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## Research Report

# Practical guide to monitoring rural development policy in Ireland: Opportunities and challenges

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# PRACTICAL GUIDE TO MONITORING RURAL DEVELOPMENT POLICY IN IRELAND: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

ELISH KELLY, SEAMUS MCGUINNESS AND ANNE DEVLIN



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**January 2024**

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## **ABBREVIATIONS**

|      |   |
|------|---|
| CSO  | Central Statistics Office                     |
| DRCD | Department of Rural and Community Development |
| ESRI | Economic and Social Research Institute        |
| KPI  | key performance indicator                     |
| LFS  | Labour Force Survey                           |
| SILC | Survey on Income and Living Conditions        |

## CHAPTER 1

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### Introduction

As part of the research programme between the Department of Rural and Community Development (DRCD) and the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI), the ESRI's second research output, *Developing a Framework to Monitor Rural Development Policy in Ireland: Opportunities and Challenges* (Kelly et al., 2023) examined a range of potential metrics that the DRCD could adopt in order to monitor the impact of the government's Our Rural Future: Rural Development Policy 2021–2025.

Policy evaluation is an essential tool of government because it ensures that the objectives of policies and programmes are being met and that tax revenues are being well spent. In many instances, policy evaluation involves using standard counterfactual analysis to measure the impact of a programme on a well-defined outcome variable, for example, the change in unemployment rates following the introduction of a wage subsidy offered to firms hiring persons on the Live Register. However, in many policy areas with wide-ranging and cross-cutting objectives, standard counterfactual analysis is not possible and policy evaluation takes the form of monitoring changes in key performance indicators (KPIs) that are linked to specific policy objectives and general well-being levels. Given the large-scale budgets associated with rural and community development, it is essential that Ireland's data infrastructure is sufficient to allow for effective policy evaluation in these areas.

The focus of this practical guide is to present those KPIs identified in the accompanying report, *Developing a Framework to Monitor Rural Development Policy in Ireland: Opportunities and Challenges* (Kelly et al., 2023), that are currently available to the DRCD to monitor the impact of Our Rural Future. In particular, we focus on those indicators to which the six-way urban–rural categorisation of Ireland schema from the Central Statistics Office (CSO) is presently applied. A key finding from the study is that applying a standard urban–rural dichotomy to the development of KPIs is of limited value given that this classification masks a large



amount of heterogeneity across areas (Whelan et al., 2023). Thus, KPIs to which the six-way urban–rural classification is applied to, or can be, allows for a much greater level of granularity in monitoring the impact of rural policies and the measurement of rural well-being. The six-way urban–rural classification subdivides urban areas into:

1. cities;
2. satellite urban towns
3. independent urban towns

and rural locations into:

4. rural areas with high urban influence;
5. rural areas with moderate urban influence;
6. highly rural/remote areas.

The urban subdivision was undertaken on the basis of the proportion of people in employment in cities, while the rural classification was based on the proportion of usual residents in employment in urban areas. We also present measures to which the six-way urban–rural categorisation is not currently applied but which we have identified as being important for monitoring rural development in Ireland.

In recent years, there has been increased attention paid at the EU and OECD level to the importance of the rural community and its development. Ireland has been no exception in acknowledging and emphasising the importance of rural communities in the country’s growth and development, along with the well-being of its citizens. The government’s Our Rural Future policy was designed as an ambitious plan for rural Ireland that not only took advantage of opportunities in rural locations but also mitigated against the risks and challenges that these areas are facing. The plan centres around eight key themes:

1. optimising digital connectivity;
2. supporting employment and careers;
3. revitalising rural towns and villages;
4. enhancing participation, leadership and resilience in rural communities;
5. enhancing public services;

6. transitioning to a climate neutral society;
7. the sustainability of agriculture, the marine and forestry;
8. the sustainability of the islands and coastal communities.

