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na hÉireann
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Ár dTodhchaí
Tuaithe
Our Rural
Future



Rural Youth Assembly Summary Report 2025





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1. Key Recommendations from the Assembly

The National Rural Youth Assembly 2025 took place on the 24th of September 2025 at Miesian Plaza, Dublin, jointly convened by the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht and the Department of Children, Disability, and Equality. This Assembly formed part of a national consultation process to inform Ireland's next *Rural Development Policy (2026–2031)*, following on from *Our Rural Future (2021–2025)*.

Delegates examined how rural Ireland can remain vibrant, connected, and sustainable for young people over the coming decade. Seven key themes were initially identified in advance of the Assembly and delegates were asked to complete a survey based on these areas:

- Enterprise and Employment;
- Infrastructure and Public Services;
- Revitalising Rural Towns and Villages;
- Tourism, Culture and Heritage;
- Community Participation;
- Ensuring a Just Green Transition; and
- Supporting Sustainability in Agriculture, the Marine and Forestry.

On the day of the Assembly delegates focused on four key areas:

- Tourism, Culture and Heritage;
- Revitalising Rural Towns and Villages;
- Infrastructure and Public Services; and
- Community Participation.

The delegates' recommendations for these four areas are detailed in the image on the next page.

National Rural Youth Assembly 2025 RECOMMENDATIONS

Our Rural Future is the Government's policy for rural Ireland. It offers a framework for a thriving and inclusive rural Ireland, using a strategic, ambitious and holistic approach to investing in and maximising opportunities for rural areas. The new policy will build upon the achievements of the 2021-2025 policy, while also addressing new issues of importance for people in rural Ireland over the next six years.

The National Rural Youth Assembly took place on the 24th of September 2025. 54 youth delegates aged 12-24 years from across Ireland attended, representing youth organisations, Comhairle na nÓg (Youth Councils) and other interested organisations. The delegates completed a questionnaire and attended a preparation session in advance of the Assembly, and then took part in a day of discussions. They have produced fourteen key recommendations for the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht, and The Government to consider. These are outlined below.



Tourism, Culture and Heritage

Increase funding into Irish Language and culture facilities.
Reform Irish as it is taught in schools - more conversational and less rote learning.



Significant investment in rewilding, native afforestation and **protection** of natural heritage areas.



Community Participation

Promote and incentivise the use of the Irish language in schools, at festivals and Irish cultural events. Promote Irish folk and **traditional music** and the teaching of GAA, Irish dancing etc through the Irish language.

The government should dedicate funding to create **social events**, clubs, activities and spaces in rural areas that are accessible to people of all different ages, backgrounds, ethnicities, etc. They should include the people of rural communities in the decisions regarding new **facilities** in their towns and villages.

Add required **volunteering** hours for every student in order to pass the Junior Cycle.

Create places of **protection**, such as events and spaces, to show support in the community for minority groups.



Revitalising Rural Towns and Villages

Provide more **support** for new and existing local businesses to **redevelop** abandoned and run-down sites for public, community uses and/or green spaces in order to prevent dereliction. Also, support businesses and local authorities to provide **more planting** and greenery around towns and villages.

Some education facilities in rural areas have less opportunities and are at risk of **extinction**. We recommend a bigger allocation of **budget** to education for all ages in rural areas.

The government should have more frequent **public transport** for rural areas e.g. local link. This would mean young people living in very rural areas could **meet up** with their friends.

Increase **safe facilities** for young people to safely go to at night.



Infrastructure and Public Services

Increase public transport services, such as trains and buses, with more **tailored schedules** and better connectivity with a greater variety of small towns. Provide **sufficient security measures**, particularly at night, and ensure tickets are easily sourced.

Due to there being a lack of **accessible buildings**, the Government should provide **incentives** and grants to businesses to rent out their spaces for young people to meet.

The Government should work to set up a **reliable** and affordable public transport systems in rural Ireland. Ensuring that public transport is **accessible** to everyone who wants to utilize it.

Make all opportunities **inclusive** and **accessible** for young people with disabilities and young carers.



2. Overview

The National Rural Youth Assembly 2025 provided a national platform for young people across Ireland to share their lived experiences of rural life and to shape priorities for the forthcoming *Rural Development Policy 2026–2031*. The Assembly was co-designed with a Youth Advisory Group (YAG) and facilitated by trained youth workers, ensuring that the process was rights-based, inclusive, and authentically youth-led.

Background and Purpose

Building on the progress of *Our Rural Future (2021–2025)*, the Government is developing a renewed rural policy to respond to Ireland’s changing social, economic, and environmental landscape. The purpose of the Assembly was to provide young people with a formal opportunity to contribute directly to the design of national rural policy, identify key challenges and opportunities facing rural youth, and generate action-driven recommendations.

Data Collection and Reporting

Facilitators and note-takers documented all sessions using structured templates. Materials including placemats, posters, and recommendation sheets were collected for thematic analysis by the report writers. An online survey was also distributed in advance to all 63 Assembly members.

3. Survey Results

The survey was completed in advance of the Assembly by 42 Assembly members, under several thematic headings: (1) enterprise and employment; (2) infrastructure and public services; (3) revitalising rural towns and villages; (4) tourism, culture and heritage; (5) community participation; and (6) ensuring a just, green transition.

Under Theme One: “Enterprise and Employment”, respondents identified Agriculture, Renewable Energy, Arts and Heritage, and Tourism as key employment opportunities for rural Ireland. Barriers for enterprise and employment included lack of housing, poor infrastructure, and difficulty accessing funding for community projects.

For the second theme, “Infrastructure and Public Services”, respondents prioritised investment in Public Transport and Healthcare, calling for more reliable bus routes, improved roads, and greater access to health professionals.

For the third theme, “Revitalising Rural Towns and Villages”, nearly half rated their local area as ‘okay’ and suggested better public transport, improved shopping experiences, and increased housing as priorities.

For the fourth theme, “Tourism, Culture and Heritage”, respondents called for more unique attractions, stronger Irish language promotion, and better transport links to heritage sites.

For the fifth theme, “Community Participation”, they highlighted the need for accessible meeting spaces, simpler funding applications, and greater awareness of local services.

Finally, for the sixth theme, “Ensuring a Just Green Transition”, respondents cited biodiversity loss and fossil fuel dependency as key challenges, alongside a lack of funding for local green initiatives.



4. Discussions

4.1 Activity 1: Tourism, Culture and Heritage

During the morning session, delegates engaged in an activity to explore their perspectives on **Tourism, Culture, and Heritage**.

Delegates highlighted both the strengths and challenges within these sectors. Common themes included the importance of economic growth, cultural preservation, language revitalisation, and community cohesion.

Recommendations from Activity 1: Tourism, Culture, and Heritage

Delegates identified key recommendations for enhancing Tourism, Culture, and Heritage in Ireland.

- Increase funding into Irish Language and culture facilities. Reform Irish as it is taught in schools - more conversational and less rote learning.
- Significant investment in rewilding, native afforestation and protection of natural heritage areas.

4.2 Vision Piece: What do delegates want to see for the future in Rural Ireland 2030?

The following topics were the focus of this activity. Housing; Education; Farming; Forestry and Fishing; Community Life, Climate Action and Sustainability, Enterprise and Business, Healthcare and Services, and Transport.

The first topic focused on “Housing”

During the thematic analysis of delegate responses, five key themes emerged:

- Fair Housing for All
- Regulating Corporate Control
- Reinhabiting Wasted Space
- Regulating Student Accommodation
- Specific and Sustainable Planning

Fair Housing for All

Delegates emphasised that access to housing must be equitable and inclusive, ensuring availability for people of every race, culture, and background. One delegate stated, *“More housing for people of every race, culture & background. Less holiday homes.”*

There was a clear call to reform or replace Direct Provision, with delegates advocating for asylum seekers' rights to live and work independently. *"Demolish Direct Provision / improve it e.g. let the asylum seekers get jobs."*

Delegates also urged greater focus on social housing and community-led development rather than market-driven or developer-led models. *"Focus on social housing, not developers."*

Regulating Corporate Control

Delegates identified the influence of investment funds, vulture funds, and short-term letting platforms as a major barrier to affordable housing.

One delegate noted, *"Put houses on the market so those who want to buy a house don't have to compete with investment funds,"* while another stated, *"Bring in laws against vulture funds & big companies (stop buying up estates & charging too high prices)."*

Delegates also raised concerns about Airbnb and holiday home ownership, calling for strict regulation to prevent housing shortages in local communities. *"Add limitation[s] on Airbnb ownership, holiday homes should be regulated on how many people use it and how frequently per year."*

They also proposed to penalise vacancy and discourage speculative holding of property. *"Laws for charging higher rent on derelict houses to encourage people to sell them."*

Reinhabiting Wasted Space

Delegates advocated for reusing derelict and vacant properties before expanding into new developments. *"Using derelict houses instead of urban sprawl"* and *"Make use out of ghost towns + houses, renovated + reinhabited"* reflect this focus on sustainable reuse and local regeneration.

