



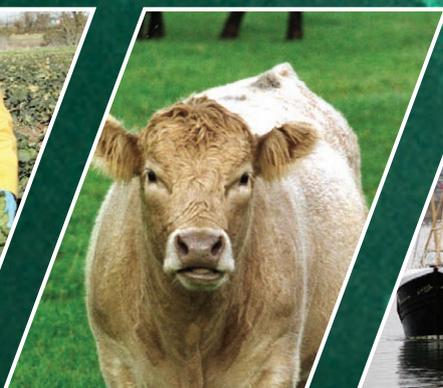
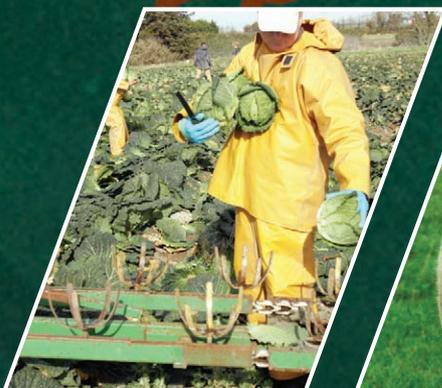
Sinn Féin

STANDING UP

FOR RURAL IRELAND

Sinn Féin Discussion Document

September 2013



FOREWORD BY SINN FÉIN PRESIDENT GERRY ADAMS TD

Rural Ireland and rural communities are the heart of Ireland. Most Irish citizens can trace their roots back to rural Ireland. While my family has lived in Belfast for generations, my roots are in Counties Down, Leitrim and Donegal. Like many others, my family moved to the city in search of employment and better opportunities.

Today the island of Ireland has a population of just over six and a half million.

Cé go bhfuil an saol tar éis dul i bhfeabhas do chuid mhór den phobal le blianta beaga anuas, is fíor go mbíonn tionchar ag an áit chónaithe ar shaol an duine agus saol an chlainne.

Life has improved for many citizens in recent years but the fact remains that where you live greatly impacts on your life and that of your family.

If you drew a line along the course of the River Bann or the River Shannon, east of that line you will find the centres of political power, greater employment and educational opportunities and increasing population levels. Over 40% of people now live in urban centres. More than one-third of the population in the 26 Counties live in or close to Dublin.

Along with its many advantages, the urbanisation of Ireland, particularly along the eastern coast, has brought its difficulties, especially in relation to the quality of people's lives.

The economic collapse and the election of Fine Gael and Labour in the South have seen serious erosion in the quality of life of rural communities. The austerity policies of the Government have pushed many low- and middle-income households into poverty and most others barely getting by.

The last two years have seen a succession of savage cuts to wages and incomes and the introduction of new additional stealth taxes, like the septic tank charges, Household Charge and family home tax (the Property Tax); water charges; increased VAT; higher Motor Tax; as well as cuts to child benefit; cuts to home help hours, to the Carer's Respite Care Grant and much more. The closure of Garda stations, local post offices, and transport systems alongside the shutting down of rural schools is tearing the heart out of rural areas.

Cuts in the provision of health services and hospitals or family resource centres, allied to the lack of childcare, have accelerated this decline.

Agriculture used to be the main Irish industry. Nowadays, while it is less important, many people are still directly involved in farming.

However, the austerity policies of the Government, the absence of jobs, forced emigration and the practical effects of the declining numbers of people making their living from the land has seen a fall in the populations of rural town lands, villages and towns.



Rural Ireland is under attack. It is time for a fight back. But such a campaign must have its roots firmly in rural Ireland. Sinn Féin has been listening to people in rural Ireland, including those most affected by the Government's policies which are stripping local communities of essential services.

Businesses, shops and pubs in rural towns and villages are closing. Small indigenous businesses, including small farmers – with no real support from the Government or credit from the banks – are going under.