Under these key themes, the government identified an initial 146 measures it is currently pursuing to achieve nine key deliverables:

1. remote working;
2. revitalising rural towns and villages;
3. jobs for rural Ireland;
4. rural living;
5. rural Ireland's unique tourism, culture and heritage;
6. supporting communities to create their own future;
7. agriculture, the marine and forestry;
8. island and coastal communities;
9. transitioning to a climate-neutral economy.<sup>1</sup>

Some of the government's 146 measures are scheme/fund-based (e.g., 'Invest in roll-out of National Broadband Plan'). Others involve the development or implementation of policies (e.g., 'Implement the National Remote Work Strategy to facilitate employees in working from home, or from co-working spaces, which will support the retention of skilled people in rural areas'). And others are less tangible in nature (e.g., 'Encourage greater use of the Buy and Renew Scheme and the Repair and Lease Scheme to combat vacancy and dereliction'). In this report, we focus on KPIs that can be used to monitor the scheme/fund-based measures that are being implemented under Our Rural Future.

It is important to note that in the report that accompanies this practical guide, *Developing a Framework to Monitor Rural Development Policy in Ireland: Opportunities and Challenges* (Kelly et al., 2023), we set out a range of potential KPIs that could be adopted to monitor progress related to the Our Rural Future framework; however, while these metrics are entirely achievable, many are not currently available at the six-way urban–rural classification level. Currently, there

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1 There are a further six measures set out under the heading 'implementation of the policy'. Our Rural Future work programmes are designed with the living-document principle in mind, such that new policy measures can be added each year while others can be closed off or removed.

are only nine KPIs available at this level. Here we separate, following our data review, the metrics that can be currently adopted, or could be readily developed, as part of a policy monitoring framework. We hope that this guidance document can lead to positive discussions between the DRCD and the CSO with a view to increasing the number of available relevant KPIs that can be published using the six-way urban–rural classification system.

Some of the listed KPI data are available on a quarterly or annual basis (e.g., the Labour Force Survey [LFS] and the Survey on Income and Living Conditions [SILC]), while other data are collected on a less regular basis (e.g., the Census) or in an ad-hoc manner (e.g., Personal and Work–Life Balance Remote Working). This needs to be kept in mind when finalising the KPIs that will be used to monitor the effectiveness of Our Rural Future. Where feasible, and as a minimum, annual data should be used. The international literature recommends ongoing monitoring to be best practice with regards to rural development (see, for example, Department for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, 2022).

## CHAPTER 2

---

### **KPIs to monitor the effectiveness of Our Rural Future: Rural Development Policy 2021–2025**

In *Developing a Framework to Monitor Rural Development Policy in Ireland: Opportunities and Challenges* (Kelly et al., 2023), we identified 70 potential KPIs that could be used to monitor the effectiveness of Our Rural Future in achieving the policy's nine key deliverables (see Kelly et al., 2023, Tables 4.1–4.9). This work was based on an examination of data nationally available from government departments (e.g., Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science; Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment), state agencies (e.g., Pobal, Fáilte Ireland, Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland) and the CSO (e.g., the Census, LFS, Business Demography, National Accounts).

In order to effectively assess the impact of this, and any, rural development policy, we contend that the data need to be available at an appropriate spatial level, which, in this context, means at the CSO's six-way urban–rural geographic classification level. In this chapter, we focus on outlining the KPIs that are presently available at this spatially disaggregated level to allow the DRCD to monitor the effectiveness of Our Rural Future in achieving its key deliverables.

Of the 70 indicators that we identified in *Developing a Framework to Monitor Rural Development Policy in Ireland: Opportunities and Challenges* (Kelly et al., 2023), 60 are currently available at some level of spatial disaggregation for monitoring (e.g., national, region or county). Furthermore, of the 70 indicators, we deemed that 45 were needed at the six-way urban–rural geographic classification level, but we found that only nine were available.<sup>2</sup> This can be seen in Table 2.1, with those KPIs available at the six-way urban–rural geographic classification level listed in Table 2.2.

**TABLE 2.1 POTENTIAL KPIS TO MONITOR OUR RURAL FUTURE'S SCHEMES: CURRENTLY AVAILABLE AND SIX-WAY CLASSIFICATION**

|    | Key deliverable | Required KPIs | Available KPIs | Six-way classification required | Six-way classification available |
|----|-----------------|---------------|----------------|---------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| 1. | RW              | 9             | 8              | 9                               | 0                                |
| 2. | RTV             | 17            | 16             | 14                              | 6                                |
| 3. | RJ              | 9             | 9              | 7                               | 2                                |
| 4. | RL              | 8             | 6              | 4                               | 1                                |
| 5. | TCH             | 8             | 8              | 0                               | –                                |
| 6. | C               | 6             | 5              | 6                               | –                                |
| 7. | AMF             | 5             | 5              | 0                               | –                                |
| 8. | ICC             | 3             | 2              | 0                               | –                                |
| 9. | CNE             | 5             | 1              | 5                               | –                                |
|    | <b>Total</b>    | <b>70</b>     | <b>60</b>      | <b>45</b>                       | <b>9</b>                         |