Repurposing *"ghost towns"* was viewed as both an environmental and economic priority, preventing rural decline while reducing the need for further urban sprawl. Several delegates also suggested rent controls in these areas, ensuring affordability for returning residents.

Regulating Student Accommodation

Delegates called for increased access to affordable, safe, and regulated student accommodation, noting that current options are often limited or unaffordable. Comments included, *"More accessible student housing," "Cheaper student accommodation,"* and *"Build more student accommodation."*

They also highlighted welfare concerns, suggesting *"mandatory psychological examinations"* for DIGS hosts and *"24-hour access"* for students in accommodation.

Specific and Sustainable Planning

Delegates emphasised the importance of planning housing with local character, accessibility, and environmental sustainability in mind. *“Design rural housing estates based on the area they are in. Many new housing estates look copy and paste from Dublin,”* one delegate wrote.

There was also support for mixed-use and energy-efficient developments: *“Build homes that are needed, mixed use, energy naught units & accessible estates.”*

Rural delegates specifically stressed the need to balance one-off rural homes with larger estate developments: *“Need to find balance between building one-off housing and providing more housing in rural areas and more regional/townlands.”*

The second topic focused on “Education”

Analysis of delegate responses to this question identified four key themes:

- Reformed Irish Language Teaching
- Equity for Rural Learners
- Inclusive Education
- Affordable Basic Support

Reformed Irish Language Teaching

Delegates strongly emphasised the need to improve how the Irish language is taught, envisioning a future where fluency is normalised and the language is part of daily life. *“The Irish language should be taught better — by 2050 most people should have the basics and the ability to speak it on a daily basis,”* one delegate stated.

Suggestions included more creative and immersive teaching methods: *“Make the Leaving Cert Irish language taught unique each term (different method of teaching, exercises, group activities, listen to students’ ideas).”*

Delegates also identified a need for more qualified teachers and support for higher-level Irish learning, calling for *“more Irish language teachers”* and the creation of a *“fluent Irish college.”*

Equity for Rural Learners

Delegates highlighted persistent inequities between rural and urban education, noting disparities in subject choice, school access, and extracurricular opportunities. *“More subject options for rural schools (courses available in urban but not rural schools),”* one delegate explained.

Many rural delegates described the difficulty of reaching specialised or secondary schools, with comments such as *“easier access to specialty schools (not someone who has to travel an hour to go to one).”*

Delegates also called for more rural youth centres and community learning hubs that combine education with engagement opportunities: *“Youth centres in rural areas that facilitate educational workshops/activities.”*

Inclusive Education

Delegates emphasised the importance of inclusivity for students with disabilities, neurodiversity, and additional learning needs, particularly in rural schools. Calls for *“automatic acceptance of SNA [special needs assistants] support for people with hidden or severe disabilities”* and *“better access to special classes/SNAs in rural schools”* were noted.

Delegates also advocated for better support services within schools, including in-school therapy and counselling for young carers. *“More therapists for young carers in school & inclusion in school society,”* one noted.

Affordable Basic Support

Delegates described education as a right that should be affordable, accessible, and properly resourced. This included both physical infrastructure and financial support. *“Improve heating in schools”* and *“student accommodation should be cheaper”* captured the dual focus on comfort and affordability.

There was also emphasis on reducing barriers to further education, with calls for *“easier and more affordable access to further education and transport to and from further education institutions.”*

The third topic focused on “Farming, Forestry and Fishing”

Through analysis of delegate contributions, four key themes emerged:

- Sustainable Farming
- Equity and Fairness in Farming
- Youth in Agriculture
- Reform in Farming Culture

Sustainable Farming

Delegates placed strong emphasis on the need for more environmentally responsible and diverse approaches to agriculture, forestry, and fishing. Sustainability was viewed as essential to ensuring that rural industries can thrive without damaging the natural environment.

They called for an end to monocultural forestry and farming, an increase in organic and agroforestry practices. *“Major increase in organic farming”* and *“Stop monocultural forestry”* were noted.

Delegates also supported better regulation of fishing and water management and called for accessible grants to help farmers adopt sustainable methods. As one delegate noted, *“Better and more accessible grants to enable sustainable farming.”*

Equity and Fairness in Farming

Delegates highlighted the need to protect small and young farmers, ensuring that the agricultural economy remains fair and community-based. There was strong support for co-operative farming models to strengthen the bargaining power of small producers.

“More supports for small farms & young farmers” and *“Increased use of farming co-ops (collective secure deals w/ supermarkets)”* reflected a shared view that Irish farming should prioritise fairness and local resilience.

Delegates also encouraged the promotion of Irish produce domestically, noting that *“Better support for Irish beef rather than importing”* would help sustain rural livelihoods.

Other comments highlighted the need for more ethical, community-focused farming practices that prioritise sustainability and fairness over profit.

Youth in Agriculture

Delegates envisioned a future where young people, both from farming and non-farming backgrounds, can easily enter the agricultural sector. *“Apprenticeships for people to get into agriculture (esp. young people & non-farming backgrounds)”* and *“Programmes for young people helping on farms to get experience”* illustrate a desire to make farming education and experience more accessible.

They also called for efforts to challenge stereotypes that portray farming as outdated or inaccessible, advocating for its inclusion in school career pathways and public awareness campaigns.

Reform in Farming Culture

Delegates identified cultural barriers within farming, particularly around inheritance and access. There was a desire to move away from traditional practices that restrict ownership to family members, namely the eldest son. *“Farming must not be passed from father to eldest son”* summarised this concern.

The fourth topic focused on “Community Life”, specifically, what do delegates want to see for the future of community life in Ireland (2030)?

Analysis of delegate responses identified five key themes:

- More Spaces for Young People
- Culture and Diversity
- Increased Social Connection
- Improved Facilities
- Nature and Sustainability

More Spaces for Young People

Delegates consistently called for greater investment in youth facilities, particularly in rural areas. They emphasised that many communities currently lack inclusive and accessible spaces for teenagers and young adults.

Comments such as “*More youth clubs in rural areas*” and “*More facilities for people who don’t play sports and people (20s) (teenagers)*” reflected a strong demand for non-sport activities and neutral “*third spaces*” where young people can gather.

Delegates also expressed a desire for extended opening hours and greener community spaces, envisioning a 2030 where all young people have somewhere local to socialise, relax, and engage in community life. “*More (preferably green) 3rd spaces for young people to hang out that don’t close early!*” summarised this aspiration.

Culture and Diversity

Delegates envisioned a future where communities embrace cultural diversity and shared heritage. There was broad support for cultural festivals, storytelling traditions, and inclusive education that recognises Ireland’s multicultural society.

Suggestions included adding “*multicultural elements to schools (curriculum, language, food, importance)*” and hosting “*cultural community events*” and “*festivals, parades, music, artwork.*” These initiatives were seen as ways to celebrate identity, foster inclusion, and challenge division.

Delegates also stressed the importance of preserving Irish cultural heritage, including storytelling and music. One delegate noted “*more Seanchaí (Irish storytellers) - only one left,*”

Several delegates explicitly called for a more inclusive national tone, urging communities and institutions to “*stop anti-immigrant rhetoric.*”

Increased Social Connection

Delegates highlighted connection and belonging as vital to healthy communities. They proposed regular, informal opportunities for people to meet and collaborate—*“tea/coffee mornings,” “mens/womens sheds,”* and *“volunteers go to other organisations eg an American goes to an Irish organisation and vice versa.”*

Improved Facilities

Delegates expressed the need for sustained support and funding for community facilities. *“Community centres receiving more support from government to widen their reach and range of activities they offer”*. Delegates also called for promotion of *“local facilities: libraries, cafes, shops, community halls, schools,”* seeing them as key anchors for participation and connection.

Nature and Sustainability

Delegates expressed a desire for environmental action at community level. Ideas noted were *“plant wildflowers as community”* and create *“local biodiversity groups”*. Delegates also proposed having *“more green 3rd spaces.”*

The fifth topic focused on “Climate Action and Sustainability”

Analysis of delegate responses revealed four key themes:

- Renewable Energy
- Sustainability and Biodiversity
- Sustainability Education
- Greener Travel and Tourism

Renewable Energy

Delegates expressed strong support for wind, solar, and other renewable technologies, such as *“major increase in renewable electricity”* and *“more solar panels etc.”* They combined with public education to help communities understand and engage with the energy transition. For example, delegates stated *“education through wind energy & other renewables”*.

Sustainability and Biodiversity

Delegates advocated for measures to control invasive species and promote local ecosystems, as captured by comments such as *“less invasive species of plants and more native ones”* and *“take care of biodiversity.”*

Community participation was also seen as key to environmental care, with ideas such as *“plant wildflowers along roads”* and *“more rewilding and green 3rd spaces.”*

Delegates viewed local environmental action as essential to collective wellbeing. *“Natural heritage and biodiversity must be preserved for us and future generations to enjoy and benefit from.”*

Sustainability Education

Delegates proposed increased environmental awareness in schools, community workshops, and public campaigns to promote understanding of climate action.