Our fishing communities are devastated. It has been estimated that €120 billion of fish (at current value) was taken from Irish waters between 1973 and 2003. Only a small proportion of this was taken by the Irish fleet. This is not only a massive loss to Irish fishing communities but it also represents a huge loss for the economy of the island.

Economic collapse and austerity are forcing a whole generation of young people to leave. This GAA generation are playing our Gaelic games in Brisbane, Birmingham and Baltimore instead of their own parish. As the social fabric of rural Ireland is undermined there is a growth in isolation, loneliness and suicide.

All of this and the absence of equality of access to public services threaten the quality of life of people living in rural Ireland.

Sinn Féin's focus was to prepare a comprehensive discussion document out of a process of engagement and consultation with rural communities. Martin Ferris TD and Senator Trevor Ó Clochartaigh were tasked with the responsibility of travelling the length and breadth of the state to get the views, opinions, suggestions and ideas of rural communities. Other Sinn Féin party leaders, including myself, joined them when possible.

Through scores of meetings the Sinn Féin campaign travelled from Donegal to west Cork, from Rosspport to Wexford and Louth. We also met communities along the Border corridor and sought the views of citizens across the North.

Our first stop was Mayo. We thought it was an appropriate place to launch the campaign. It is the Taoiseach's county. **It is his policies – as well as those of the last Fianna Fáil Government – which are contributing to the crisis in rural Ireland.** But Mayo is also Michael Davitt's county. He founded the Land League in Castlebar in 1879. The Land League led the fight back against the exploitation of rural Ireland and the eviction of farmers and their families.

Davitt's slogan was **"The land of Ireland for the people of Ireland."** He believed that if people stand together there is nothing they cannot accomplish. That lesson is as relevant and necessary today as it was 130 years ago.

There is a pressing need to formulate an all-Ireland strategy on farming and the wider issue of rural development. This strategy needs to be built up and developed by the communities directly affected by rural under-development.

Government policy needs to be rural-proofed – decisions should be examined before being put into effect, to ensure that they do not adversely impact on rural areas and that they actually are to the advantage of rural Ireland. This means bringing together in a structured way all those departments and bodies which affect rural areas and trying to ensure that they work together to promote rural development.

The aim must be to keep the maximum number of people on the land and to preserve the social fabric of rural life. This can be achieved by creating the conditions in which rural communities can rebuild their local economies and everyone has a dignified standard of living, access to proper education, housing and health resources.

This requires the maintenance of roads and other services. Fair and strategic planning regulations are crucial for the future sustainability of rural communities, which means genuine consultation between local councils, rural communities, farmers and environmental campaigners to develop new legislation for rural development.

The solution requires the political will at government level to ensure that our natural resources are developed to our advantage. This means Irish national interests being asserted.

Sinn Féin believes that sustainable rural economies, that can offer employment to young people, can be built.

We want to ensure that emigration should not be the future for your children.

There needs to be:

- ★ A fair deal for rural households
- ★ Job opportunities in rural Ireland
- ★ Protection for rural schools
- ★ Equal access to health services
- ★ Tacaíocht do cheantair Ghaeltachta – Support for Gaeltacht areas
- ★ Management of natural resources in public interests

In the last Dáil, Sinn Féin produced three major Oireachtas reports focusing on rural Ireland:-

- ★ ***Awakening the West*** – Overcoming Social and Economic Inequality;
- ★ A report on ***The Future of Farming and Fishing in the West***;
- ★ A report on creating ***Greater Employment in the Agri-food Sector***.

In the North, we have taken responsibility for the Agriculture and Rural Development Ministry on two occasions. ***That is the measure of our commitment to rural Ireland.***

So while it is a time of adversity it is also a time of opportunity. A lesser people confronted by centuries of colonisation, of hardship and occupation, of division and emigration, would have collapsed under the weight of this burden.

The Irish people are made of sterner stuff. We have risen above all of that. And we will not allow this current crisis to break us. We will not allow the Golden Circle of bankers and bondholders, of developers and corrupt politicians, to break us.

