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Whither Rural Ireland?

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Summary: Rural Ireland has featured prominently in recent public and political discussions. However, the prevailing narratives have not addressed fundamental questions concerning future policy directions. This paper explores some of the key features of the current policy framework, *Our Rural Future 2021-2025* and the findings from a recently published *Rural Policy Review of Ireland 2026* by the OECD.

Our Rural Future proclaims that it “represents a new milestone in the approach to rural development policy for Ireland.....by adopting a more strategic, ambitious and holistic approach to investing and maximising opportunities for rural areas (p.8)”. It specifically acknowledges the need for people-centred and place-sensitive strategies that take account of the diversity of rural contexts. It also commits to invest in and empower rural communities to design and deliver responses that meet their local needs.

The OECD Review commends the approach elaborated in *Our Rural Future* (ORF). The policies and strategies in ORF are considered to be aligned with core elements of the OECD rural development framework. It asserts that Ireland is among the first Member States to use the OECD Principles of Rural Policy to guide national rural strategy. It also notes the comparatively more favourable demographic structure in rural Ireland, the strength of local national and local labour markets, the relative abundance of fiscal resources and previous success in implementing bottom-up approaches to rural development supported via local development companies. The Review concludes that the evolution of rural development policy in Ireland has been gradual, adaptive and context-sensitive.

However, the Review identifies several obstacles that hinder the achievement of the full potential of ORF:

- Absence of clarity and consistency on what constitutes Rural Ireland which is a significant obstacle to monitoring the overall effectiveness of the policy,
- Insufficient analysis of the diversity of rural areas, and use of a robust territorial classification,
- A perspective on the inter-dependencies between rural and urban areas that is too narrow and understates the complexity of the multi-faceted relationships between different areas,
- Incomplete adoption of an innovative place-based approach that is advocated in the policy,
- Limited resourcing of animation and capacity building as core components of the implementation strategy,

- Risks related to over-dependence on inadequately supported volunteers to deliver many core rural development functions,
- Abandonment of initiative to adopt functional territorial development zones as an implementation framework,
- Weaknesses in the multi-level hierarchy of governance structures due to limited local discretion and autonomy,
- Redefinition and curtailment of role of Local Development Companies as contractors, despite their experience in bottom-up, place-based approaches to development,
- High dependence of households in some rural areas on financial transfers from the State and EU,
- Monitoring approach focused on quantitative output metrics and limited attention to qualitative outcomes,
- A critical disconnect between national oversight and local reality in the monitoring framework,
- Absence of a spatially structured framework for measuring and strengthening rural well-being.

The next version of Our Rural Future 2026-2031 will need to take account of the changing national and international context for rural Ireland, build upon recent achievements and address the fundamental weaknesses that have arisen in the implementation of the policy. At the end of the Review the OECD team advise that “Ireland does not need more programmes: it needs to make the current ones work together”; the next phase of Our Rural Future “offers an opportunity to link these efforts under a coherent, place-based framework led by the DRCDG” (p. 267). An unambiguous Vision statement is needed to guide the policy – the draft prepared by the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht needs to be strengthened along the lines suggested at end of this paper. Ireland has the potential to become an international leader in implementing a place-based approach to rural development, though there are challenges to overcome in the transition towards becoming an exemplar of international best practice. In conclusion *Whither Our Rural Future?*

Table of Contents

SUMMARY:	1
WHITHER RURAL IRELAND?	4
OECD REVIEW: KEY MESSAGES	6
DIVERSITY OF RURAL AREAS	6
RURAL-URBAN RELATIONSHIPS	10
GOVERNANCE	12
ROLE OF AGRICULTURE, FORESTRY AND MARINE.....	13
MONITORING AND REVIEW	13
REFLECTIONS AND WAYS FORWARD.....	15

Whither Rural Ireland?

Over Easter 2026 a wave of anti-government protests were planned by farmers, agricultural contractors, hauliers and others against the impacts of fuel increases arising from the US/Israel war against Iran. The protests turned into blockades that resulted in enormous disruption throughout the country and provided opportunities for unelected individuals to claim they spoke for the people of Ireland. The government responded with a generous but poorly targeted compensation package without any evidence that the opportunity costs had been assessed, and one junior Minister resigned during a confidence vote for the Government. Rural Ireland featured prominently in all of this turmoil. But there are fundamental questions that have not been addressed. What and where is rural Ireland? How does it connect with urban Ireland? How effective is the current policy for the future of rural Ireland and how might it be improved? These and other issues are examined in a recent report by the OECD with the title *Rural Policy Review of Ireland 2026*¹. This paper commences with an overview of innovative aspects of the current policy, *Our Rural Future* (ORF), and of the features that are commended in the OECD Review. It is followed by a consideration of weaknesses and challenges identified by the OECD team and that I agree with. The final section concludes with reflections and suggestions for moving forward with the next version of *Our Rural Future* 2026-2031.