“Programmes to teach people about the importance of sustainability & workshops” and *“adding more awareness in schools”* were noted by delegates. Delegates also supported reward-based initiatives such as *“More programmes like Re-turn.”*

Greener Travel and Tourism

Delegates proposed sustainable transport and tourism practices to balance economic opportunity with environmental protection. They advocated for *“more public transport”*, *“sustainable travel”* and for spreading tourism to smaller towns to avoid overdevelopment and price inflation in popular areas. *“Try spread out tourism to smaller towns to prevent mass tourism and price inflation”*.

The sixth topic focused on “Enterprise and Business”

Analysis of delegate responses revealed three central themes:

- Backing Small and Local Business
- Funding and Tax Relief
- Promoting Rural Entrepreneurship

Backing Small and Local Business

Delegates strongly emphasised the importance of investing in and sustaining small, locally based enterprises.

“Support for businesses start-ups in local rural areas to make them stay open” and *“small businesses need more support & funding”* was noted by delegates.

There was also interest in community-led and cooperative business models. For example, *“Local/rural co-operatives for communities in all areas (e.g. shops)”* and *“create specialised rural enterprises or orgs”*.

Delegates suggested that stronger links between local producers and established retail chains could further enhance business sustainability, with one proposal recommending, *“Introduce small businesses to local shops eg Lidl and Dunnes.”*

Funding and Tax Relief

Delegates advocated for grants, subsidies, and tax measures that prioritise local enterprises over large corporations.

“Subsidies + grants are available, big corporate ones shouldn’t receive same”. Others proposed reduced VAT and rent subsidies to ease operating costs, particularly in hospitality: *“Reduce VAT for small businesses, particularly hospitality.”*

Promoting Rural Entrepreneurship

Delegates suggested genuine opportunities to start and sustain businesses in their communities. *“Give young people chance to start a small business”* exemplified this.

They called for better access to information, mentoring, and centralised resources, including *“centralised information online/in person”* to guide entrepreneurs through funding and business development processes.

Encouraging new enterprises in rural towns was also seen as a way to revitalise communities and retain young people locally. *“Encourage business to create employment in small towns + villages”*.

Delegates also suggested new incentives, such as a *“rural shop of the week”* promoted by councils to increase visibility and local engagement.

The seventh topic focused on “Healthcare and Services”

Analysis of delegate responses revealed five key themes:

- Mental Health and Neurodivergent Care
- Increased Access to Healthcare
- Valuing Healthcare Workers
- Facilities Beyond Hospitals
- Inclusive Healthcare

Mental Health and Neurodivergent Care

Delegates prioritised the expansion and improvement of mental health services, particularly in rural areas where access remains limited. *“More mental health services (esp. in rural areas)”* and *“no long waiting lists for mental health”* captured a strong desire for equitable, timely, and locally available mental health support.

Delegates also emphasised the need for specialised neurodivergent services, including better diagnostic systems for girls¹ and accessible support in schools and communities. *“Early diagnosis for neurodivergent girls”* and *“neurodivergency services”*.

¹ Evidence shows that neurodivergent girls are frequently under-identified and under-supported. Reviews highlight that current diagnostic pathways lack a gender-sensitive lens, contributing to later or missed

diagnoses for girls. Prescription and service-use patterns also show a large gender gap, indicating that many girls remain undiagnosed. Because access to school-based and community supports often depends on timely diagnosis, these gaps disproportionately disadvantage girls, reinforcing the need for improved gender-responsive diagnostic systems and accessible neurodivergent supports across education and community settings

Increased Access to Healthcare

Delegates called for improved access to healthcare in rural areas, where distance, transport, and service shortages continue to limit care. *“More GP centres, lack of in rural areas”* and *“home residential doctors in rural areas so you don’t have to travel far”* reflected a focus on bringing services closer to people’s homes.

Many also connected healthcare access to better rural transport, ensuring patients and staff can reach hospitals and clinics more efficiently. *“Ties in with public transport: more direct ways to get to hospitals / to get healthcare workers to houses in rural areas”* captured this intersection between health and mobility.

Delegates further expressed frustration with the centralisation of specialist services in Dublin, urging that *“improve access and stop sending people to Dublin for a procedure.”*

Valuing Healthcare Workers

Delegates stressed that the future of healthcare depends on fair treatment and support for workers, including student nurses and rural healthcare professionals.

Calls to *“Pay student nurses a livable wage”* and *“accommodation for healthcare providers sent to rural areas”* highlighted concerns about low pay, staffing shortages, and the challenges of attracting healthcare professionals to rural regions.

“Funding - overcrowded, underpaid & staffed” further summarised another delegates thoughts on this topic.

Facilities Beyond Hospitals

Delegates viewed community infrastructure and everyday services as integral to public health. They argued that wellbeing depends on access to amenities such as chemists, post offices, and grocery shops, particularly in rural areas.

“Post offices and banks nearby” and *“more/better shops, especially grocery shops”* reflected this understanding that essential local facilities support both economic and social wellbeing.

Inclusive Healthcare

Delegates envisioned a 2030 where healthcare is equitable, inclusive, and person-centred, ensuring equal access regardless of background, ability, or identity.

“Accessible gender affirming care to young trans people” and *“physio/SLT free services for people with disabilities”* reflected this. Delegates also called for parity between public and private sectors, stating that care quality should not depend on income or insurance status.

“Improve services to meet people’s needs, and make sure same level of care is provided in the HSE and private sector”.

The eighth topic focused on “Transport”

Analysis of delegate responses revealed two key themes:

- Affordable and Fair Transport
- Connecting Rural Ireland

Affordable and Fair Transport

Delegates identified affordability and fairness as essential for ensuring equal access to transport across Ireland. They called for subsidised or free travel options for young people, carers, and students, particularly to support access to education, work, and healthcare. *“Cheaper/subsidised transport for students”* and *“cheaper/free (Leap card) for young carers”*.

Delegates also suggested that pricing structures should reflect people’s needs rather than location or income, promoting a more equitable transport system.

Connecting Rural Ireland

Delegates placed strong emphasis on improving transport connectivity in rural regions, which they felt remain underserved and disconnected from national routes. *“Increased public transport in rural areas”* and *“more transport to far off places - west & north of Ireland (no trains)”*. They thought this could be tackled by having *“more trains”* and *“metro”*. Delegates also emphasised the need for more reliable, frequent, and accessible bus services that meet community needs. *“Improved bus time / more convenient buses”* and *“more transport hubs in rural Ireland (more frequent)”*.

They also called for greater regional balance, arguing that transport investment is too focused on Dublin. *“A railway network that connects the whole of the country, not Dublin-centric + trains in Donegal + increased bus times”* captured this clearly.

Proposals included school transport, improved feeder services to train stations, and better regional coordination to ensure that rural residents can reach major transport nodes. *“More public transport to get to (e.g.) train stations”*.

Delegates also raised ideas for innovation and accessibility, including *“make different types of apps to make it easier for older people to understand,”* showing awareness of digital inclusion as part of transport access.

4.3 World Café Thematic Discussions

There were three themes discussed in the World Café discussion. Under each theme three questions were asked.

Theme One: Revitalising Rural Towns and Villages:

The first question was what does revitalising rural towns and villages mean – what is included, and what are some examples?

Through discussion, delegates identified five distinct themes that capture what revitalisation means to them. The five themes were:

- Regenerating and Beautifying Rural Spaces
- Strengthening Local Economies and Enterprise
- Building Vibrant and Connected Communities
- Connectivity and Mobility for Inclusion
- Inclusion, Safety and Wellbeing

Regenerating and Beautifying Rural Spaces

Delegates viewed physical and environmental renewal as central to revitalising rural towns and villages. They spoke of transforming both the built environment and surrounding landscapes through projects such as “*doing up abandoned buildings*,” “*regenerating derelict buildings*,” and providing “*shopfront regeneration grants*.”

Revitalisation, in their view, should balance sustainability with visual appeal, “*planting trees and wildflowers*,” “*encouraging tidy towns to set up greenery around the village*,” and incorporating “*murals and street art*” or “*botany and public art*.”

Strengthening Local Economies and Enterprise

Economic opportunity was seen as the foundation for sustainable rural renewal. Delegates called for “*SME grants – boosting local economy*” and greater support for “*local businesses*,” “*charity markets*,” and other grassroots enterprises to re-energise town centres. Some suggested building “*new shopping centres in rural areas*” to improve access to goods and services while keeping spending local.

There was a strong sense that local economies thrive when supported by creative industries and community events, such as “*food festivals e.g., Taste of Cavan*,” “*agriculture shows*,” and “*townwide cook offs*,” which attract visitors and encourage entrepreneurship

Building Vibrant and Connected Communities

Delegates described revitalisation as about social energy and shared experience. They imagined towns full of cultural and social activity “*festivals*,” “*arts festivals*,” and “*community fun days*” that “*promote a wide audience to get involved*.”

These events were not simply for entertainment but essential for rebuilding community bonds and local pride.