We are no mean people. Is daoine uaisle iad na hÉireannaigh. There is a genius in the Irish people. And standing together – like Michael Davitt and the Land League before us – we will prevail.

Is mise,



Gerry Adams TD

INTRODUCTION

Sinn Féin launched our party's *Defending Rural Ireland* campaign in early March 2012 in Castlebar, County Mayo.

This discussion document is the culmination of a year-long series of grassroots community engagements and consultation across rural Ireland led by the Sinn Féin leadership as part of this campaign.

Through our direct community engagements throughout the length and breadth of Ireland, Sinn Féin have both met and listened to local people, families, businesses and service providers. They have all voiced their unique experience of how the Government policy of austerity is impacting on their daily lives and livelihoods and how the burden of cuts is threatening the future sustainability of rural Ireland and the rural way of life.

The objective of the discussion document is to both identify and catalogue this local experience and lead the debate as to what change is required to reverse this cycle of decline. The report also sets out clear and constructive alternative approaches of how we can support and sustain rural Ireland by securing a fairer deal for rural households, create and retain jobs in rural communities, protect rural schools and services, ensure equal access to health services and maximise support for our Gaeltacht areas.

In the Six Counties, Sinn Féin are fortunate to hold the Assembly Department with responsibility for Agriculture and Rural Development. Our Minister, Michelle O'Neill MLA, is delivering a practical strategy which promotes the sustainable economic growth and the development of rural areas. This critical work of both acting as Government champion for rural communities and defending rural interests will continue and remain a key priority for our party in the Assembly and Executive at Stormont.

In the 26 Counties, the Sinn Féin *Defending Rural Ireland* campaign will continue to drive home to the Fine Gael/Labour Government the downward spiral and affect their policies of austerity and cuts are having. This campaign will continue to be led by our Rural Affairs and Agriculture spokespersons, Martin Ferris TD and Senator Trevor Ó Clochartaigh. It is about creating sustainable jobs, restoring services and standing together in our demand for investment in the social fabric and economic growth of rural Ireland.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

OVERVIEW

As this document shows, the impact of austerity can be starkly seen in an unemployment rate of more than 14% and the large number of young people who are emigrating – more than 75,000 in the last year alone. It also highlights the fact that both unemployment and emigration are much higher in certain rural parts of the country, with Donegal being particularly impacted.

The over-reliance on the property boom and construction jobs has left many rural areas decimated.

Sinn Féin proposes that future growth be based on local indigenous sectors, including agriculture and food processing but also local high-tech enterprises. The state has a key role in promoting growth and the negative impact of the economics of austerity must be replaced by strategic public investment to stimulate growth and jobs creation.

Sinn Féin is opposed to the sale of state assets and proposes a new 'National Development Plan' that will address infrastructural deficits as part of a publicly-led stimulus package. We will also push for ***a cross-Border co-ordinated strategy to tackle infrastructural deficits*** in the West and North-West.

We propose to establish a new Border West & South (BWS) region embracing Counties Derry, Donegal, Tyrone, Fermanagh, Cavan, Leitrim, Sligo, Mayo, Roscommon, Galway, Clare, Limerick and Kerry.

Austerity is impacting on the health service and that is contributing to a dramatic increase in the level of suicide. That issue was highlighted by many of the people we have met and who stressed the need for a co-ordinated, proactive strategy to tackle this issue.

Sinn Féin supports the right to equal access to public provisions. Rural Ireland has seen a concerted withdrawal of these services. That ranges from the closure of over 100 Garda stations to the closure and running down of bus routes, to the downgrading of post offices, and the lack of funding for rural libraries. Education has also been negatively impacted with the reduction in teacher numbers and the threats to smaller rural schools, including within the Gaeltacht. We oppose the assessment of farm assets in the granting of third-level grants.



According to the 2012 Census, there are over 289,000 empty houses in the state – over 14% of the housing stock (59,000 of those are holiday homes). That contrasts with increasing local authority housing lists and the huge numbers of people who are finding it difficult to meet mortgage and rental costs. The vacant housing stock needs to be used to tackle those issues.

