

Macra na Feirme statement for Joint Oireachtas Committee on Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs

Chairman, ladies and gentlemen, I would like to begin by thanking the Joint Oireachtas committee on Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs for giving us the opportunity to present to you today. My name is Seán Finan and I am the 35th National President of Macra na Feirme and I am delighted to be joined today by Macra na Feirme Policy officer Paul Smith.

Macra na Feirme is the representative organisation for young farmers and rural youth between the ages of 17 and 35. We have 9000 members in approximately 200 clubs across the country. Our focus is on 6 main programme areas including agriculture, public speaking, performing arts, sport, travel and community involvement.

Macra na Feirme aids the personal development of young people through encouraging social interaction and participation in our programmes and activities.

The Macra na Feirme Rural Youth committee is focused on developing policy and programmes geared toward young people in rural Ireland. The 3 key areas of concentration for the committee are:

- Rural and Youth affairs
- Health and Well Being
- Travel and Exchange

Macra na Feirme is also affiliated to Rural Youth Europe and this provides our organisation with the opportunity to discuss issues of concern with other affiliated organisation across Europe.

Encouraging job creation should be seen as the pivotal element to ensuring a high quality of life in rural Ireland. A steady supply of employment will decrease the prospects of a depopulated countryside as it will inspire more young people to remain in rural Ireland.

To attract job creation to rural Ireland, an educated workforce capable of filling positions in these new businesses and a fully functioning and modern infrastructural system need to be available. In light of global challenges such as the Trump presidency and Brexit rural areas have to be a target for job creation.

The regional action plans for jobs offers huge opportunity. Resources are required to deliver on the regional action plans.

In terms of infrastructure; broadband and the rail network as well as the regional road network need to be modernised.

The Macra na Feirme Rural Youth committee believes that without high speed broadband in rural Ireland, the ability of rural communities to prosper is constraint. As day to day activities increase in their reliance on broadband, the availability of the latest broadband technology will be the defining aspect in the ability of rural Ireland to attract business and Jobs

Improving the level of broadband, by supporting the roll out of the National Broadband Action plan, will increase the attractiveness for people to remain in the countryside. For the farmer who wants to register their calves online or lodge their Basic Payment application, the student returning home who wants to submit a project online for college, a business looking to establish in a rural town or a

resident of a rural area who wants to shop on line, a modern and efficient fast broadband service is crucial.

The SIRO Project which is a joint venture between ESB and Vodafone is being rolled out across the country. This project will see fibre optic cable rolled out by wrapped the cable around the ESB wires. This is being hailed by some as the best thing since rural electrification. It is progress and we welcome that. However the focus of the project is on the medium to large town and not rural areas. The map is very striking with many rural areas left barren and losing out again in this project.

The importance of an adequate rail network and secondary road network must not be forgotten. From a tourism point of view, the easier it is to manoeuvre around Ireland, the more attractive it is to visit rural tourist attractions therefore helping to lure tourists from cities to attractions outside of urban areas therefore benefiting rural tourism. Boosting rural tourism will have an accumulative effect by increasing the traffic through country towns, leading to more being spent and more job creation in local areas.

A modern road and rail network will also assist the countryside in attracting more businesses therefore increasing jobs. An efficient infrastructure system and job creation should be viewed together, as they both benefit each other.

In terms of our rail network Macra na Feirme would call for a full review of time tabling on rail routes to ensure that a commuter services is provided on all lines. We would also insist that any review would give a guaranteed of continuity of service in the medium to long term. This would mean that our smaller regional town are then an attractive proposition to live in for commuters who work in our larger towns and bigger cities. This has the potential to take people off the road network and create a better quality of life for people who have to commute to work.

Macra na Feirme feels investment in rural infrastructure and education are key to encouraging jobs and growth in rural Ireland. We would propose the government increases the level of funding to local rural projects and more strategic use of LEADER funding in terms of encouraging enterprise and rural diversification

We as a youth organisation feel the health of young people, both physical and mental, is an area that needs much more support in rural areas. The level of access to health services needs improvement in rural society.

Social isolation is an issue and due to the geographic constraints of rural communities and the nature of farm related careers, people can live a good distance away from each other and may not interact with many people on a daily basis and this increases the likelihood of becoming isolated.

Macra's Rural Youth committee has tried to tackle this problem by running campaigns such as the Know Your Neighbour campaign sponsored by Calor, hosting the Mental Health Seminar at the 2015 Macra annual conference and engaging with the newly established Youth Mental Health Taskforce.

We also feel mental health services should be focused on a more community basis, focusing on mindfulness and its importance. Mental resilience and coping skills are critically important for surviving in our high tech modern world and this resilience is not as strong as it used to be.

Rural crime is an increasing problem in rural Ireland. Some 50% of young farmers, in this year's FBD Young Farmer of the Year, said they had previously been a victim of crime. The survey also found that 83% of young farmers feel they should have the right to bear arms to defend their property.

This finding sums up the fear that exist, of being a victim of crime and the frustration that being felt by the failure to deal with this rural crime issue. Macra na Feirme calls for a significant portion of the new Garda recruits announced in the recent budget be posted in rural areas. Dealing with rural crime will improve the attractiveness of living in rural areas.

While not directly linked to rural youth employment or health, Macra feels action needs to be taken to tackle the astronomically high quotes young people receive for car insurance. The current price insurance companies are charging young people make it unaffordable for a young person to get car insurance. Our resolution to this issue is to work with the insurance provider FBD to secure a 15% discount for Macra na Feirme members. As a nation we should be providing young people with support, allowing them to grow and develop by spending their money on college, recreational activities and travel and not being crippled by expensive car insurance.

To conclude, I would like to declare from my experience that rural Ireland is very much alive and despite some of the commentary that exists, there is a lot of good work being done. We have to promote the quality of our lives in rural areas and the benefits that living in rural areas bring including fresh air and views of our spectacular picturesque countryside.

Farming provides opportunities for young farmers but in most cases the same opportunities do not exist for rural young people not involved in farming. For non farmers, attracting and retaining these young people in rural areas is about jobs and more jobs.

As an organisation we feel implementation of the very comprehensive Commission for Economic Development of Rural Areas (CEDRA) report is very important. The CEDRA Report and the importance of its implementation should not be underestimated. This report needs to be properly resourced and the actions delivered.

We also feel the LEADER programme, under the Rural Development Programme for Ireland, along with funding for the European Investment Bank, should be used to provide investment to projects in rural areas. The more investment opportunities we make available for rural Ireland, the more growth these regions will witness. We would like to see funding provided by LEADER being focused to support the development of small niche enterprises that will act to attract foreign direct investment to rural areas.

Further funding needs to be also set aside towards preventative measures to stop flooding in rural areas. Flooding has disastrous consequences on both people's homes, lives and business in the areas affected.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank you for allowing us to engage with the committee and I hope Macra na Feirme and the Joint Oireachtas committee can work together to improve the quality of life in rural Ireland.

Thank you.

Sean Finan,

Macra na Feirme,

National President 2015 - 2017