Delegates also stressed the need for places that allow people, especially youth, to connect and belong. Requests for “*more youth facilities,*” “*good free third spaces, for example youth clubs,*” and “*communal spaces with seating or shelter*” revealed the importance of inclusive gathering places.

Social venues such as “*nightclubs and pubs*” were also considered part of this vibrancy, ensuring rural areas feel alive both day and night. Together, these insights highlight the role of cultural activity, youth engagement, and shared spaces in strengthening community life.

Connectivity and Mobility for Inclusion

Accessibility and transport were identified as prerequisites for rural participation and economic vitality. Delegates repeatedly cited “*transport links,*” “*trains,*” “*buses,*” and the “*TFI Local Link*” as vital lifelines connecting smaller communities to jobs, education, and social opportunities. Without reliable connections, they felt young people and older residents alike are cut off from essential services and civic life.

Improved connectivity was seen not only as practical infrastructure but as a means of social inclusion, ensuring that everyone, regardless of where they live, can reach community facilities, attend events, and participate fully in rural life.

As one delegate summed up, investment in “*public transport and the roads so [the] public can travel into town*” is key to making revitalisation real and equitable.

Delegates also suggested increasing residential density with “*apartments above shops – more people living in towns,*” seeing this as a practical way to bring life and footfall back into rural centers when transport is lacking.

Inclusion, Safety and Wellbeing

Revitalisation, delegates argued, must benefit all residents, not just the most visible or mobile. Delegates called for “*activities for people with disabilities,*” highlighting the need for accessibility and equality in design and planning.

Public safety was another concern: “*better street lighting*” and well-maintained communal areas were seen as vital for comfort and security, particularly at night.

References to “*parks and playgrounds,*” “*public lakes and walkways,*” and “*sports centres*” illustrated a desire for spaces that support both physical wellbeing and social connection. This theme ties together the equitable, social dimensions of revitalisation, ensuring that as rural towns grow and change, they remain inclusive, healthy, and safe for everyone.

The second question under the theme “Revitalising Rural Towns and Villages” was what are the opportunities and challenges associated with the theme Revitalising Rural Towns and Villages? Consider the government and local people, and is everyone affected equally?

Through discussion, delegates identified four interconnected themes that capture both the opportunities and barriers shaping rural revitalisation:

- Government Investment and Economic Renewal
- Reimagining Public Space: Green, Safe, and Inclusive Environments
- Participation, Culture, and Belonging
- Connectivity and Access as Foundations for Revitalisation

Government Investment and Economic Renewal

Delegates repeatedly highlighted that revitalisation cannot succeed without sustained government funding and fair resource distribution. Many felt that *“funding isn’t there”* and that *“it shouldn’t be down to volunteers to fix and clean towns—they are already paying taxes.”* The perception of financial inequity ran through multiple comments, delegates calling for *“grants to revitalise run-down houses and areas”* and *“more funding for youth.”*

Economic renewal was viewed as an opportunity as well as a challenge. Delegates pointed to *“SME grants”* and support for *“local businesses”* as critical to helping rural areas thrive, yet they also noted the barriers: *“How expensive it is to run a business”* and *“smaller businesses and family-owned companies can’t afford rent, taxes etc.”* Several linked this to the dominance of large corporations, warning that *“local businesses are replaced by larger corporations,”* which undermines community-led economies.

Delegates also connected infrastructure to government responsibility, calling for investment in *“water lines and power grids,”* and emphasising that *“investing in public transport and the roads”* would help people access work, education, and leisure.

Reimagining Public Space: Green, Safe, and Inclusive Environments

A strong theme across discussions was the need to restore and reimagine rural spaces to make them greener, safer, and more welcoming. Delegates saw *“more nature public spaces like community gardens”* as an opportunity for both environmental and social renewal. The inclusion of *“biodiversity and climate awareness”* reflected how delegates want sustainability embedded in rural development.

However, they also identified clear challenges in the built environment. Derelict and vacant sites were seen as visible signs of decline: *“Houses and ex-business buildings left empty and untended.”*

Others raised concerns about exclusionary design, noting that *“hostile architecture”* and *“anti-homelessness designs—spikes, oddly shaped benches”* alienate certain groups. They also wanted built spaces that were inclusive and accessible for *“people with disabilities.”*

Safety was also a recurring priority, with calls for *“Gardai funding”* and improved public lighting to make towns safer, especially at night.

Participation, Culture, and Belonging

Delegates associated vibrant rural life with opportunities for cultural expression, inclusion, and community connection. They spoke about the potential of events and exchanges to foster belonging, describing how *“street parties”* and *“intercultural exchanges [through Erasmus+] foster a sense of community.”* However, several also noted barriers to participation: *“the people not wanting to get involved”* and *“people don’t have a lot of free time.”*

Delegates stressed the importance of youth involvement and age-appropriate amenities, calling for spaces that reflect local needs: *“age-appropriate amenities based on the local people—elderly or young.”* A sense of disconnection was evident in comments like *“young people don’t have the confidence to independently start pursuing their interests,”* showing that participation requires not only infrastructure but also empowerment and encouragement.

Embedding art was also seen as central to revitalisation, with delegates describing the challenge of *“small towns have no creativity (street art)”* and wanting more outlets for expression.

Connectivity and Access as Foundations for Revitalisation

Across all discussions, delegates underlined that rural revitalisation depends on connection and mobility. Many referred to *“less frequent bus and train times”* and called for *“investment in public transport and the roads so people can travel into town.”* This lack of connectivity was described as a major obstacle, with one delegate observing that *“young people cannot walk or cycle to towns because roads are not safe.”* Others noted that some regions remain disconnected altogether: *“Need train in Donegal and Dundalk.”*

Lack of transport was limiting access to school and work: *“If you are a student going to specialised schools—not having transport, for example accessible transport.”* As another delegate noted, a *“lack of transport means lack of opportunity.”*

The final question in the theme “Revitalising Rural Towns and Villages” was what can be done to make these opportunities a reality and to address these challenges?

Through discussion, delegates proposed a wide range of practical, creative, and policy-based solutions to make rural revitalisation achievable. Their suggestions centered on four key areas:

- Investment, Governance and Local Decision-Making
- Infrastructure, Accessibility and Sustainability
- Empowering Communities, Culture and Inclusion
- Economic Development and Local Enterprise

Investment, Governance and Local Decision-Making

Delegates called for more equitable and transparent investment in rural areas, repeatedly emphasising to *“provide funding please”* as the essential first step toward meaningful change. Many recommended *“allocating a bigger proportion of the budget to rural development”* and *“rural funding increase for a few years and stop developing large cities for a little while.”*

Delegates also proposed new local governance models to ensure accountability and community ownership. They suggested *“individual town councils”* or *“local town councils for decent-sized towns to unite communities”* as mechanisms for decision-making closer to citizens. Others stressed the importance of *“more callouts for county council collaboration”* and for officials to experience rural life directly: *“A government official should go into the public as a citizen, try out public transport, shopping as a person to see how difficult it is as a regular person.”*

Infrastructure, Accessibility and Sustainability

Delegates identified transport, housing, and public spaces as critical foundations for revitalisation. They called for *“more buses for rural areas”* and *“Local Link [to] go to every major bus station,”* noting that greater connectivity would enable participation in work, education, and social life. Active transport and safety were also priorities: *“More bike lanes in small towns/areas with better/wider roads”* and *“more rural street lighting.”*

Rural planning was also seen as an opportunity to integrate sustainability. Delegates proposed *“grants and funding for people to create their own third spaces—for example, clubs and community gardens, especially green biodiversity spaces and youth clubs.”* Biodiversity and environmental design were recurring themes, expressed through calls for *“green walls”* and *“plant wildflowers along roads.”*

Some delegates linked infrastructure to equality and inclusion, suggesting *“spaces that provide activities, specialising for people with disabilities”* and *“build social housing to look alike to private homes.”*

Empowering Communities, Culture, and Inclusion

Delegates envisioned revitalisation as a community-led process rooted in belonging, culture, and participation. They proposed *“listen and involve community of all age groups”* and *“allowing more people to state their ideas to the government (kind of like what we’re doing right now, but for other groups too).”*

Cultural and creative expression were seen as very important in order to revitalise rural towns and villages. Delegates proposed *“funding for cultural activities, for example Irish dancing,”* *“hire more professional artists for things like street art in local villages,”* and *“funding for culture night celebrations outside of Dublin.”*

Social inclusion was also central to their proposals. Delegates advocated for *“cultural competency when integrating immigrants into rural Ireland”* and for building *“cross-community links within primary and secondary school”*.

Economic Development and Local Enterprise

Delegates consistently linked revitalisation to local economic opportunity. They argued that rural sustainability depends on empowering small businesses and creating diverse local economies. Suggestions included *“support local businesses (tax reductions, grants etc)”*, *“offer encouragement to business to expand into less represented areas,”* and *“greater incentives for family-owned businesses and enterprise.”*

Creative industries and tourism were seen as growth sectors. Delegates proposed *“provide funding to local businesses to encourage live music and create open mic nights for musicians of all ages”* and *“focus on what makes an area unique and promote it (i.e., Aran jumpers).”*

Lowering costs was another priority, with one delegate recommending *“lower VAT for hospitality—it will improve tourism and encourage people to stay in small places.”*

Delegates also linked economic opportunity with sustainability, suggesting that large corporations should contribute locally: *“Make large corporations invest in their communities in a tangible way... create a community space or sponsorship through planning permission and legislation.”*

Upon completing discussion on each of the questions delegates identified four key recommendations.

