportunities and challenges that lie ahead for rural areas and rural communities.

**Commitment 3** - The Policy Framework will include a mandatory system of assessment to ensure that future Government policies are designed with full and stated consideration of their impact on Rural Ireland. In addition, the Policy Framework will seek to maximise current and future opportunities for sustainable linkages between rural and urban Ireland, for the benefit of both, with a view to ensuring that the role of rural areas is fully recognised. This will be accompanied by a commitment to review current, relevant, national policy frameworks in this context, with a view to their amendment if necessary.

The Action Plan for Rural Development, launched in January 2017, sets out the Government’s strategy for rural development over the period to 2019. The Action Plan sets out more than 270 actions across 5 pillars:

- Supporting Sustainable Communities
- Supporting Enterprise and Employment
- Maximising our Rural Tourism and Recreation Potential
- Fostering Culture and Creativity in Rural Communities
- Improving Rural Infrastructure and Connectivity

The Action Plan is a significant Government intervention in rural development policy, taking a whole-of-Government approach to the economic, social and cultural development of rural
Ireland for the first time. The Action Plan will act as an overarching structure for the co-
ordination and implementation of initiatives right across Government Departments, public
bodies and other relevant stakeholders.

Implementation of the Action Plan is overseen by a Monitoring Committee, chaired by the
Minister for Rural and Community Development, Michael Ring, T.D. The Monitoring Committee
assesses the level of progress being made in relation to implementation of the Action Plan and
will also develop impact indicators which will assess the effects that actions are having on rural
development as the plan is implemented. The Action Plan is also considered to be a living
document and allows for additional actions to be added as new rural development priorities
emerge.

Consultation

During the preparation of the Action Plan, the then Department of Arts, Heritage, Regional,
Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs undertook a comprehensive consultation process with key rural
stakeholders. Rather than undertake a single National Rural Development Forum, as envisaged
in the Charter, a number of meetings were held with various stakeholders, in particular:

A series of meetings was held with key stakeholder groups including farming groups, fishing
groups, Teagasc, Macra na Féirme, Údarás na Gaeltachta, IDA Ireland, Enterprise Ireland,
Chambers Ireland, the Western Development Commission, the Association of Irish Local
Government, Irish Rural Link and Waterways Ireland.

Six structured workshops were held across the country with representatives from local
community groups, Local Government, rural stakeholder groups, and relevant State bodies and
agencies.

An information session was provided to Oireachtas members, who were invited to submit
proposals for consideration for inclusion in the Plan.

The Oireachtas Committee on Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs was invited
to make a submission to the process.

Each Government Department was also invited to provide inputs to the process.

The emphasis in each strand of the consultation process was on the identification of practical
actions that could be taken to support economic and/or social development in rural Ireland. This
process built on the work of the Commission for the Economic Development of Rural Areas
(CEDRA), which carried out extensive consultation in 2013 to identify the key issues which
affect rural Ireland. The actions included in the Action Plan emerged from the consultation
process outlined above, which was both targeted and comprehensive.
**Links with Other Strategies/Policy Frameworks**

As set out in the Charter, supporting the economic and social development of rural areas is the responsibility of a range of Government Departments and agencies and local government. Many Government policies and programmes have a direct and positive impact on rural development and the Action Plan for Rural Development was formulated to complement and supplement a number of strategies at national and local level, including the Rural Development Programme, Harnessing our Ocean Wealth, Food Wise 2025, the National Broadband Plan, the Regional Action Plans for Jobs, the Capital Investment Plan 2016-2021, and the LEADER Programme 2014-2020.

In order to avoid duplication of effort and resources, the Action Plan acknowledged strategies and programmes such as those outlined above, while also providing additional supporting mechanisms which would assist in the goals outlined in these initiatives while also introducing new and innovative policy interventions in these and other sectors.

**National Planning Framework**

The Action Plan was also designed to complement the National Planning Framework (NPF) which was published in February 2018. The National Planning Framework is the Government’s strategy for the place-based development of Ireland as a whole over the period to 2040.

**Rural Regeneration and Development Fund**

As part of Project Ireland 2040, the Government committed to providing an additional €1 billion for a new Rural Regeneration and Development Fund over the period 2019 to 2027. The objective of the Fund is to provide investment to support ambitious, collaborative projects in rural settlements of less than 10,000 people and outlying areas. Initial funding of €315 million is being allocated to the Fund on a phased basis over the period 2019 to 2022. The Fund will be administered by the Department of Rural and Community Development. The first call for proposals under the Fund was launched in July 2018 with a closing date of 27th September 2018.