Source: Kelly et al., 2023. Legend for key deliverables: AMF: Agriculture, the marine and forestry; C: Supporting communities to create their own future; CNE: Transitioning to a climate-neutral economy; ICC: Island and coastal communities; RJ: Jobs for rural Ireland; RL: Rural living; RTV: Revitalising rural towns and villages; RW: Remote working; TCH: Rural Ireland's unique tourism, culture and heritage.

**TABLE 2.2 KPIs FOR MONITORING OUR RURAL FUTURE'S KEY DELIVERABLES: CURRENTLY AVAILABLE AT SIX-WAY URBAN–RURAL CLASSIFICATION**

|  | Required KPI  | Spatial level required | Available KPI  | Spatial level available         | Source  |
|--|---|------------------------|--|---------------------------------|---|
| <b>II. Revitalising rural towns and villages</b> |   |                        |  |                                 |   |
| 1.   | Increase in number of people living in rural areas                    | Six-way classification | Population change  | Six-way classification          | CSO: Census                                     |
| 2.   | Increase in number of people living in rural areas in self-employment | Six-way classification | Persons aged 15 years and over self-employed   | Six-way classification (region) | CSO: Urban and Rural Life in Ireland (CSO: LFS) |
| 3.   | Proportion of children  | Six-way classification | Primary-school students usually resident and present in the state                                  | Six-way classification          | CSO: Urban and Rural Life in Ireland            |
| 4.   | Proportion of working-age adults                                      | Six-way classification | Population usually resident and present in the state (age)   | Six-way classification          | CSO: Urban and Rural Life in Ireland            |
| 5.   | Proportion from an ethnic-minority background                         | Six-way classification | Population usually resident and present in the state (country of birth)                            | Six-way classification          | CSO: Urban and Rural Life in Ireland            |
| 6.   | New houses built  | Six-way classification | New dwelling completions   | Six-way classification          | CSO: Urban and Rural Life in Ireland            |
| <b>III. Revitalising jobs for rural Ireland</b>  |   |                        |  |                                 |   |
| 1.   | Regional average income   | Six-way classification | Median income measures   | Six-way classification          | CSO: Urban and Rural Life in Ireland            |
| 2.   | Rural dwellers working or studying in rural areas                     | Six-way classification | Could be generated using 'Place of work, school or college' (Census)                               | Six-way classification          | CSO: Census                                     |
| <b>IV. Rural living</b>                          |   |                        |  |                                 |   |
| 1.   | Reduction in regional income disparity                                | Six-way classification | National income definition, national equivalence scale: Equivalised Total Disposable Income (euro) | Six-way classification          | CSO: Urban and Rural Life in Ireland            |

Source: Kelly et al., 2023.

In Table 2.3, we have identified other KPIs not available at the six-way urban–rural geographic classification level but that were still at a disaggregated geographic level that would facilitate the DRCD to monitor the effectiveness of Our Rural Future in achieving its key deliverables, namely, degree of urbanisation, urban–rural split, and regional, county or small area geographic levels. Between Tables 2.2 and 2.3, we have identified 22 KPIs that the DRCD could use to monitor the effectiveness of Our Rural Future.

**TABLE 2.3 KPIs FOR MONITORING OUR RURAL FUTURE’S KEY DELIVERABLES: CURRENTLY NOT AVAILABLE AT SIX-WAY URBAN–RURAL CLASSIFICATION**