Theme 1: Revitalising Rural Towns and Villages Recommendations

- Provide more support for new and existing local businesses to redevelop abandoned and run-down sites for public, community uses and/or green spaces in order to prevent dereliction. Also, support businesses and local authorities to provide more planting and greenery around towns and villages.
- Some education facilities in rural areas have less opportunities and are at risk of extinction. We recommend a bigger allocation of budget to education for all ages in rural areas.
- The government should have more frequent public transport for rural areas e.g. local link. This would mean young people living in very rural areas could meet up with their friends
- Increase safe facilities for young people to safely go to at night.



Theme Two: Infrastructure and Public Services

The first question in this theme asked: what does infrastructure and public services mean – what is included, and what are some examples?

The delegates highlighted three key themes that represent their understanding of infrastructure and public services in rural communities.

- Essential Services and Physical Infrastructure
- Social Services for Wellbeing
- Community Spaces and Structures

Essential Services and Physical Infrastructure

Delegates characterised essential services and physical infrastructure as foundational elements central to the daily functioning of their communities. They emphasised the vital role of essential emergency services, such as “*fire brigade*”, “*garda*” and “*paramedics*”, in rural areas. Emergency services extended to humans and animals alike, with “*emergency vets*” being referenced as important services within the community.

Furthermore, delegates demonstrated that “*public transport*” in the forms of “*local links*”, “*buses*” and “*trains*” were key components of rural transportation and essential physical infrastructure, with transportation amenities, such as “*bike sheds*” and “*boat clubs*” being equally as important for the communities.

Municipal maintenance and upkeep, such as “*water supply*” and “*waste management*”, were another core essential service.

Social Services for Wellbeing

This theme focused on the infrastructure and support systems that nurture development across the areas of health, education and services pertinent to civic life. Delegates emphasised the integral structures that safeguard the health of community members, such as “*medical clinics*” and “*hospitals*”, alongside services concentrated on mental health and well-being, like “*free therapy centers*” and “*school counsellors*”

In addition to health, support services such as “*citizen information*”, “*social welfare*” and “*Tusla*” were noted.

Community Spaces and Structures

Delegates described community spaces and structures, including “*libraries*”, “*creches*” and “*credit unions*” as indispensable elements of rural infrastructure and public services.

They also noted services that encouraged creativity, such as “*art centers with dance studios*” and spaces that inspired cultural expression, like “*theatres for live performance*” as key community structures.

The need for diversity within community spaces that cater to everyone's needs was further highlighted through references to "sports clubs", "recreational facilities" and "youth work centers in rural areas",

Local "parks" and open spaces were also seen as essential structures contributing to the identity and character of the community rather than for leisure alone.

The second question under the theme Infrastructure and Public Services was: "What are the opportunities and challenges associated with Infrastructure and Public Services? Consider the government and local people, and is everyone affected equally?"

Delegates' responses included opportunities alongside persistent structural and social challenges. Six interconnected themes emerged:

- Reliability and Equity of Core Utilities
- Transport and Connectivity Gaps
- Access to Education and Training Services
- Community Facilities and Local Participation
- Health, Safety, and Emergency Service Disparities
- Economic Pressures impacting Public Service Sustainability

Reliability and Equity of Core Utilities

Delegates described substantial challenges with essential utilities, especially water, electricity and broadband. Many referenced "polluted undrinkable water" and "bad electrical grid maintenance," with one delegate stating that "the electricity grid in rural areas... is terrible, power was lost for weeks during Storm Eowyn — this is unacceptable in 2025."

Broadband and digital access were also highlighted as inequalities. Delegates cited "broadband & internet issues" and noted the "lack of remote working spaces in rural areas." However, delegates also pointed to emerging opportunities, including the "move to digitised services," which could widen access to public services if digital infrastructure improves.

Transport and Connectivity Gaps

Transport was one of the most dominant themes. Delegates described a system that is unreliable, inaccessible, and insufficient for daily needs. They mentioned "lack of public transport," "buses only leave the town once a day," and "local link times [that are] crap — not accessible, not regular." Transport challenges limit access to work, education, healthcare, and social activities. Young people, older adults, and disabled people were named as most vulnerable: "People unable to use public transport eg youth elderly disabled."

Poor infrastructure was also frequently referenced. Delegates noted *“barely/no sidewalks,” “not enough footpaths, cycle lanes or bridle paths,”* and that *“roads in rural areas are often not fixed properly — they just put down a temporary covering and call it a day”*. Safety concerns were also raised, for example, *“delayed buses leads to late home in dark with no street lights.”*

Despite these challenges, delegates identified opportunities in improved transport planning and investment. Suggestions such as *“more train stations,” “improve accurate time and train lines & signals,”* and expanding inter-county routes.

Access to Education and Training Services

Delegates drew strong links between infrastructure gaps and unequal access to education and training. They highlighted *“lack of teachers,” “poor education,”* and that *“schools only accommodate certain type of people.”* Long travel distances and unreliable transport were seen as additional barriers to participation in formal learning.

Opportunities were also noted, particularly around alternative education pathways. Delegates referenced *“agricultural apprenticeships”*. However, they saw the *“lack of full-time training courses”* and *“not enough training for young people”* as an ongoing challenge.

Community Facilities and Local Participation

A shortage of local facilities was identified as a major challenge which undermines community life and participation. Delegates described *“very few spaces”* in creches, *“lack of people”* in sports clubs, and some towns lacking *“basic necessities, shops, post offices, leisure, shopping, etc.”* The lack of spaces was described as exclusionary. Delegates said there were *“lack of opportunities eg youth work centres, subjects for youth, finding like minded people and making friends.”* Transport barriers heightened this exclusion: *“Difficult for youth to get into the town or city because of bad transport.”*

Delegates also noted “government funding” as an opportunity when allocated equitably.

Health, Safety, and Emergency Service Disparities

Access to healthcare and emergency services emerged as a challenge. Delegates cited *“long wait times for medical care,” “excessive waiting lists,” “not much healthcare services nearby,”* and that *“lack of ambulances [are] taking far too long to arrive from other counties.”* Specialised care was described as urban-centred, with *“specialised doctors near city and mostly long waiting lists.”*

Mental health services were noted as particularly strained. Delegates referenced *“staffing”* shortages and barriers facing *“vulnerable people eg migrants, disability, disadvantaged,”* who also experience communication barriers. Delegates noted a need for *“emotional support to students.”*

Safety issues were also raised, including *“no Garda working in the town.”*

Economic Pressures Impacting Public Service Sustainability

Finally, delegates described issues such as “*unemployment,*” “*jobs,*” “*lack of opportunities e.g. jobs,*” “*lack of housing,*” and “*cost of living rises further than wage increase*” as undermining stability and encouraging “*emigration.*” These pressures also make it harder for rural areas to attract and retain essential workers, with one delegate noting that “*people with medicine degrees [are] being underpaid.*”

Lack of funding and investment was repeatedly mentioned: “*county councils lack adequate funding to allocate to rural areas,*” “*lack of resources,*” and “*lack of supplementation for electricity and heating in public buildings.*” Delegates also highlighted “*no promotion of living in rural areas eg benefits/pros,*” indicating a missed opportunity for balanced regional development.

Government initiatives such as funding streams were seen as potential opportunities, but only if distributed fairly and aligned with local needs.

The third question in the theme Infrastructure and Public services was: What can be done to make these opportunities a reality and to address these challenges?

The following themes capture the main areas of proposed action:

- Regional Connectivity and Transportation Infrastructure
- Equitable Employment Opportunities and Workforce Sustainability
- Emergency Services and Mental Health Support Provision
- Education and Lifelong Learning
- Civic Participation and Youth Engagement
- Community Infrastructure and Maintenance

Regional Connectivity and Transportation Infrastructure

Delegates viewed reliable and inclusive transport as essential to the sustainability of rural life. They repeatedly called for government investment to “*allocate more funding to set up reliable public transport*” and to ensure “*every town has a significant amount of public transport, at least two train stations per county and several buses.*” They emphasised the need for “*more frequent buses / other public transport to rural communities*” and “*better schedules that ensure buses are on time, efficient, & easy to book or get tickets for.*”

Delegates proposed a “*railway system connecting the whole country, not Dublin centric,*” including “*routes on outskirts of mainland*” and “*trains in Donegal.*” Delegates also suggested safer and more sustainable options, including “*cycle lanes that connect to each other,*” “*have more walking areas,*” and “*don’t have paths right on the edge of really busy roads.*” Improved transport planning should be locally informed, with one group recommending to “*ask people what times would actually work*” for local bus services.