The key element in tackling the impact of austerity is to return to economic growth. At present, 98% of enterprises are in the indigenous SME sector and this accounts for 78% of employment. Yet this sector only adds 50% gross value. In 2011, Enterprise Ireland-supported SMEs contributed €15.2billion to the total exports of €92billion. It is clear that the indigenous sector as the largest employer could contribute more in terms of economic benefits to our people.

We need targeted policies of investment and support that will optimise the potential of local indigenous enterprise and lessen our dependence on overseas investment. In terms of the rural economy we need to redress the historical tendency of the Irish state to focus economic growth on the main urban centres. That is reflected in the huge disparity of state-promoted job creation.

In order to stimulate the economy, Sinn Féin proposes a €13billion additional investment package in job creation and economic growth over four years. We would fund this with €5.7billion from the National Pension Reserve Fund; €1.7billion in funding from the European Investment Bank; a €3billion incentivised investment from the private pension sector; and by maintaining €2.6billion in the capital budget spend (restoring the €500million cut last year and not implementing any more cuts in capital spending). We would also allocate €600million of current spending for our Jobs Retention Fund (this would be met by a combination of the existing enterprise budget, social welfare spend and taxation).

A major drawback in promoting enterprise in rural areas is the lack of broadband coverage. This needs to be redressed by a targeted strategy of rolling out broadband to every part of the state within a set time-frame. Government reports indicate that the cost of broadband roll-out would be €2.5billion. We have allowed for this investment in our stimulus proposals.

Agriculture remains a key sector of the Irish economy. It is particularly important as the main indigenous sector based wholly on domestic resources. There are 80,700 people directly employed in farming, fishing and forestry, although that is a decline of over, 2,500 since last year. That still accounts for around 4.5% of the workforce, and indeed the 2011 Census showed a small increase in the actual numbers employed. That figure is compounded by those indirectly employed in related sectors.



Both farming and fishing have massive potential to contribute to indigenous job creation, particularly through higher value-added processing with the potential to service both the domestic and export markets.

However, both sectors also need to have the right conditions to develop. That is why **Sinn Féin supports a radical reform of the farm payments system** with an upper limit on individual payments and a fairer distribution of payments to ensure that small and medium producers can survive. Fishing requires **a radical reform of the Common Fisheries Policy** to ensure a more equitable distribution of quota and better protection of fish stocks in Irish waters.

Tourism is another sector where development can be largely domestically led to target both the home and overseas market. A relatively underdeveloped aspect of tourism is cultural and heritage tourism which has great potential for expansion. That also underlines the need to ensure that the 7% of the state's land under the stewardship of Coillte is not sold to private companies.

Public land can also play a role in the generation of renewable energy through wind and biomass. We favour moving towards the Scottish model of wind farm development in which there will be fewer but larger farms located well away from people's homes. We believe that the island as a whole can not only become self-sufficient in electricity generation through wind but could also become a net exporter of electricity.

There is also scope to use poor land to grow species that can be used in the production of bio fuels. **We also favour the reopening of the Irish sugar sector** with the option to use some of the beet produced for the production of fuels.

Wave power is another under-utilised resource that could be used both for domestic energy production and generation of electricity for export. The west coast is the most favourable part of Europe for wave energy and possesses considerable economic potential.

We also support the taking of a majority state share in oil and gas finds and the imposition of a graduated tax on oil and gas profits from between 40% and 80% to ensure that the economy benefits from oil and gas that is brought on shore.

The discussion document concludes with the results of an extensive survey carried out among visitors to the National Ploughing Championship in September 2012. Among the striking findings were that over 50% of respondents had a family member who had emigrated in the past year.

Sinn Féin is not presenting people with all of the answers. We do have a general view, shared by others, that the austerity programme is the wrong way to go. We are arguing for a clearly costed and coherent stimulus programme that will invest in our human and economic and social resources. It is up to all of us, however, to put meat on the bones of a plan to revive the country and save rural Ireland.