**Rural-Proofing**

The Action Plan for Rural Development includes a commitment in relation to the development of a new and effective rural proofing model which will ensure that rural development issues are considered in the decision-making processes of all Government Departments, State bodies and agencies.
The Department of Rural and Community Development is establishing a working group to progress this action and it is expected that the group will bring forward recommendations on an effective rural-proofing model. The Department will seek the views of a range of stakeholders in the preparation of the draft model.

**Status of commitments 1, 2 & 3**

The Action Plan for Rural Development now acts as the policy vehicle for all rural development initiatives up to the end of 2019 and was a contributing factor to the National Planning Framework. The Action Plan, and the consultation process which underpinned it, addressed Commitments 1 and 2 in the Charter for Rural Ireland. Commitment 3 will be addressed through Action 44 of the Action Plan for Rural Development which commits to the development of a new and effective rural proofing model.

### 4.2 A National Conversation: Effective Communications

The Charter states that the development of policies, strategies and actions is a slow and deliberate process and that often, while there is a significant level of work being undertaken in different Departments on policies which affect rural Ireland, progress is not widely known. The Charter therefore argues that systems should be put in place to communicate the Government's action in relation to rural development and makes the following commitments.

**Commitment 4** - *Put in place a robust reporting mechanism in early 2016 that will require each Government Department to report on tangible actions and outcomes and challenges as they relate specifically to rural Ireland, on a regular and transparent basis.*

**Commitment 5** - *Develop the www.ruralireland.ie website as a central portal for rural issues in early 2016.*

The *Programme for a Partnership Government (2016)* included a commitment to support a new Cabinet level Minister to provide greater political coordination and prioritisation of the work across Government Departments that impacts on rural Ireland. The appointment in May 2016 of Heather Humphreys, T.D as Minister for Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs gave effect to this commitment. In July 2017, the priority accorded to rural development was further strengthened by the creation of a dedicated Department tasked with overseeing rural and community development under Minister Michael Ring, T.D.
Monitoring Implementation of the Action Plan for Rural Development

The Action Plan for Rural Development provides a single point of reference for the main initiatives across Government which impact on rural Ireland. Each action is assigned to a lead body responsible for delivery of the measure. Progress on the implementation of the actions contained in the Action Plan is overseen by a Monitoring Committee which includes senior representatives of relevant Government Departments and key rural stakeholder interests and is chaired by Minister Ring. Progress reports on the implementation of the Action Plan are published twice-yearly. The first progress report was published in August 2017 and the second Progress Report was published in May 2018.

Status of commitments 4 & 5

No further action is required. The appointment of the Minister for Rural and Community Development, the rollout of the Action Plan for Rural Development and the monitoring structures now in place for the Action Plan meet this recommendation in full.

The ruralireland.ie portal, which was previously administered by Teagasc, was re-launched in June 2017. The website publishes information relating to all areas of the Government's rural development strategy and is kept up to date with relevant material supplied by relevant Government Departments. In addition, the website has been designed to showcase best practice initiatives relating to rural development. It is intended that the website will be incorporated into the Gov.ie portal in due course.

4.3 A Local Conversation: Local Authorities and Local and Community Development Committees

The Charter recognises the progress made in implementing the programme of Local Government reform set out in Putting People First – An Action Programme for Effective Local Government. The establishment of Local Community Development Committees (LCDCs) and their role in developing, coordinating and implementing an integrated approach to local and community development is recognised.

The support provided by the development of a Framework Policy on Local and Community Development which will work in tandem with the processes at national and local level to maximise the impact of local and community additional investment in development initiatives is also vital. In that regard, the Government reiterates its commitment to the collaborative development, delivery and rollout of programmes at local level, which will enhance and revitalise rural communities. These include the LEADER element of the Rural Development Programme 2014-2020 and rural Ireland provided from central Government through the Town and Village Renewal Scheme, the CLÁR Programme, the Outdoor Recreation Infrastructure
Scheme and the Rural Regeneration and Development Fund. The following commitments were made in the context of the foregoing.

**Commitment 6 - Publish guidelines for LCDCs, which will ensure full and active participation of rural dwellers in initiatives to support economic and community development, and monitor the implementation of these guidelines. This will be facilitated through structures such as the Public Participation Networks and initiatives such as the Rural Economic Development Zones, the Local Economic and Community Plans (LECPs), Local Development Strategies and other ongoing consultation actions.**

The then Department of Housing, Planning Community and Local Government issued revised Guidelines for the Operation of Local and Community Development Committees in December 2016. Guidelines on the preparation of Local Economic and Community Plans had been issued in June 2015, followed by A User Guide for Public Participation Networks in May 2016.

These supports, together with the ongoing rollout of the Framework Policy on Local and Community Development, provide a comprehensive structure for effective participation in decision-making by local communities in rural areas. Initiatives such as REDZ and Local Development Strategies are addressed in the guidance.