OUR RURAL FUTURE 2021-2025 and the OECD REVIEW 2026

Our Rural Future, Ireland's Rural Development Policy 2021-2025 (ORF) proclaims that it "represents a new milestone in the approach to rural development policy for Ireland.....by adopting a more strategic, ambitious and holistic approach to investing and maximising opportunities for rural areas (p.8)". It specifically acknowledges the need for "people-centred and place-sensitive strategies that take account of the diversity of rural contexts". To deliver on its policy objectives the ORF proclaimed to "adopt a place-based approach to rural development to meet the needs of different areas in a holistic way" (p.9). It would also "invest in and empower rural communities to design and deliver responses that meet their local needs" (p.9). In reality the ORF is an example of a 'light touch soft policy' approach that is strong on discourse but weak on implementation as it lacks substantial steering capacity. The fragmented responsibility across multiple government departments and state agencies attempts to secure a whole-of-government approach to a holistic model of rural development but in practice it places a heavy administrative burden and responsibility for integration and coordination on the lead Department of Rural and Community Development.

The 2026 OECD Review provides a comprehensive assessment of Ireland's Rural Development Policy 2021-2025, known as *Our Rural Future*². The review was prepared by an international team of experts and informed by the OECD's extensive on-going programme of research on rural policies and strategies. It is aligned with the OECD model that is based on

¹ OECD (2026). *Rural Policy Review of Ireland 2026*, ORCD Rural Studies, OECD Publishing, Paris.

² Government of Ireland (2021) *Our Rural Future* Rural Development Policy 2021 – 2025, Government Publications, Dublin.

two key reports: *Principles of Rural Policy* (2019)³ and *Rural Well-being; Geography of Opportunities* (2020)⁴. It is comprehensive in scope, analytically thorough, provides international benchmarks, identifies unique strengths and also highlights weaknesses that need to be addressed if the objectives of rural development policy are to be achieved. It is an important contribution to the on-going preparation of rural policy for the period 2026-2031.

The OECD Review commends the approach elaborated in *Our Rural Future*. The policies and strategies in ORF are considered to be aligned with core elements of the OECD rural development framework. ORF builds upon previous initiatives from the 1990s onwards to firmly de-couple rural development policy from the more traditional approach that tended to prioritise the role of agriculture⁵. The later output from the Commission for the Economic Development of Rural Areas (CEDRA) provided important up-to-date baseline data and insights⁶. ORF promotes a whole-of-government approach with shared responsibility between the lead government Department of Rural and Community Development (later extended to include the Gaeltacht) and other departments.

The establishment in 2017 of the Department of Rural and Community Development (DRCD) was commended by the OECD Review team as a ‘structural milestone’ (p.102) in relation to policy development and implementation. The rural agenda is comprehensive as it extends beyond economic development to encompass other dimensions. The diversity of rural area types is recognised. The Review also notes that Ireland is almost unique among OECD countries in that it does not have widespread rural depopulation and it has an abundance of funding opportunities to support a broad range of interventions. Overall, it concludes that the ORF stands out among national rural strategies for embracing the system-oriented model advocated by the OECD. It asserts that “Ireland is among the first Members to use the OECD Principles of Rural Policy to guide national rural strategy” (p.159). The Review, however, identifies several obstacles that hinder the achievement of the full potential of ORF. Key policy issues identified by the Review are considered in the remainder of this brief overview. The issues covered here are not exhaustive – the review has much to say on rural housing as a structural constraint on rural development, green transition opportunities, social inclusion, health, transport, climate and the potential of wind energy in some areas.

³ OECD (2019), *OECD Principles of Rural Policy*, OECD, Paris, <https://www.oecd.org/en/topics/sub-issues/rural-service-delivery/oecd-principles-on-rural-policy.html>

⁴ OECD (2020), *Rural Well-being: Geography of Opportunities*, OECD Rural Studies, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/d25cef80-en>.

⁵ National Economic and Social Council, (1995) *New Approaches to Rural Development*, Report no. 97, NESC, Dublin; Government of Ireland (1999), *Developing for the Future: A Strategy for Rural Development in Ireland*, Government Publications, Dublin. For an earlier critique see National Economic and Social Council, (1978) *Rural Areas; Change and Development*, Report No. 41. NESC, Dublin

⁶ CEDRA (2014) *Energising Ireland’s Rural Economy*, Government Publications, Dublin.

OECD REVIEW: KEY MESSAGES

Where is rural Ireland and for whom is the policy?

