

MOVING FORWARD. TOGETHER.
AG BOGADH AR AGHAIDH. LE CHÉILE.

A MANIFESTO FOR RURAL IRELAND



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A Manifesto for Rural Ireland

Fianna Fáil's plan for rural Ireland:

- 1. A new Rural Communities Initiative to invigorate community development.**
- 2. 1,500 more GPs and full national coverage for GP on Call.**
- 3. A new €13m Small Schools Initiative to support our schools with four teachers or less.**
- 4. Supports for remote working and a focus on balanced regional development so that our rural communities have access to high-quality, well-paid jobs.**
- 5. Protect the rural right to build.**
- 6. A focused policing plan to tackle rural crime.**



Rural Ireland is thriving. There are more people living and working in rural Ireland than at any other time during the history of the State. Investment is at an all-time high.

Fianna Fáil's plan will ensure that rural Ireland remains a great place in which to live, work and raise a family.

Since 2020, we have changed the narrative around rural Ireland. What were once described as areas of need and decline, are now being described as vibrant communities of opportunity, innovation and growth. This has been achieved through historic levels of investment and initiatives including the targeting of FDI for job creation, the establishment of Remote Working Hubs and the development of improved transport infrastructure.

The Covid-19 pandemic presented us with a huge opportunity to support the return of young people to our rural communities. We seized the moment, and as a result many people are back living where they want to live, working in jobs they want to work in. Fianna Fáil is determined to build further on the initiatives that are benefitting rural Ireland.

Fianna Fáil will re-establish the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs to drive forward and coordinate a new era of support for community development.

Fianna Fáil's specific plan to support the Gaeltacht and the Islands will be outlined in a separate policy document.

Investing in rural Ireland

Rural communities are not all the same. They have individual challenges, and a one size fits all approach does not work. Our approach to rural development has been to have a grass roots, ground up approach through our funding programmes. We are committed to continuing to increase funding to these vital funding streams.

If returned to government, Fianna Fáil will:

- Establish a Rural Communities Initiative to bring together all state agencies to implement community development and town-centre rejuvenation. This work will be co-ordinated by a dedicated Development Office. The work will be funded by an expanded Rural Regeneration and Development Fund.
- Ensure that extra funding is allocated to the Local Improvement Schemes (LIS), CLÁR and the Town and Village Renewal schemes.
- Work at EU level to increase LEADER funding under the next CAP.
- Introduce an Islands Infrastructure Fund to support those living on our islands.
- Ensure that no town is excluded from access to national infrastructure funding.
- Review the designation of key towns with a view to ensuring that all towns with a population over 10,000 are included.

Working in rural Ireland

Almost 1/3rd of the entire workforce is now working remotely. This has been a game changer for rural communities. It means less people having to choose between a good career and living in their own local community.

The rollout of the National Broadband Plan, together with the Remote Working Hubs, has made this possible.

Furthermore our commitment to balanced regional development has resulted in highly skilled, well-paid jobs across the country. In the last two weeks alone, we have seen Abbott health technology company open a manufacturing facility, which will employ 800 people in Kilkenny. A further 250 jobs were announced in Co. Leitrim with Freudenberg Medical. Most new jobs being created in IDA supported companies are now in the regions outside Dublin.

Local economies in rural areas are reaping the benefits of the increase in the working population. More people are spending in their local shops, cafés and restaurants.

If returned to government, Fianna Fáil will:

- Support people working remotely from home through the Connected Hub Voucher Scheme.
- Ensure that a minimum of 60% of IDA Foreign Direct Investment goes to regional locations.
- Prioritise locating new State agencies and enterprises in cities and towns outside of Dublin.
- Support and fund the Social Enterprise sector to create more than 50,000 jobs in the regions over ten years.

Rural Housing

Fianna Fáil is committed to supporting people so that they can live in the areas they come from – whether this is through supports to bring vacant and derelict properties back into use, building new homes or supporting people to build their own homes on family land.

If returned to government, Fianna Fáil will:

- Uphold the rural right to build where there is a clear social or economic need.
- Increase the Derelict Refurbishment Grant by €10,000.
- Increase the Vacancy Refurbishment Grant by €10,000.
- Extend the Help to Buy Scheme to 2030 and extend eligibility to second hand homes.
- Support Local Authorities to make serviced sites for sale available through the Ready to Build Scheme.
- Support group water schemes and private well grants.
- Implement the special rural water investment scheme.
- Allocate €3bn to Uisce Eireann to build adequate infrastructure to support home building.
- Establish a new Towns Investment Fund of €2bn to build and update infrastructure to support the communities living in our towns.



Supporting communities to thrive

The Community and Voluntary Sector contributes hugely to the enhancement of local community structures, strengthening their resilience and building social cohesion.