LCDCs have been established in all 31 local authority areas since Autumn 2015. They were established for the purpose of bringing about a more joined-up approach to local and community development in their respective areas. A review of LCDCs was commenced in October 2017 by the Department of Rural and Community Development. The objective of the review is to develop an understanding of the LCDC landscape nationwide and the challenges facing the structures, identify opportunities for strengthening and enhancing them, and to make recommendations for their ongoing and future development. A report outlining the key findings and conclusions, and setting out recommendations for future development of the structures will be published in 2019.

The Action Plan for Rural Development also includes a number of actions (Actions 37-46) which set out to further empower local communities. These include actions to further develop the Public Participation Networks and to put in place measures to consult PPNs on the development of the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies, which are being prepared by the three Regional Assemblies.

**Status of commitment 6**

The Department of Rural and Community Development will continue to enhance these structures through a targeted programme of development for LCDCs and the actions to empower communities set out in the Action Plan for Rural Development. The Department will complete a review of the LCDCs in 2019.
Commitment 7 - *In the context of the provision of specific support for enterprise in rural areas, ensure that all LCDCs, Local Enterprise Offices, rural Planning Authorities and other stakeholders collaborate effectively to support enterprise in local areas, including Social Enterprise, and review and seek to eliminate such barriers to rural enterprise as currently exist.*

Collaboration and activation among state bodies at regional level has been addressed through the Regional Action Plans for Jobs. Between June 2015 and January 2016, the Department of Jobs, Enterprise, and Innovation published eight Regional Action Plans for Jobs, aimed at raising employment levels in the regions and facilitating them to achieve their economic potential.

The objectives of these Plans is to deliver a co-ordinated approach to improve enterprise development and job creation in each region on the part of the enterprise development agencies (Enterprise Ireland, IDA Ireland, Údarás na Gaeltachta, and the Local Enterprise Offices) and other local stakeholders (e.g. Local Authorities, business leaders, community representatives and other State Bodies). Each plan contains a series of actions with timelines for delivery through improved collaboration between enterprise agencies and other stakeholders supporting enterprise development in the regions.

The Government's new Rural Regeneration and Development Fund also places an emphasis on supporting entrepreneurship and job creation in rural areas. The Fund will provide €1 billion in support over the period 2019-2027 for collaborative, integrated initiatives that will transform rural communities.

Another key element of the strategy for grassroots jobs growth is the development of 6-year Local Economic and Community Plans (see also Recommendation 4). LECPs are developed as part of an integrated local, regional and national planning process. This ensures that each Plan will be consistent with County Development Plans, Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies and Regional Action Plans for Jobs.

As referenced above, under the Local Government Reform Act 2014, the three Regional Assemblies (the Northern & Western, Southern and Eastern & Midlands) are tasked with the preparation of Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies for their regions. The Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies will provide a long-term regional level strategic planning and economic framework in support of the implementation of the National Planning Framework.
Social Enterprise

Under the Action Plan for Rural Development, the Department of Rural and Community Development is working with the Social Enterprise sector with a view to preparing and publishing a National Policy on Social Enterprise before the end of 2018.

**Status of commitment 7**

No further action is required. The Regional Action Plans for Jobs act as the co-ordinating mechanism for local, regional and State bodies in delivering economic growth and jobs to rural and regional areas.

The Rural Regeneration and Development Fund will provide financial support for collaborative projects that support rural rejuvenation, including in the area of entrepreneurship and job creation.

The Department of Rural and Community Development will continue to work with the social enterprise sector to prepare and publish a National Policy on Social Enterprise. This work will be carried forward under the auspices of the Action Plan for Rural Development.

**Commitment 8 - All LCDCs will be required to actively communicate their work on an ongoing basis. This will include engagement with the central rural development portal, thereby ensuring that their work is represented and communicated at both a national and local level.**

**Commitment 9 - Develop a national database of best practice examples of grant aided rural development projects that are available to the interested parties.**

Every LCDC in the country operates a web page devoted to detailing their activities. The Department of Rural and Community Development is, however, committed to examining further ways in which the operations of LCDCs around the country can be more effectively communicated to local communities.

In this regard, the Department will consider how best to communicate the work of LCDCs. This will be carried forward in conjunction with the review of LCDCs to be completed by the Department.

More broadly, the ruralireland.ie website carries a number of examples of best practice rural development projects. In addition, the Progress Reports on the Action Development highlights case studies of rural development initiatives. The Department of Rural and Community Development will continue to work with other Government Departments and State Agencies, LEADER groups, and rural stakeholders to showcase best practice rural development projects.
Status of commitments 8 & 9

The Department of Rural and Community Development will consider how best to communicate the work of LCDCs in conjunction with the review of LCDCs to be completed in 2019.