A key question is where is rural Ireland? There is a lack of consistency between the OECD and CSO definitions of rural areas, and there are also inconsistencies in the definition of rural Ireland between government departments with responsibilities for policies and strategies that impact on individuals and communities in rural places. This is a significant obstacle to monitoring the overall effectiveness of ORF since it is unclear which places fall within the scope of the policy. Citing evidence from other countries the Review team conclude that “when countries lack territorial clarity, whether through incomplete or vague rural definitions that vary across policy areas and data sources, the effectiveness of their rural policy implementation is weakened” (p.179). There is an urgent need to agree a policy-relevant definition of rural that can be adopted by all government departments and agencies. It should be a high priority in ORF 2026-2031 if it cannot be negotiated prior to the completion of the next government statement of rural policy.

The use of the word ‘Our’ in the title of ORF suggests that the policy might be about a rural future for everybody living in Ireland. However, the authors may have left it ambiguous to circumvent politically-sensitive debates on what is rural and what is not. In my experience the deliberate use of ‘Our’ is an original and very welcome recognition of the interdependencies between the rural and urban components of Ireland and it may help to overcome outdated dichotomies and perceptions. It is also about inclusion – everyone resident in rural Ireland, regardless of personal circumstances, falls within the scope of the policy. The inclusion of ‘Our’ in the title may also, perhaps, be a succinct statement of what Ireland can offer to visitors and others who may be interested in Ireland’s interpretation of, and commitment, to sustaining an economy, culture, communities and environment that collectively contribute to the almost abstract entity that is promoted as Rural Ireland. Unfortunately, the potential significance of the wording of the title is not clarified in ORF and it does not merit any attention in the OECD review.

Diversity of rural areas

Our Rural Future explicitly recognises that not all rural areas share the same characteristics. While that may not be surprising, the Review notes that in practice the implementation of strategies devised and managed by different government departments often ignore the diversity of rural places. The Review team were impressed that Ireland has a typology of urban and rural areas. It was prepared by the Central Statistics Office (CSO) as a tool for summarising variability in the spatial distributions of economic and social characteristics of life in urban and rural Ireland⁷. The OECD review team highlight the merits of typology-based data (p.35) and observes that a typology approach provides valuable policy insights that are not apparent from analyses at the level of the OECD framework of regions. They recommend that much greater

⁷ CSO (2019), *Urban and Rural Life in Ireland 2019*, CSO, Dublin. An updated version was published by the CSO in April 2025.

use should be made of the typology not only by the Department responsible for ORF but also by other government departments.

However, the CSO typology is not critiqued. It consists of six area-types, three represent different forms of urbanisation and the remaining three refer to areas that range from those ‘with high urban influence’ to ‘highly rural / remote areas’. The rural population includes all the residents of CSO ‘small areas’ with fewer than 1,500 persons. Each ‘small area’ is allocated to one of three rural area types mainly on the basis of the scale of commuting to workplaces in different urban area types. The resultant classification is used to produce a typology map that is included in the ORF (p.25) with very little commentary on its rationale or potential. It does not appear to have been used as a framework for collecting data on the implementation of ORF. A few summary statistics extracted from the CSO report are compiled for each area type. However, in ORF the summaries presented relate almost exclusively to the ‘highly rural/ remote areas’ which contain only 23.5% of the total rural population and 8.8% of the total population in the State. ORF does not provide a comprehensive analysis of the scale and diversity of rural Ireland and its focus on data for only one of the rural area types belies the wider scope of rural policy as suggested by the very first word in its title. This approach contrasts with the extensive use of a specially commissioned rural typology as an input into the preparation on the National Spatial Strategy in the late 1990s.

The usefulness of current typology could be improved by inclusion of a few tables. For example, a table to show the percentage of the population in each area-type for each of the NUTS2 and NUTS 3 regions. It could provide a useful link for interpreting variations within and between regions. A further addition would be to add a metric on household incomes for each area type. It could be used to highlight the extent of variation in incomes within and between area-types. The following metrics merit consideration: (i) median household disposable income for each area type and for the State, and (ii) the lower and upper quartile household income measures for each area-type with data also on the proportion of the population in households with either lower than, or greater than the relevant quartile measures. Such additional metrics would add an important social dimension to the typology. The CSO data provide a better understanding of the challenges faced by households in the different rural areas and they also provide insights on the extent to which some places are dependent on either public sector employment and / or State welfare transfers. A modified version of the heatmap of key indicators (p.61) could be particularly helpful in establishing a baseline for understanding the complexity of the current reality and for monitoring outcomes.

The sensitivity of the area classifications to the selection of indicators, technical matters related to the data, and the application of weightings are not explored. Thus the robustness of the typology as a tool to support the implementation of rural policy interventions needs to be thoroughly examined prior to the next iteration of rural policy. Following agreement on the technical design of a new typology it will need to be applied to the most up-to-date data⁸. The

⁸ The CSO have very recently (April 2025) published *Urban and Rural Life in Ireland 2025*, CSO, Dublin which updates the previous report.

current typology is mostly based on data from 2016 when the overall context for prospective rural development was different from today. A new typology should be used as a framework for a baseline report on the current state of rural Ireland that would include information on recent trends in a wide range of relevant indicators with particular attention to opportunities and constraints associated with different landscapes (e.g., uplands, wetlands) and to risks and obligations in relation to natural environments).