Equitable Employment Opportunities and Workforce Sustainability

Creating and sustaining employment opportunities in rural areas was seen as fundamental. Delegates called for *“more jobs in rural areas”* and to *“help more people find jobs,”* suggesting that government should *“encourage people to live in rural areas”* by promoting local employment and remote work. Reliable digital infrastructure was viewed as critical, with calls for *“more funding for fast-tracked progress on [the] NBI plan”* and to *“make it so more people can work from home / provide reliable WIFI connections.”*

Delegates supported *“publicly funded remote working spaces – incorporate into libraries”* and improving pay and conditions for essential workers, including *“better pay for healthcare and social care workers”* and *“community employment offices should have public servant benefits.”* They also emphasised retention strategies, such as *“incentives for Irish nurses / doctors / healthcare professionals to stay in Ireland after college,”* and improving inclusivity through hiring *“multilingual staff & translators.”*

Emergency Services and Mental Health Support Provision

Delegates stressed the importance of strengthening local emergency and health responses. They advocated for *“more public service in rural areas such as fire stations and garda stations,”* with *“full time garda in every station,”* and *“more ambulances.”* They also sought animal emergency supports, suggesting *“no matter where you are in Ireland there should be an emergency vet less than an hour away”* and a *“24-hour emergency vets for farmers.”*

Mental health services were seen as severely underdeveloped in rural areas. Delegates proposed establishing *“outreach hubs for mental health / part-time clinics”* and improving staffing levels to *“work on increasing number of and improving healthcare services.”* Addressing pay and training was also seen as vital, with delegates calling for *“better pay for public services”* and *“improved police force – better training (harassment / discrimination / disability awareness).”*

Education and Lifelong Learning

Access to education and lifelong learning was highlighted as a key area for development. Delegates called for *“more training opportunities in community areas and more teachers to actually teach the courses,”* alongside *“more educational courses outside of school in the community.”* They emphasised inclusivity in education, believing *“universal makes everything accessible for everyone of all abilities,”* and requested better emotional support services in schools, recommending that *“schools should have at least two fully qualified school counsellors (not just guidance counsellors).”*

Practical and skills-based learning was viewed as essential for rural revitalisation, including *“apprenticeships for farming/agriculture for urban people / people without a farming background.”* Delegates also wanted to *“fix young people access to financial literacy programmes”* to help them gain skills for independence and employment.

Civic Participation and Youth Engagement

Delegates believed that meaningful rural development requires community involvement and youth representation. They called for *“monthly community meetings for towns/villages to build rapport and feedback on issues to the county council,”* and urged decision-makers to *“be transparent and let us be heard.”* They recommended that government *“have more meetings in local areas”* and *“community meetings – listen to the communities.”*

Youth engagement was also prioritised. Delegates suggested to *“invest in youthwork, support the National Youth Council of Ireland,”* and to *“build/create Youth Cafés & other youth spaces in rural areas.”* They also called for *“grants to youth groups to rent in rural areas”* to help sustain youth-led activities and local inclusion.

Community Infrastructure and Maintenance

Delegates consistently emphasised investment in community infrastructure and essential utilities. They advocated to *“spend more money on electrical and water maintenance – prioritise rural areas,”* *“better maintaining of waste,”* and *“better public lighting/street lamps.”* Modernisation of infrastructure was also suggested, such as *“wires can be buried underground to prevent trees breaking them & complete overhaul of electricity.”*

They also called for planning measures to ensure liveable and well-serviced towns, suggesting *“halt land development, follow through with estates/housing to prevent ghost estates.”* Delegates recommended a *“general checklist for every town – grocery store, post office, emergency care, leisure, public transport, community space, and mental health space,”* alongside *“build more public childcare”* and *“more funding for rural libraries.”*

Theme 2: Infrastructure and Public Services Recommendations

- Increase public transport services, such as trains and buses, with more tailored schedules and better connectivity with a greater variety of small towns. Provide sufficient security measures, particularly at night, and ensure tickets are easily sourced.
- Due to there being a lack of accessible buildings, the Government should provide incentives and grants to businesses to rent out their spaces for young people to meet.
- The Government should work to set up a reliable and affordable public transport systems in rural Ireland. Ensuring that public transport is accessible to everyone who wants to utilise it.
- Make all opportunities inclusive and accessible for young people with disabilities and young carers.



Theme 3: Community Participation

The first question under the theme “Community Participation” was what does Community Participation mean? What is included?

Delegates described community participation as the various ways people come together to support and improve their areas. Themes identified were:

- Youth Engagement and Empowerment
- Sports and Activities
- Arts and Culture
- Shared Spaces for Community Life
- Civic Participation

Youth Engagement and Empowerment

Delegates described youth programmes such as *Foróige*, *Comhairle na nÓg*, and the *Youth Assembly* as vital in giving young people a say in their community and political life. One delegate said, “*Comhairle helps people learn about politics*,” while another noted, “*having a new perspective coming from young people*.” Delegates saw these programmes as opportunities to “*improve and advocate for where you live*” while developing leadership, confidence, and civic awareness.

Sports and Activities

Sports clubs and local fitness initiatives were repeatedly mentioned as cornerstones of community engagement. Delegates cited “*GAA*,” “*community games*,” “*greenways*,” and “*marathon/camino*” as examples that “*bring people together*.” Sport was said to encourage intergenerational participation and social inclusion. Delegates viewed sporting spaces as shared points of pride and belonging.

Arts and Culture

Delegates also highlighted participation in arts and culture, “*theatre/drama*,” “*festivals*,” “*music*,” and “*arts events set up by volunteers*,” as important for connection and identity. These spaces were described as creative outlets that celebrate heritage and enable people of all ages to participate.

Shared Spaces for Community Life

The availability of shared spaces such as “*community halls*,” “*town halls used for events and activities*,” and “*libraries*” was described as central to participation. Delegates saw these facilities as safe, open places that create regular opportunities for social interaction and learning.

Civic Participation

Delegates also linked participation to public decision-making and representation. Involvement in “*community councils*,” “*school boards*,” and “*voting in local elections*” were seen as key ways to “*show interest in shaping public life*” and ensure local voices are heard.

The second question in the theme Community Participation asked “what are the opportunities and challenges associated with community participation?”

Five interconnected themes emerged:

- Youth Civic Participation
- Volunteering and Active Citizenship
- Community Belonging and Social Connection
- Access and Inclusion Barriers
- Institutional and Structural Challenges

Youth Civic Participation

Delegates described significant opportunities for young people to build civic awareness and leadership skills through participation. They highlighted initiatives such as *Comhairle na nÓg*, which offer “a lot of opportunities for young people” and allow them to “*talk to government eg Leinster House*.” These programmes help young people “*learn about politics*,” provide “*a new perspective coming from young people*,” and enable them to “*improve and advocate for where you live*.”

However, delegates also identified challenges that limit youth involvement. They noted that “*younger people may not be considered*” in decision-making and that some adults are “*not caring about what young people have to say*.”

Volunteering and Active Citizenship

Delegates identified strong opportunities to grow active citizenship through volunteering. They suggested linking “*students like TYs for a volunteer role*,” or introducing “*required volunteer hours for graduation*.” Some emphasised the role of local structures such as “*community councils*,” while others described the value of “*systems to help encourage people to volunteer*” and the need for “*incentives*” to promote engagement. For many, volunteer activity is personally meaningful, offering “*a sense of purpose and worth*” and contributing to community wellbeing.

Despite these opportunities, delegates emphasised the strain on existing volunteers. They referenced “*volunteer burnout*,” “*lack of volunteers to keep groups going — high workload causing burnout*,” and specific examples such as “*Scouts — leader burnout, no funding*.” Barriers such as “*unsocial hours for volunteering*,” “*lack of numbers*,” and “*lack of effort*” further reduced participation. Financial obstacles also limited sustainability, with delegates saying there is “*not enough funding or funding not being spent correctly*.”

Community Belonging and Social Connection

Community participation was widely viewed as a powerful way to foster belonging. Delegates described how *“community comes together tight knit close”* and that social activity provides *“easy ways to make friends.”* Events such as *“integration days”* and *“community projects or interventions helping to stop racism”* were seen as ways to promote inclusion. Participation within your community also benefited individual wellbeing, offering a *“positive impact on mental health”* and creating *“a sense of belonging.”*

However, delegates also highlighted concerns around declining social interaction. They noted that *“due to social media & tech there is less in-person interaction... more distractions,”* leading to weakened community ties. Some communities experience a *“lack of social relationships in villages,”* and social inclusion is uneven, with *“segregation and stereotypes”* such as *“if you're not bulky you can't do sports.”* Others referred to *“social stigma,” “loss of language and culture,”* and *“people not wanting to cooperate,”* which can undermine community cohesion. Another delegate noted a *“lack of intergenerational interaction,”* as a challenge in community life.