4.4 The Common Agricultural Policy and Rural Development: The International Dimension

The Charter recognises the importance of the international rural development policy perspective in Ireland. The EU's rural development policy is one of the mechanisms which help rural areas of the EU meet the wide range of challenges and opportunities facing communities. The Charter highlights how the Irish Rural Development Programme 2014-2020 will be a key support in enhancing the competitiveness of the agri-food sector, in achieving more sustainable management of natural and cultural heritage resources and ensuring more balanced development of rural areas including their economies and communities.

Commitment 10 - Fully implement the Rural Development Programme 2014-2020 measures to address environmental, climate change and biodiversity needs at both national and local level, to provide support for the continued viability and competitiveness of the agricultural sector, and to address structural issues such as the age and gender profile of the sector.

The Rural Development Programme is part of the Common Agricultural Policy, a common set of objectives, principles and rules through which the European Union (EU) co-ordinates support for European agriculture. The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine is the Managing Authority for Ireland’s Rural Development Programme which is co-funded by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development and the national Exchequer. EU support for the Rural Development Programme amounts to €2.19 billion over the 7-year Programme lifespan and the total spend comes to some €4 billion. The Rural Development Programme 2014-2020 is a key support in enhancing the competitiveness of the agri-food sector, achieving more sustainable management of natural and cultural heritage resources, and ensuring a more balanced development of rural areas, including their economies and communities.

The Programme is delivered through schemes and measures which aim to deliver on the environmental, economic and social objectives identified under the Programme. The suite of measures within the Programme is extensive and includes:

- The Green Low-Carbon Agri-Environment Scheme (GLAS) which provides support for farmers who address environmental concerns in the area of water quality, biodiversity and climate change.
- The Burren Programme, an agri-environmental measure focussed specifically at the conservation of the unique farming landscape of the Burren in counties Clare and Galway. It aims to promote a particular farming model that couples traditional farming practices with scientific assessment of environmental health at field level. There are currently over 320 farmers in the Burren Programme.

- Other locally-led environmental and climate projects are being funded under the European Innovation Partnership which has a budget of €59m. The initiative includes a specific locally-led project for seeking new solutions to the decline of the Hen Harrier and a similar project to address the issues surrounding the survival of the Freshwater Pearl Mussel.

- The Beef Data and Genomics Programme requires farmers to undertake a range of actions designed to deliver accelerated genetic improvement in the quality of the beef here and as a result associated climate benefits. The programme has a funding allocation of €300 million over the six year term of the RDP.

- The Targeted Agricultural Modernisation Scheme (TAMS) provides support for on-farm investment and has an overall budget of €395 million over the lifetime of the current Rural Development Programme 2014 -2020. The TAMS Scheme ensures that all farmers have access to the most up-to-date technology to bring the highest quality product to market. The Scheme is supporting generational renewal on Irish farms by allowing young farmers to avail of a higher grant rate of 60% (with a standard grant rate of 40% available to all other applicants).

- The Knowledge Transfer (KT) initiative is a significant investment in high quality training and upskilling of farmers so that they are equipped to deal with the range of challenges and opportunities arising in the agri-food sector. The KT Programme launched in summer 2016 and over 19,000 farmer participants have now been approved to participate in some 1200 KT Groups across six farming sectors. Farmers are required to attend Group meetings which allow the farmers to interact with, and learn from, each other. Farmers also have to complete a Farm Improvement Plan, covering a range of issues from farm safety to grassland management.

- The RDP invests in rural communities and rural businesses through the LEADER Programme which is administered under the auspices of the Department of Rural and Community Development. LEADER is administered through 29 Local Action Groups in sub-regional areas throughout the country and will contribute €250m in grant aid to rural areas over the period of the Programme.

**Status of commitment 10**

No further action is required. The Rural Development Programme will continue to be implemented on an on-going basis.
5. Conclusion

The Action Plan for Rural Development now acts as the vehicle for the implementation of the Government's strategy for rural development. The commitments set out in the Charter for Rural Ireland have been implemented or have been subsumed into the Action Plan for Rural Development, where relevant, and will be monitored using the implementation structures established by the Action Plan.

In that regard, a Monitoring Committee to oversee the implementation of the Action Plan for Rural Development was established in March 2017. The Committee is chaired by the Minister for Rural and Community Development, Michael Ring, T.D., and includes senior representatives of relevant Government Departments and key rural stakeholder interests.

The Monitoring Committee provides a 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 Minister also intends to achieve greater co-ordination of the dual functions of rural and community development under his remit to allow rural communities to more effectively participate in the development and implementation of policies and programmes which affect their areas.

The Department of Rural and Community Development will use the structures established by the Action Plan for Rural Development, the Framework Policy on Local and Community Development and the Local Community Development Committees to support rural communities to continue making a valuable contribution to the national economy and to enhance social and cultural life across the country.