Experience in converting policy and strategies into outcomes

The Review notes that while the core policy framework in Ireland is both conceptually strong and fully aligned with OECD principles on well-being and spatial differentiation, the experience in translating distinctive strengths into an integrated cross-sectoral policy remains uneven; “Ireland’s aggregate success masks rural disparities” (p. 178). *Our Rural Future* contains over 150 policy measures that require actions from the home Department and many other departments (13 in total) and five national agencies along with many regional and local bodies. However, national frameworks for different policy spheres without the granularity needed to reflect local realities can result in tensions between broad policy objectives and place-specific needs and risk exacerbating disparities between places rather than addressing them. Examples are provided in areas such as unevenness in support for micro level rural entrepreneurship (core attributes of the support mechanisms are standardised at national level and are not adaptable to the variety of conditions in different parts of the country). Questions are raised about the depth of economic benefit captured by local rural businesses from the prevalence of group coach and bus tours in the rural tourism sector. The Review notes that poor targeting of interventions risk privileging sectors and business models that are already well supported, while masking gaps in support for more fragile or emergent local enterprises. The Review also notes the emergence of an increasingly burdensome regulatory environment in many spheres of activity which it concludes is fostering a more risk-averse culture. The OECD critique is in reality a description of a ‘spatially-blind’ policy implementation framework as it does not incorporate important local place-specific information that may impact on outcomes. This is not what was intended in ORF.

Place-based rural development

The text of *Our Rural Future* goes beyond ‘spatially-blind’ policies. It seeks to “adopt a place-based approach to rural development to meet the needs of different areas in a holistic way”(p.9). A genuine place-based approach requires fundamental shifts in several attributes of policy design and implementation. These include

- spatially sensitive objectives linked to national strategies instead of reliance on high level national objectives,
- targeting place-based communities instead of individuals and enterprises,
- adoption of functional areas rather than administrative units as the geographical focus,
- promotion of holistic strategic supports instead of reliance on market-based instruments and universal supports,

- adoption of broad multi-dimensional understanding of innovation instead of narrower focus on technology and start-ups,
- transition to integrated design and delivery as alternative to sectoral strategies and silo based management of interventions,
- wider range of implementation tools to include social capital, and social & cultural resources rather than reliance on physical infrastructure, human capital and fiscal subsidies,
- a transition from central government management of design, funding allocation, implementation compliance and financial accountability to multi-level structures that are more inclusive, sensitive to needs identified at different geographical scales and more open to innovation⁹.

The essence of place-based policies has been summarised by Beer et al. (2020) as follows: *“Place-based policies embody an **ethos** and an **approach** to the development of economies and societies that acknowledge how the **context** of each place offers **opportunities for enhancing well-being** through a development model **tailored to the needs of each area**”* (p.5)¹⁰ – emphasis added by present author. The extent to which ORF is being implemented in accordance with the attributes of the place-based approach is considered in the following sections.

Concept of Place

The international literature on the place-based approach to development consistently refers to the importance of a shared sense of place and the adoption of a functional territorial perspective. A sense of place is built upon deep emotional and cultural bonds that can contribute to a wealth of social capital which helps to foster enduring networks for shared interests that can transcend geography. Since the early 1990s a place-based approach was widely adopted in Ireland by Local Development Companies (LDCs) to implement the LEADER programme. Some LDCs were highly innovative and gained international recognition for the approaches they pioneered. The functional territorial perspective takes account of spatial interdependencies in labour markets, use of natural resources, local social capital, and multi-directional mobility patterns that shape the totality of rural-urban relations. Following the CEDRA report in 2014 a more sophisticated approach was devised for the identification of functionally based Rural Economic Development Zones (REDZs).

In practice, however, the concept of place has become equated with administrative boundaries throughout most of the State and the earlier experiments with REDZs were abandoned. Instead, policy interventions are now primarily managed at the level of entire counties which are much larger in many cases than would be considered appropriate for implementation of international best practice. In addition to the issue of geographical scale, the fixation with adherence to

⁹ For a more comprehensive overview see OECD (2025) *Place-Based Policies for the Future*, OECD Regional Development Studies, OECD Publishing, Paris

¹⁰ Beer, A., McKenzie, F., Blazek, J., Sotarauta, M. and Ayres, A. (2020), *Every Place Matters: Towards Effective Place-based Policy*, Regional Studies Association and Taylor and Francis Publishing, Oxon.

administrative boundaries can frustrate efforts to delineate appropriate boundaries for places with established local identities. The OECD Review is critical of the failure to reflect the spatial realities of rural communities. Feedback to this author from experienced CEOs of LDCs is that over the last decade there has been an almost total abandonment of functional areas in national policy and it has been replaced by a reliance on administrative boundaries of Local Authorities.