Access and Inclusion Barriers

Delegates identified practical barriers that restrict community participation. Transport and accessibility were recurring issues: *“travel,” “accessibility,” “lack of transport to rural areas,”* and *“isolation — lack of transport”* were noted. Physical infrastructure also limits access, with some communities facing *“no buildings to rent — location”* or *“lack of access to sports facilities.”* Insurance requirements were another barrier, as *“having to have insurance to participate in events”* excludes those unable to afford it.

In terms of inclusion, delegates pointed to *“not enough diversity in activities,” “narrow age-range for events,” “not always very inclusive for people who have disabilities,” “lack of variety of activities for those who don't do sports,”* and *“language barriers”*. Awareness gaps further restrict participation; *“lack of information,” “events... attended by the same people as info is not branched out,” “not enough awareness,”* and *“lack of awareness and engagement with many young people”*.

Institutional and Structural Challenges

Delegates also identified systemic barriers rooted in governance and policy. Some noted there is *“lack of attention from county councils, governments etc,”* and that *“local county councils' lengthy agendas”* slow progress and discourage engagement. Funding gaps were a major concern, with repeated mentions of *“finances”* and *“funding.”* Promotion was also seen as insufficient, leading to low visibility of community initiatives due to *“lack of information”* and weak advertising resources (*“ads funding”*).

The third question under the theme “Community Participation” was what can be done to make these opportunities a reality and to remedy these challenges?

Themes identified were:

- Secure Funding, Facilities, and Infrastructure
- Empower and Engage with Youth
- Inclusion, Equality, and Diversity
- Improve Transport and Accessibility
- Strengthen Local Governance and Representation
- Promote Awareness and Communication

Secure Funding, Facilities, and Infrastructure

Delegates called for long-term, ring-fenced investment in community activities. *“Give councils specific funding for community events & a quota of how many events must be ran per year. “Projects ran by local groups, funded by governments” and “funding for events, locations/spaces/facilities” were also common proposals. “Have community buildings to hold events without cost” was cited as a way to remove financial barriers. Delegates believed that public spaces like halls, libraries, and community centres should serve as hubs for civic and social life.*

Some also linked funding to fairness, ensuring rural areas are not overlooked in favour of urban ones. Delegates said that *“support from councils”* must be transparent and consistent, particularly for small volunteer-led organisations.

Empower and Engage with Youth

Delegates repeatedly emphasised that engaging young people is critical to community sustainability. They proposed *“include volunteering in school curriculum”* and *“add required hours for every student to complete to graduate,”* believing this would normalise civic engagement. *“Promotion of youth organisations in schools as a social and personal opportunity”* was also seen as key. An example of this was *“more signage (in school) to include young people in community projects (tidy towns) -> school involvement”*.

Delegates called for investment in *“more youth groups and sponsorship towards the youth”* and then to encourage *“young people to involve themselves with youth groups.”*

Also creating leadership opportunities that allow young people to *“help on a larger scale in government”* was proposed.

Inclusion, Equality, and Diversity

Delegates stressed that inclusion must underpin all community planning. They proposed *“recognise LGBTQ+ groups and support them equally to any other groups,”* and *“make activities etc. sure to be inclusive and accessible for people with disabilities.”*

Delegates also highlighted cultural inclusion, proposing *“plan inter-cultural events to foster understanding and community”* and *“Irish language promotion - Irish dancing, GAA, Gaeilge, signs, Irish college.”* This could be encouraged through the creation of *“sister schools, sister towns, more sense of Irishness connections.”* Another solution was holding *“yearly social seminars in halls to introduce new and old community members”*.

Delegates said inclusion requires more than policy, it requires proactive engagement. Community leaders and councils, they argued, must reflect the diversity of the people they represent.

Improve Transport and Accessibility

Delegates described transport as essential to enabling participation. They suggested *“fix TFI,” “Local Link routes to nearby major bus stations,”* and *“transportation for no self-isolation.”* These improvements were seen as crucial for those without access to private transport.

Delegates also emphasised rural connectivity: *“Focus on rural areas for local transport systems”* and *“more transport for sporting events.”* Reliable transport, they noted, reduces isolation, improves accessibility, and connects communities across regions.

Affordable and inclusive transport options were seen as particularly important for young people, older residents, and those with disabilities. Without them, delegates warned, opportunities for engagement will remain unequal.

Strengthen Local Governance and Representation

Delegates expressed a strong desire for communities to have a greater role in decision-making. *“Local county councils need to represent all communities in their areas, government can enforce this,”* one said. Others added, *“community and minister working together”* and *“community councils should have more power.”*

Delegates believed that greater transparency and accountability from local government would rebuild trust and empower communities to act. *“Local decision making”* was seen as the best way to ensure policies reflect lived experience and this should be ongoing rather than occasional. They suggested that the government should *“create meetings with citizens and have an open conversation with them,”*

Promote Awareness and Communication

Delegates identified improved communication as a simple but powerful way to strengthen participation. They suggested *“put up posters in shops, schools, post offices, etc.”* and *“more talks of youth clubs like Instagram.”*

“Local awareness campaigns” and “encourage advertising and inclusion of a wide variety of age groups” were proposed to engage both younger and older residents. Delegates felt that outreach should use multiple channels such as schools, social media, and public spaces to foster participation as “events are often attended by the same people as info is not branched out”

Theme 3: Community Participation Recommendations

- Promote and incentivise the use of the Irish language in schools, at festivals and Irish cultural events. Promote Irish folk and traditional music and the teaching of GAA, Irish dancing etc through the Irish language.
- The government should dedicate funding to create social events, clubs, activities and spaces in rural areas that are accessible to people of all different ages, backgrounds, ethnicities, etc. They should include the people of rural communities in the decisions regarding new facilities in their towns and villages.
- Add required volunteering hours for every student in order to pass the Junior Cycle.
- Create places of protection, such as events and spaces, to show support in the community for minority groups.

5. Appendices

Appendix 1: Lundy Model

The National Rural Youth Assembly 2025 was convened according to the *Lundy Model of Participation* (2007), ensuring that young people's involvement was meaningful, inclusive, and directly connected to national policymaking. The process also aligned with the principles of the *National Framework for Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making* (2021), ensuring that the voices of young people were listened to, taken seriously, and given due weight in shaping the next *Rural Development Policy 2026–2030*.

The Assembly adopted the four key dimensions of the Lundy Model: **Space, Voice, Audience, and Influence**, to create an experience that was both empowering and impactful.

5.1 Space

The Assembly created a safe, inclusive, and welcoming environment for young people from across Ireland to share their lived experiences of rural life. Delegates were supported by trained facilitators at each discussion table, ensuring that every participant felt comfortable and respected.

Accessibility and wellbeing were central considerations throughout. Materials were developed using clear, youth-friendly language, and visual resources supported understanding for all literacy levels and different communication styles. A Chill-Out Space was provided for delegates who needed time away from the group setting, and sensory supports were available upon request.

The event was guided by safeguarding best practice. A Designated Liaison Person was on site for the duration of the Assembly, and adult supporters were briefed on their roles to maintain an environment of trust and safety.

This physical and emotional space allowed young people to speak freely about their rural realities, from transport challenges and education access to opportunities in culture, tourism, and enterprise, without fear of judgement.

5.2 Voice

Delegates were actively supported to share their perspectives through a series of creative and structured participation methods. These included interactive workshops, poster design sessions, table discussions, and digital Mentimeter voting to prioritise key themes. Their perspectives were also collected in a pre-assembly survey.

Each table was facilitated by experienced youth workers trained in participatory methodologies. They encouraged balanced and respectful discussion, ensuring that all delegates, regardless of age, confidence, or background, had an equal opportunity to contribute, whether verbally or in writing.

Activities such as *“Tourism, Culture and Heritage”* and the *“Rural Ireland 2030 Vision Piece”* invited delegates to imagine, design, and debate their vision for the future of rural life. The process encouraged collaboration, creativity, and collective problem-solving, ensuring that young people’s voices shaped the recommendations from the ground up.

5.3 Audience

The views and recommendations of the delegates were heard directly by key policymakers. Senior representatives from the Department of Rural and Community Development (DRCD) and the Department of Children, Disability and Equality (DCDE) attended the Assembly, engaging with participants throughout the day.

Minister Dara Calleary, Minister for Rural and Community Development, officially opened and closed the Assembly, affirming the Government’s commitment to ensuring that young people’s lived experiences inform the next phase of rural policy. Officials from both Departments circulated among the tables, listening to discussions, answering questions, and taking notes on delegates’ insights.

Delegates presented their collective recommendations during the closing plenary session, sharing their ideas for strengthening rural communities, improving services, and creating more sustainable futures for young people living outside urban areas.

5.4 Influence

The views and recommendations shared at the National Rural Youth Assembly 2025 will play a central role in shaping Ireland’s rural development policy from 2026.

All discussion materials, including placemats, posters, and recommendation sheets were gathered and analysed by the report writers, alongside feedback from a pre-Assembly survey. The final report will be submitted to the Department of Rural and Community Development and Gaeltacht and shared publicly.

Following the event, delegates will reconvene online to review and refine the language of their recommendations, ensuring youth ownership of the final output. In keeping with best practice in youth participation, officials from DRCDG will provide a written response outlining how the Assembly’s contributions have been considered and integrated into the policy development process.