Sinn Féin will present this discussion document to the Government and we hope that practical solutions to help shape the future of rural Ireland in the context of a newly-revitalised country run in the interests of its people rather than banks and bondholders will be quickly realised.



KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

RETURNING EMIGRANTS SCHEME

Tackle the scourge of emigration. As well as ensuring that there are jobs to prevent people leaving, we want to bring people home.

This Government has offered tax reliefs to large companies who want to bring in high-paid executives to work here (Special Assignee Relief Programme). We want a scheme for the thousands of young rural Irish people who have been forced to emigrate.

The Government needs to immediately establish a task force to examine the impediments facing Irish people who want to return home, from lack of access to social welfare, to available jobs and houses, and even the cost of the ticket home.

We propose a portion of profits from the National Lottery be allocated to a fund where those who emigrated in the last five years (since the beginning of the recession) can apply for the cost of coming home, including fares and initial accommodation.

RURAL BUSINESS SUPPORTS PROGRAMME

New supports for small rural businesses and indigenous enterprises.

These to include access to a Jobs Retention Fund run from the Department of Social Protection, tax reliefs for the sourcing of local goods by multinational corporations, state energy bodies to be instructed to freeze utility costs for a period of three years, and the state to break down procurement contracts and establish targets for rural access to procurement.

REGIONAL FDI STRATEGY

Regionally balance foreign direct investment (FDI).

The IDA to be mandated to appoint regional officers in rural areas and targets to be set for the agency in attracting FDI into rural areas, with job creation targets attached.



ENHANCED POST OFFICE NETWORK

Create more jobs in local post offices and retain them in our towns.

Post offices should be given responsibility for motor tax renewals, dealing with business rates and rent payments and other Government payment services. Social welfare payments should be maintained.

BETTER RURAL CHILDCARE PROVISION

Provide more childcare. Assist in the establishment of childcare co-operatives by providing suitable empty NAMA/Government units free or at low cost.

DEVELOP COILLTE'S POTENTIAL

Maintain Coillte in full state ownership. That would allow the agency to continue to develop Coillte's role in eco-tourism.

RURAL TOURISM MARKETING CAMPAIGN

Market rural Ireland as a tourism destination.

In recent times, tourism marketing has veered towards city breaks. Rural Ireland has so much to offer: from fishing breaks to cultural and heritage experiences, alongside great value for money.

This must be a priority marketing campaign for the tourism bodies.

PROMPT PAYMENTS POLICING

Ensure small businesses get paid on time.

Prioritise the review of the prompt payments legislation as called for by ISME and ensure the '15 day rule' is adhered to by state agencies.

DEVELOP SUSTAINABLE AQUACULTURE

No more delays in licence applications.

The Irish Shellfish Association revealed last year that 600 aquaculture licences were being held up in the Department of Agriculture, delaying the production of 2,000 jobs.

SUPPORT CREDIT UNIONS

Protect Credit Union jobs by ensuring disproportionate losses following personal insolvencies are not inflicted on them by the banks.



INTERIM PROPOSALS

Several of the following proposals carry funding costs and the Sinn Féin document 'Create Jobs, Create Growth' (October 2012) identified where this funding could be found.

BIO-REFINERY DEVELOPMENT

Develop new enterprise. Re-establish a bio-refinery plant in the South-East which would produce sugar as well as ethanol from beet and grain again. Price WaterHouse Coopers have estimated this would cost €350million to establish and create 5,000 jobs.

RURAL BUILDING PROGRAMME

Create construction jobs in the delivery of essential infrastructure with a balanced emphasis on development in rural as well as urban areas.

As part of a state-wide stimulus programme, set targets for the delivery of new school build and repair, road repair and build, broadband roll-out, primary health care centre build and social housing build or renovation.