If returned to government, Fianna Fáil will:

- Introduce tax breaks for donations to community development companies.
- Extend the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP) to new communities.
- Increase the number of places on the Rural Social Scheme.
- Open the Community Services Programme for applications every year.
- Expand the Community Centres Investment Fund to build and refurbish community centres.

Addressing disadvantage

Fianna Fáil acknowledges that some communities have not felt the same improvements as others. We want to prioritise these areas through targeted investment.

If returned to government, Fianna Fáil will:

- Require the Local Community Development Committees to recruit Social Development Managers to prioritise very disadvantaged areas.
- Develop a new Rural Deprivation Fund (CLÁR +).
- Remove the necessity for co-funding for state funded projects in areas of high socio-economic disadvantage.
- Invest in the rollout of the Local Community Safety Partnerships and social and economic regeneration programmes to support communities experiencing high levels of crime, unemployment and social exclusion.

Rural crime

There is no 'one size fits all' approach to policing. Fianna Fáil recognises the distinct crime issues that face rural communities.

The success of Garda Operation Rototiller, set up following the brutal attack of a farmer in Clonmel and a spate of burglaries in the area, is evidence of what can be achieved with targeted policing. Fianna Fáil is committed to ensuring our policing response meets the needs of the areas it serves.

Fianna Fáil's promise to increase the number of Gardaí visible on our streets will help isolated communities feel safer. This will be augmented with increased funding for community CCTV and community watch schemes.

If returned to government, Fianna Fáil will:

- Establish a dedicated Rural Crime Unit.
- Tackle rural crime by expanding nationwide the successful Garda Operation Rototiller, that targeted criminal gangs operating in Tipperary.
- Rollout out Community Safety Partnerships nationwide.
- Enhance funding for community CCTV.
- Continue to fund community watch schemes.



Education opportunities in rural Ireland

Fianna Fáil has an unmatched record of commitment to education. We firmly believe in equality of opportunity, and this includes ensuring that those living in rural Ireland have equal access to excellence in education.

Small schools are the lifeblood of their community, serving not only as educational centres but also vital community infrastructure. In government, Fianna Fáil has protected these schools by providing them with more staff, providing greater support to teaching principals and increasing their funding. We want to support them further through a new Small Schools Initiative.

At third level, the new Technological Universities are important catalysts of regional development. They allow students to study closer to home and are uniquely placed to link with local and regional enterprises, particularly Small and Medium Enterprises, to support them to turn innovation opportunities into reality. The 'Learning in the Hubs' initiative that allows third level students to complete college courses in their local remote working hub. This breathes new life into towns and villages and change the way education is delivered for the better, all the while supporting more people to access education opportunities.

If returned to government, Fianna Fáil will:

- Set up a new Small Schools Initiative providing €13 million to small schools for additional administrative and leadership supports.
- Reduce the pupil-teacher ratio to 19:1.
- Expand the School Transport Service to include 100,000 students by 2030.
- Work with our third level institutions to facilitate remote learning where possible.

Childcare

Fianna Fáil recognises that there are parts of the country where there is undersupply of childcare places. This can be particularly acute in parts of rural Ireland. We have made significant commitments in relation to childcare, cutting the cost to €200/month.

If returned to government, Fianna Fáil will:

- Undertake a national audit to identify blackspots where there are insufficient childcare places for the local population.
- Provide capital investment to build or purchase state-owned childcare facilities, which can then be leased to community childcare providers in these blackspots.
- Make it easier for childminders to register with Tusla so that parents who chose this form of childcare can access the National Childcare Scheme.



Health care in rural Ireland

Fianna Fáil is committed to ensuring those living in rural Ireland have access to healthcare close to home.

If returned to government, Fianna Fáil will:

- Increase the number of GPs by 1,500.
- Ensure full national coverage for GP on Call.
- Invest in our ambulance service to further improve response times and allow them to treat more patients in their own homes.
- Open another 100 enhanced primary care centres.
- Expand our community care teams.
- Build a new surgical hub for the North-West and open the six hubs that are being completed.
- Introduce Virtual Urgent Care, based on the model successfully introduced in Australia.
- Continue to invest in local cancer support groups.
- Achieve full national coverage of hospice and community services.



Rural transport

Fianna Fáil is committed to improving and increasing transport services, and providing for major infrastructure to support connectivity for those living in rural communities.

If returned to government, Fianna Fáil will:

- Progress key public infrastructure projects.
- Invest in new carriages to increase train capacity.
- Expand local link services.
- Increase funding for both essential new road construction and road maintenance.
- Create a new Pothole Action Fund for Local Authorities and utilise advanced imaging technology to expedite repairs.
- Fund a matching road maintenance catch up programme for local authorities with poor pavement surface conditions.
- Reallocate funding for smaller local active travel projects to Local Authorities.
- Increase investment in greenways, blueways and develop urban trailways.
- Expand the Support the Safe Routes to School programme.





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