Appendix 2: National Rural Youth Assembly 2025 – Preparation Session Statistics

Section	Category	Details / Numbers
Event Information	Date	13 September 2025
	Location	Online (Zoom)
	Time	11:00 a.m. – 1:15 p.m.
Attendance Overview	Total Delegates	35
	Adult Attendees	9
	Sitting Delegates	20
	Guest Delegates	15
Delegate Profile	Rural Delegates	28
	Urban Delegates	7
	Female	20
	Male	12
	Other	3
Geographic Representation	Total Counties Represented	21

	Counties	Meath, Louth, Mayo, Kildare, Clare, Roscommon, Cork, Tipperary, Donegal, Longford, Carlow, Laois, Westmeath, Dublin, Wicklow, Galway, Wexford, Sligo, Limerick, Waterford
Age Range	12–15 years	16
	16–17 years	8
	18+ years	11
Participating Organisations	Total Organisations	18
	Organisations	Nexus Youth Integration Project; TENI; Spunout; GFS; Dyspraxia Ireland; UNICEF; Irish Girl Guides; Donegal Youth Service; Léargas; Foróige SAFE Project; The Early Learning Initiative; Féach; ISPCC; NYCI; NYAI; EIL/AFS Ireland; YMCA Ireland; Limerick Youth Service
Comhairlí na nÓg Represented	Total Comhairlí	8
	Comhairlí	Waterford; Sligo; Galway County; Tipperary; Clare; Longford; Cork County; Roscommon

Appendix 3: National Rural Youth Assembly 2025 – Main Event Statistics

Section	Category	Details / Numbers
Event Information	Date	24 September 2025
	Location	Miesian Plaza, Dublin
	Time	11:00 a.m. – 4:00 p.m.
Attendance Overview	Total Delegates	54
	Sitting Delegates	38
	Guest Delegates	15
Delegate Profile	Rural Delegates	41
	Urban Delegates	13
	Female	34
	Male	16
	Other	3
	Prefer not to say	1
Age Range	12–15 years	19
	16–17 years	20
	18+ years	15

Geographic Representation	Total Counties Represented	25
	Counties	Meath; Mayo; Dublin; Leitrim; Kildare; Clare; Roscommon; Cavan; Cork; Tipperary; Donegal; Longford; Carlow; Laois; Offaly; Westmeath; Kerry; Galway; Wicklow; Wexford; Louth; Sligo; Limerick; Waterford; Kilkenny
Participating Organisations	Total Organisations	26
	Organisations	TENI; Nexus Youth Integration Project; Jigsaw; NYAI Ireland; GFS; Dyspraxia Ireland; Castlebar Foróige Club; UNICEF Ireland; Irish Girl Guides; Donegal Youth Service; An Taisce Climate Ambassador; Léargas; Spunout; Gaisce; Young Voices; Foróige SAFE Project; The Crann Centre; The Early Learning Initiative; NYCI; Young Social Innovators; Féach; ISPCC; Citywise; EIL/AFS Ireland; YMCA Ireland; Limerick Youth Service
Comhairlí na nÓg Represented	Total Comhairlí	17
	Comhairlí	Louth; Waterford; Kilkenny; Sligo; Galway County; Tipperary; Clare; Longford; Galway; Meath; Cork County; Mayo; Roscommon; Cavan; Fingal; Kildare; Leitrim

Appendix 4: Activity 1 - Tourism, Culture and Heritage

Table 1: Tourism, Culture and Heritage Insights from Delegate Consultations

Theme	Examples	Opportunities	Challenges	Proposed Action
Tourism	<p>Delegates highlighted traditional food and drink, landmarks, natural landscapes, and cultural events.</p> <p>Examples included: “Boxty,” “Guinness,” “A full Irish breakfast,” “Cliffs of Moher,” “Wild Atlantic Way,” “Museums,” “Electric Picnic / Ploughing,” and “Exploring new things.” Tourism connects visitors to</p>	<p>Economic benefit: “Tourists are good for the economy,” “Tourism brings money into the country.”</p> <p>Cultural promotion and preservation: “Tourism can provide heritage and preserve culture,” “Awareness of our language and culture.”</p> <p>Youth engagement: “More engaging events for younger people and tourists.”</p> <p>Use of natural assets: “Natural beauty,” “Scenery”.</p>	<p>Transport and accessibility: “Public transport to get to the area,”</p> <p>“No train/private transfers to get to a city,”</p> <p>“Distance from arrival points of tourists.”</p> <p>Resource limitations and infrastructure: “Lack of resources,”</p> <p>“Lack of infrastructure,”</p> <p>“Uninteresting attractions.”</p> <p>Negative community impacts: “Airbnb – housing,”</p> <p>“Overcrowding of popular places,” “Raising prices of</p>	<p>Improved transport: “Direct transport links from airports,”</p> <p>“State-owned public transport,”</p> <p>“More reliable local connections”.</p> <p>Cultural and environmental protection: “Funding for Irish language & culture facilities,”</p> <p>“Protection of wildlife and ecosystems,”</p> <p>“Restrictions on heritage areas.</p> <p>Promotion of rural Ireland: “Market less visited rural sites (not just Dublin).”</p> <p>Youth-focused events: “More modern cultural events,”</p> <p>“Student/adult exchange trips.</p>

	Ireland's landscapes, heritage, and social life		property.” Cultural and social concerns: “No support for fluent Irish speakers & gaeilgeoirs,” “Disrespect for culture,” “Stereotypes.”	
Culture	<p>Culture expressed through language, music, dance, literature, sports, and rural life.</p> <p>Examples included: <i>“The Irish language,”</i> <i>“The Fleadh,”</i> <i>“Sean-nós singing,”</i> <i>“Sports – GAA,”</i> <i>“Tea (Barry’s Tea),”</i> <i>“The bog, turf</i></p>	<p>Community cohesion: <i>“Brings people together,”</i> <i>“Community connectivity.”</i></p> <p>Cultural economy: <i>“Tourism can come from both culture and heritage,”</i> <i>“Economic growth.”</i></p> <p>Language promotion and education: <i>“Irish is a core subject,”</i> <i>“Gaelscoils/coláiste.”</i></p> <p>Youth engagement: <i>“Encourage self-discovery,”</i> <i>“Music.”</i></p>	<p>Language decline: <i>“Irish language is not as popular,”</i> <i>“Teaching methods discourage learners”.</i></p> <p>Loss of traditions: <i>“Older generation not passing down traditions,”</i> <i>“Loss of Irish music,”</i> <i>“Modern culture overshadowing traditional.”</i></p> <p>Infrastructure/funding limits: <i>“Lack of venues,”</i> <i>“Need for youth space funding”.</i></p> <p>Resistance to change:</p>	<p>Reviving the Irish language: <i>“Teach in a more accessible, spoken format,”</i> <i>“More gaelscoils.”</i></p> <p>Expand cultural events: <i>“More frequent Culture Nights,”</i> <i>“Non-sport activities.”</i></p> <p>Preserve heritage: <i>“Record local history,”</i> <i>“Protect heritage sites.”</i></p> <p>Funding and community support: <i>“Grants,”</i> <i>“Support smaller businesses,”</i> <i>“Support Gaeltachts</i></p>

			<p><i>"Role of women in the home,"</i></p> <p><i>"Fear of change".</i></p>	
Heritage	<p>Heritage examples included</p> <p><i>"Irish dancing," "Built heritage relevant to all areas,"</i></p> <p><i>"Old buildings," "Gaeltachts," "Irish freedom fighters,"</i></p> <p><i>"Family traditions," and "Mythology."</i></p> <p>Heritage links community, history, and identity.</p>	<p>Tourism and cultural assets: <i>"Tourism can come from both culture and heritage,"</i></p> <p><i>"Music,"</i></p> <p><i>"Folk legends"</i></p> <p>Community and identity: <i>"Keeping the community together," "Community support".</i></p> <p>Education and growth: <i>"Learning from the past,"</i></p> <p><i>"Training opportunities,"</i></p> <p><i>"Historical awareness."</i></p>	<p>Language decline: <i>"Irish language is not as popular,"</i></p> <p>Loss of traditions: <i>"Older generation not passing down traditions,"</i></p> <p><i>"Modern culture overshadowing traditional."</i></p> <p>Infrastructure/funding limits: <i>"Lack of venues,"</i></p> <p><i>"Need for youth space funding".</i></p> <p>Resistance to change: <i>"Role of women in the home"</i></p>	<p>Education and awareness: <i>"School programmes for in-depth heritage learning,"</i></p> <p><i>"Global awareness through diaspora links."</i></p> <p>Revitalise Irish language: <i>"Education reform,"</i></p> <p><i>"Increased funding."</i></p> <p>Events/facilities: <i>"Festivals to celebrate heritage," "Facilities for traditional arts."</i></p> <p>Preservation/documentation: <i>"Record oral histories,"</i></p> <p><i>"Grants for built heritage restoration."</i></p>



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