Rural-Urban Relationships

Rural areas, regardless of how they are defined, do not exist in isolation from other areas, especially urban areas. In reality the multiple linkages between rural and urban areas need to be considered as an expression of a complex network of symbiotic relationships. The OECD review correctly observes that in Ireland and more broadly there is a “tendency to view urban-rural relationships through a narrow lens, often focussed on commuting flows and labour market integration” (p.195) and furthermore the linkages are mostly considered to be uni-directional from rural to urban areas. Such a narrow perspective does not capture the full spectrum of inter-dependencies. The Review identifies examples that include environmental systems (water catchments, food systems biodiversity corridors, waste management systems), economic linkages (supply chains, provision of manufactured goods and services, and fostering of innovation in response to opportunities in urban and other places), renewable energy sources, and social ties linked to migration, participation in higher levels of education and mutually enriching cultural exchanges. There are also significant interdependencies in relation to the distribution and redistribution of household incomes¹¹. Nevertheless, the Review concludes that “there is little evidence of the execution of relevant policies”.....and “There is little visible joined up thinking” (p.193). The next iteration of Our Rural Future will need to adopt a broader perspective and a more pro-active approach to harnessing the potential of the symbiosis between rural and urban areas.

Animation and Capacity Building

Dedicated resources to support animation and capacity building, and also integrated delivery of initiatives, are widely recognised as essential components of strategies to support place-based development at a local scale. Beer et al., (2020) concluded that “it is the *process* of implementation that determines whether a place-based policy will achieve its goals. *Place-based policies require more than just the policy-setting and programme-design capacities: the nature, duration and collaborative approach used to bring them to life are critical*” (p.70 emphasis added by this author). Furthermore, the European-wide Evaluation of the Impact of the LEADER programme on Balanced Territorial Development¹² (2022) concluded that animation was ‘essential for both the effectiveness and efficiency of the local development strategies implemented by Local Action Groups across Europe’. The evaluation team also concluded that “animation activities are a valuable output and not an administrative overhead”

¹¹ Walsh, J. A., (2023), *Income Distribution and Redistribution in Ireland: a Geographical Exploration*. Maynooth University Social Sciences Institute.

¹² European Commission (2022) *European-wide Evaluation of the Impact of the LEADER programme on Balanced Territorial Development* (2014 -2020)

(p.203)¹³. These conclusions are particularly pertinent to considering the impact of the transition from LDCs to Local Economic and Community Development Committees in the implementation of the local dimension of rural policy (see section below on Governance). Ironically, some of the more recent examples of effective local collaborations are the European Innovation Partnerships (EIPs) funded by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine.

Indeed, one of the more striking observations in the OECD review is its critique of Ireland's over-dependence on volunteers to deliver many core rural development functions (p.139-140). While commending the tradition of volunteerism over decades and the enthusiasm and civic minded contributions via many roles of individual volunteers, the review concludes that it "signals deeper systemic issues" (p.139). Attention is drawn to risks associated with volunteer fatigue, 'burnout', disempowerment, and diminution of social capital. In practice, volunteerism has contributed complementary resources from the community to support the professionally trained staff that deliver animation and capacity building for local action groups. In order to harness the full potential of volunteerism the Review includes a suite of recommendations to rebalance volunteer dependence through professionalisation, training and support structures. The Review also states that it is "important to find ways to refresh the pool of volunteers by encouraging new participants" (p. 116). More generally it provides a ten-step path for developing meaningful citizen participation in decision-making processes (p. 117).

More recently in March 2026, the Brussels based European Association for Innovation in Local Development (AEIDL) issued a Discussion Paper on potential risks for Local Action Groups that may arise under proposals for the next multiannual financial framework for the EU¹⁴. While the focus is primarily on the LEADER programme, the core message is about the delivery method adopted by LAGs throughout Europe including LAGs in Ireland. The delivery method is characterised by enhancing participation, improving governance and strengthening social capital. Each of these is an important attribute of the place-based approach. A key question is can these attributes be retained in a redefined role for LAGs as contractors for several unrelated projects? Success will depend very much on the availability of stable, multi-annual funding to support animation and capacity building for integrated projects that extend beyond the traditional remit of LEADER. Such funding should be allocated to LAGs following an independent evaluation of locally prepared strategies that align with the objectives of the Local Community Development Community Development Committees.

Investment in capacity building is currently very restrictive. While a whole-of-government approach is a key feature of ORF, in reality most of the funding lines from different departments do not include any provision for animation and capacity building. The necessary expertise, methods and processes should be applicable to the entire suite of interventions to

¹³ European Commission (2022) *The Impact of LEADER on Balanced Territorial Development*, Luxembourg, Publications Office of the European Union.