We believe NAMA has a role to play in construction jobs. The agency announced a proposed €2billion spend in June 2012 on improving the assets underlying its loans – we want rural targets and deadlines set for that spend.

DEVELOP KNOCK AIRPORT

Invest in capital infrastructure at Knock Airport. IWA Knock shows real potential to develop as a hub for aviation-related development for which there is a growing global market, a market in which airports such as Knock as well as Shannon are ideally placed to exploit.

There is a backlog of infrastructure investments in safety and security projects in the airport's infrastructure, runway overlay, apron, taxiways, etc. Enabling infrastructure such as hangarage, apron, parking and access are needed to exploit the airport fully. Mayo County Council has recently completed the Local Area Plan for the airport encompassing 355hectares and has allocated 25hectares of this for a development park. The project would cost €74million.

FINISH THE A5 UPGRADE

Fullfill A5 commitment. The Government had committed to fund their section of the A5 with €450million but reduced this last year to €50million in 2015 and 2016. This is a key route for the future economic growth of the North-West.

RURAL CO-OPERATIVE DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY

Make co-operatives a key part of rural life. Develop a strategy at the Cabinet table to promote co-operatives in rural Ireland with a view to producing and providing affordable food, crafts and services.

Connemara Interpretative Centre by 2016

Build an Interpretive centre at Teach an Phiarsaigh in Rosmuc, Galway, by 2016. The Government has committed to do this and must honour it.

LONGER-TERM PROPOSALS

RURAL RATES REFORM

Make sure rural businesses are not penalised by commercial unified rate changes.

Sinn Féin is working on a progressive commercial rates proposal that will see business rates applied based on location, size and profitability/turnover. This should see small rural businesses that do not receive all the benefits of being in an urban centre protected from higher rates.

A FARMERS' BANK

Bring back the 'Farmers' Bank'.

The recent fodder crisis and the inability of farmers and fishermen to get loans from banks to deal with the natural disasters that occasionally occur has highlighted the need for a provider of credit and financial advice for the farming and fishing industry.

Sinn Féin fully believes that agriculture and fishing are two of the key industries to rebuild this state on and any strategic industrial development must be accompanied by financial backing.

RURAL BANKING POLICY

Maximise what we get rurally from state-owned banks.

Ensure that the nationalised AIB has as a priority focus on rural indigenous projects and SMEs.

DEVELOP ROSSLARE EUROPORT

Deepen a berth at Rosslare Europort from 7metres to 9metres at a cost of €50million. Rosslare Europort is a strategic asset supporting exports and tourism.

Since 2007, continental corridor traffic has increased by 15%, seeing 230,000 continental corridor passengers pass through the port in 2010. Freight has increased from 20,000 units in 2007 to 26,000 units in 2010. Rosslare is currently the second-biggest passenger port and second-biggest RoRo freight port in the state. Currently, the port has 7.2metres of water. This needs to be increased to 11metres ultimately.

The deepening of the port could take up to 15 years and would have to be in line with Article 6 of the Habitats Directive, be in compliance with the Water Framework Directive and the Programme of Measures contained in the South Eastern River Basin Management Plan (2009-2015) and ensure the protection of the Wexford Harbour Outer Shellfish Area. In the future we would look at building a cargo depot on-site and reopening the Rosslare to Waterford rail line.

The development of a deep water harbour at Ros A'Mhil and the dredging of Dunmore East will be prioritised, as will the provision of support industries in Killybegs.

OVERHAUL RURAL SERVICE PROVISION FROM STATE AGENCIES

Overhaul the multiple state agencies that exist across tourism, enterprise and regional development by bringing together duplicating and competing agencies and ensuring that the new streamlined approach all appoint rural officers and establish rural offices.

* The full document can viewed online at www.sinnfein.ie

SINN FÉIN ARD OIFIG

44 Parnell Square, Dublin 1, Ireland.

Tel: 01 8726100 / 8726932

Email: admin@sinnfein.ie

Web: www.sinnfein.ie