¹⁴ Carretero, R. and Pazos-Vidal, Serafin. (2026) *LEADER-CLLD post 2027: redefining the place of the EU in local development*, Brussels, AEIDL.

support the espoused holistic model of rural development instead of the more restrictive approach that currently prevails.

Governance

The international literature emphasises the importance of supportive multi-level governance structures for effective place-based strategies. The comparatively highly centralised system of public administration in Ireland is widely recognised and has been regarded by many over a long period as a barrier to regional and local development. The OECD review notes that public funding for Regional Assemblies and Local Authorities is a much smaller proportion of total state funding than in most countries and that additionally the level of discretion in the use of public funding at the local level is very constrained. The Review states that “In Ireland, the institutional architecture for more bottom-up policy making exists, but local discretion and autonomy remain limited” (p.201). It concludes that the Regional Assembly structures do not have a rural mandate *per se*..... and they are not central actors in delivering or designing rural policy.

Effective local government capacity is recognised as fundamental to the implementation of the ORF. The Review notes that the reform of local government after 2014 introduced new structures but substantive empowerment did not follow. Ireland remained the OECD country with the highest share of sub-national capital expenditure funded by central transfers including EU contributions. The Review notes that these are “mostly restricted funds that can only be used for intended purposes (p.135)” and consequently there is “little possibility of stronger bottom-up development approaches”.

Many of the challenges around co-ordination, resources and rural sensitivity persisted (p.202). The Review notes that ‘the integration of some former community-based structures into county-level (structures) has prompted concerns about capacity to maintain locally responsive delivery and about transparency linked to decision making’. Feedback to this author from experienced leaders of place-based rural development strategies is more critical than the OECD commentary. Key weaknesses in the current model are the redefinition of the role of local development companies and insufficient investment in capacity building. The transfer of responsibility for local economic and community development to Local Economic and Community Development Committees within Local Authorities has transformed the role of LDCs into contractors who engage in competitive bidding to secure resources for implementation of interventions that are designed and managed by others. Performance of local development companies is typically measured against quantitative indicators set by the parent departments without any reference to local context that might be expected in recognition of the diversity of rural areas. The redefinition of the role of LDCs is eroding the partnership principles that prevailed for many years and is being replaced by a climate of distrust between former partners as they may now be in competition for access to funding for specific projects. The contribution of some forms of volunteering is also put at risk. Will individuals with already busy life patterns continue to participate in and advise local partnerships that are being transformed into contractors to deliver programmes as part of a vision and agenda that has been prepared without engagement of the local community?

Role of Agriculture, Forestry and Marine

Agriculture is sometimes described in public narratives as the cornerstone of the rural economy and fundamentally important to the future of Irish society. Such narratives need to be carefully assessed to determine the true relative importance of the sector. The OECD review notes that while agriculture remains a significant economic activity in rural Ireland “it does not necessarily drive local employment” (p.126). However, it remains a multi-functional asset. The Review also confirms that the overall responsibility for the majority of policy measures to support the sustainability of agriculture, forestry and marine sectors is assigned to the Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Marine. Consequently, effective delivery of the ORF ambitions for the potential role of agriculture in rural development is dependent on strong inter-departmental co-ordination and accountability mechanisms to ensure coherence in overall policy implementation.

The Review omits to comment on how the origins of many of the current rural challenges can be traced back to the model that has underpinned agriculture for decades. The dominant, though not exclusive, model was associated with three sets of processes, namely intensification, specialisation and concentration which collectively contributed to a duality of outcomes characterised as modernisation or marginalisation. The likelihood of these outcomes has been known for decades – for example, a report for the National Economic and Social Council in 1978 concluded that the prevailing policies will not necessarily improve the lot of all farmers let alone improve the circumstances of all rural people¹⁵. Of course, the CAP framework has been adapted over time to cope with new challenges. However, the transition to new ways of supporting agriculture has become associated with a new form of dependency whereby the household incomes of many rural residents are significantly dependent on transfers from the State and the EU¹⁶. This outcome merits more detailed analysis within a geographical framework that reflects the variation in household composition between rural and urban area types.

Monitoring and Review

Monitoring and review are key components of the implementation strategy for ORF. The Review notes that considerable amounts of data are collated at an aggregate level, twice-yearly progress reports are prepared and oversight is provided by an inter-departmental committee. There is however scope for much improvement in order to enhance the added value of these functions. The Review states that “the monitoring framework for ORF reveals a critical disconnect between national oversight and local reality (p. 18). The performance metrics are part of a top-down system designed to track administrative progress that tends to be mostly quantitative and focused on outputs rather than on outcomes. There is very limited capture of

¹⁵ Commins, P., Cox, P. G. and Curry, J. (1978) *Rural Areas: Change and Development*, NESC Report No. 41. Dublin, NESC.

¹⁶ Walsh, J. A. (2023) *Income distribution and Redistribution in Ireland: A Geographical Exploration*, MUSSI, Maynooth University; CSO (2025) *Geographical Profiles of Income in Ireland*, Dublin, CSO; Dillon, E., Donnellan, T., Moran, B. and Lennon, J. (2025) *Teagasc National Farm Survey 2024*, Teagasc.

qualitative data on the effectiveness of processes used for specific projects and on how added value is achieved through integration. Additionally, there is limited monitoring of tangible benefits from investment in local engagement and capacity building. The OECD review urges careful reflection on the relationship between action delivery and rural quality of life outcomes (p. 212). It cautions that even if all the measures in *Our Rural Future* are technically implemented it will not automatically mean that the quality of life in rural areas will have improved.

As noted earlier, the effectiveness of monitoring is hampered by the absence of agreed definitions of what constitutes rural Ireland and by a framework to depict the dominant patterns of spatial differentiation. These are not trivial tasks which is recognised by the OECD in their recommendations that the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht should establish a research function to support on-going monitoring of performance and also to provide inputs to other departments. The capacity for data analysis and visualisation will also need to be accompanied by expertise in understanding the dynamics of rural development at geographical scales extending from the local to the international. The Review observes that the scale of the challenges in relation to monitoring and evaluation preclude any attempt to impose a sweeping transformation, instead the way forward should be one of incremental and deliberate actions. This approach will need to be guided by both top-down and bottom-up proposals that explicitly address the contextual and structural conditions evidenced via a robust typology of rural area types.

The final chapter of the OECD review is forward looking and in particular it advocates placing well-being at the centre of rural policy. In 2020 the OECD published a framework for measuring rural well-being which goes beyond economic growth to include factors such as health, education, digital access, environment, civic engagement and housing. The Well-being Framework for Ireland¹⁷ is an important initiative in developing a dashboard of data on understanding life in Ireland. However, the output is restricted to the national level for the entire rural and urban populations. The next step should be to provide some spatially disaggregated indicators within the framework of a rural-urban typology in order to devise an overall perspective on the geography of well-being throughout Ireland.

The final chapter also advocates for the inclusion of foresight analysis as an addition to the policy development toolbox. A Foresight Analysis for Rural Ireland 2025 was completed in 2005 by a team from NUI Maynooth, UCD and Teagasc¹⁸. It was a once-off exercise driven by individual researchers and others not directly involved in high level policy making. The outputs were never systematically integrated into rural or regional planning frameworks. An important lesson from this well-intentioned initiative is that the individuals responsible for drafting and advising government on high level policy need to be active participants in the Foresight process. The process requires a combination of ‘top-down’ and ‘bottom-up’

¹⁷ Government of Ireland (2023), *A Well-being Framework for Ireland: Understanding Life in Ireland*, Government Publications, Dublin.

¹⁸ NUI Maynooth, UCD and Teagasc (2005) *Rural Ireland 2025: Foresight Perspectives*. The present author was co-chairman of the Foresight team.

evidence-based inputs, openness to alternative scenarios, and effective leadership to reach recommendations that are likely to achieve a broad base of support.

REFLECTIONS and WAYS FORWARD

The OECD *Rural Policy Review of Ireland 2026* is a timely report that draws upon the vast international experience of the OECD Rural Studies programme which is also supplemented by internationally renowned rural development academic experts. The report provides an important up-to-date baseline assessment of the current policy and more importantly of the progress in implementation. The current policy document is appropriately complimented for its whole-of-government, holistic, people-centred approach that explicitly acknowledges that not all rural areas are the same and that one-size-fits-all type solutions are incapable of adequately addressing the scale and scope of the challenges. The OECD also note the comparatively more favourable demographic structure in rural Ireland, the strength of local national and local labour markets, the relative abundance of fiscal resources, and previous success in implementing bottom-up approaches to rural development supported via local development companies. The Review summarises the evolution of rural development policy in Ireland as gradual, adaptive and context-sensitive. It has moved beyond a narrow sectoral focus on agriculture and embedded rural development across wider domains of government action. ORF is regarded as a notable and coherent step forward (p.149). It might be more apt to describe the evolution of Ireland's rural policy as the outcome of a slow learning process among political leaders, senior public servants and key stakeholders.

The Report has, however, identified many challenges that have hampered implementation of *Our Rural Future*. There are some fundamental operational deficiencies such as the absence of an agreed and universally applied policy-relevant definition of rural areas, and the absence of an up-to-date and robust rural typology to support customised interventions for different area types. The perspective on urban-rural relations in ORF is criticised as too narrow. The Review notes the almost exclusive reliance on quantitative performance metrics that monitor outputs but not outcomes and that there should be more emphasis on qualitative indicators of rural well-being. The well-known attributes of centralised decision making and financial control in the Irish administrative system are recognised as barriers to spatially differentiated and effective implementation of national policies. Concerns expressed or reported to the reviewers on the impacts of local government reform are mentioned though not explored in much depth. That is possibly a significant weakness in the report. It does not question why a review of the effectiveness of the new local government structures has not been undertaken and neither does it explore the future role of local development companies, especially how their local knowledge and accumulated expertise might be most effectively harnessed in the future. The issues raised by the OECD team and at times amplified here should be addressed before the next version of *Our Rural Future* for 2026-2031 is finalised.

Our Rural Future is guided by a vision that claimed to set out an ambitiously new strategic approach in support of a new imaginary of rural Ireland. Before concluding this overview it may be appropriate to compare and contrast the vision in ORF with a draft vision statement

included in the final public consultation document issued in November 2025 by the Department for Community and Rural Development and the Gaeltacht.¹⁹

Vision in <i>Our Rural Future 2021-2025</i>	Draft Vision statement in Final <i>Public Consultation Document</i> on direction and ambition for <i>Our Rural Future 2026-2031</i>
“Our Vision is for a thriving rural Ireland which is integral to our national economic, social, cultural and environmental wellbeing and development, which is built on the interdependence of urban and rural areas, and which recognises the centrality of people, the importance of vibrant and lived-in rural places, and the potential to create quality jobs and sustain our shared environment.”	“Our Vision is for a thriving and inclusive rural Ireland. This is a place where people can live, learn and work in connected, sustainable and vibrant places, supported by strong local economies and resilient communities. It’s a vision rooted in a deep respect for, and engagement with, our language, culture and heritage, and where well-being is at the heart of rural life.”

The proposed draft statement is a significant revision of the statement in the original version of *Our Rural Future*. The references in the draft statement to an ‘inclusive rural Ireland’, ‘strong local economies and resilient communities’ and ‘well-being at the heart of rural life’ are to be welcomed. There is a completely new sentence on ‘respect for, and engagement with, our language, culture and heritage.....’ This particular wording does not adequately reflect the reality of a multi-lingual and multi-cultural society in contemporary Ireland, including many rural areas.

There are some notable omissions without explanation in the draft statement of phrases that were in the original version: e.g., ‘centrality of people’, ‘interdependence of urban and rural areas’, and rural Ireland being ‘integral’ to the ‘national’ economic, social, cultural and environmental wellbeing and development’. These omissions and their replacements suggest a move towards an exceptionalist perspective for rural Ireland and its communities.

The changes in language and content are not trivial. In practice every word in a Vision statement is carefully considered and significant amendments to previous texts are not made lightly. It might seem that the proposed changes are constrained by keeping to a word count limit of approximately 60 words. That does not represent a strategic attempt to refocus the overall strategy. A somewhat expanded and more nuanced vision statement, such as the following, may be more appropriate:

Our Vision is for a thriving and inclusive rural Ireland that will provide a distinctive and sustainable contribution to the national economic, social, cultural and environmental development in which well-being will be at the heart of rural life. It will consist of vibrant,

¹⁹ Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht (2025), *Our Rural Future 2026 -2031 Public Consultation Document Final Written Consultation*.

connected and interdependent rural and urban places where people can live, learn and work, in resilient communities in lived-in rural places supported by strong local economies with the potential to provide quality employment opportunities. The Ireland envisioned in Our Rural Future will consist of respectful multi-cultural and multi-lingual places and communities where engagement with, and further development, of the national language, culture and heritage will be promoted.

The final consultation paper includes references to ‘balanced regional development’ and ‘balanced regional growth’. This terminology has been used for many decades but it is almost meaningless. It was considered in depth in the course of the preparation of the National Spatial Strategy over 20 years ago, again in the preparation of National Planning Framework and also by CEDRA. In each case it was found to be difficult to define and measure and measure. It has become an unhelpful mantra in policy articulation. A more appropriate objective might be to promote equality of opportunity to access public and private services and to gain entry to the labour market in a context where the potential of all resources including natural, human, cultural and social capital are harnessed to the maximum extent.

The adoption of the place-based paradigm was innovative and held out the prospect for a reinvigorated, more dynamic and more inclusive Ireland that builds upon the interdependencies between rural and urban areas and lifestyles. The OECD *Rural Policy Review of Ireland 2026* raises some fundamental issues that will need to be addressed if the full benefits of the place-based approach are to be achieved. Failure to do so may result in Ireland missing out on an opportunity to become an international leader in place-based rural development – the experience to date is that much more needs to be done before Ireland can achieve recognition as an exemplar of best practice. The Review concludes cogently that while the breadth of ORF demonstrates genuine whole-of-government ambition, its impact will depend on deepening sub-national capacity, strengthening spatial intelligence and turning coordination into measurable outcomes (p.158). This paper commenced with the question Whither Rural Ireland? It concludes with a variation, Whither *Our Rural Future*?