|  | Required KPI   | Spatial level required | Available KPI  | Spatial level available | Source   |
|--|--|------------------------|--|-------------------------|--|
| <b>I. Remote working</b>                         |  |                        |  |                         |  |
| 1.   | Increase in broadband coverage in rural areas                    | Six-way classification | Households with internet access  | Small area              | CSO: Census  |
| 2.   | Distance to remote working hub                                   | Six-way classification | Average distance and number of remote work hubs and childcare services to residential dwellings            | County                  | CSO: Distance to Remote Work Hubs and Childcare Services                                       |
| <b>II. Revitalising rural towns and villages</b> |  |                        |  |                         |  |
| 1.   | Increase in number of people living in rural areas in employment | Six-way classification | Persons aged 15 years and over in employment   | Region                  | CSO: LFS, Census   |
| 2.   | Number of vacant homes   | Six-way classification | Occupancy status of permanent dwellings on Census night  | Small area              | CSO: Census  |
| 3.   | Access to basic services   | Six-way classification | Households able to access local services: supermarket, bank, post office, any form of public transport, GP | Urban–rural split       | CSO: SILC  |
| <b>III. Revitalising jobs for rural Ireland</b>  |  |                        |  |                         |  |
| 1.   | Job creation outside of Dublin                                   | Six-way classification | Jobchurn components, job creation (numbers)  | National                | CSO: Jobchurn  |
| 2.   | Employment in foreign-owned businesses                           | Six-way classification | Annual Business Survey of Economic Impact, indicators: total employment (persons)                          | Region                  | CSO, Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment: Annual Business Survey of Economic Impact |

|  | Required KPI   | Spatial level required      | Available KPI  | Spatial level available  | Source                       |
|--|--|-----------------------------|--|--|------------------------------|
| <b>IV. Rural living</b>  |  |                             |  |  |                              |
| 1.   | Length of commute  | Six-way classification      | Population aged 5 years and over by journey time to work, school or college  | Small area   | CSO: Census                  |
| 2.   | Car usage  | Six-way classification      | Number of cars per household   | Small area   | CSO: Census                  |
| <b>V. Rural Ireland's unique tourism, culture and heritage</b> |  |                             |  |  |                              |
| 1.   | Visitor numbers by region  | Region                      | Domestic travel by Irish residents   | County visited   | CSO: Household Travel Survey |
| 2.   | Number of attractions  | County                      | Attractions  | All attractions are listed with their address including county             | Fáilte Ireland               |
| 3.   | Number of accommodation places   | County                      | Accommodation  | All accommodations are listed with their address including county          | Fáilte Ireland               |
| 4.   | Number of activities   | County                      | Activities   | All places to do activities are listed with their address including county | Fáilte Ireland               |
| <b>VI. Supporting communities to create their own future</b>   |  |                             |  |  |                              |
| 1.   | Political participation  | Six-way classification      | How much respondents believe that the political system allows people to have a say in what the government does     | Degree of urbanisation (city, town or rural)                               | CSO: Trust Survey            |
| <b>VII. Agriculture, the marine and forestry<sup>3</sup></b>   |  |                             |  |  |                              |
| 1.   | Number of female farmers   | Spatial level not important | Family and regular non-family workers (persons) on all farms   | Region   | CSO: Census of Agriculture   |
| 2.   | Number of family farms in female ownership                             | Spatial level not important | Family farms   | Region   | CSO: Farm Structure Survey   |
| 3.   | Numbers aged less than 40 working in agriculture, forestry and fishing | Spatial level not important | Numbers aged less than 40 working in agriculture, forestry and fishing, separately for self-employed and employees | Region   | CSO: LFS                     |

3 Teagasc's National Farm Survey, including their Sustainability Reports data, may contain additional KPIs that could be used to monitor this key deliverable.



|   | Required KPI                                | Spatial level required | Available KPI                               | Spatial level available | Source                           |
|---|---|------------------------|---|-------------------------|----------------------------------|
| <b>VIII. Islands and coastal communities</b>          |   |                        |   |                         |                                  |
| 1.  | Job creation on the islands                 | Islands only           | Jobchurn components: job creation (numbers) | National                | CSO: Jobchurn                    |
| <b>IX. Transitioning to a climate-neutral economy</b> |   |                        |   |                         |                                  |
| 1.  | Demand for electric vehicles in rural areas | Six-way classification | New and second-hand private cars            | County                  | CSO Vehicle Licensing Statistics |

Source: Kelly et al., 2023.

As in *Developing a Framework to Monitor Rural Development Policy in Ireland: Opportunities and Challenges* (Kelly et al., 2023), we present here, in Table 2.4, KPIs for other ‘high-level outcome’ categories, such as health, well-being and education. These types of KPIs are consistent with the emphasis in the literature (e.g., OECD, 2020) on the importance of taking a holistic approach to monitoring rural development and well-being.

Of the 17 ‘high level outcome’ KPIs identified, four are available at the six-way urban–rural geographic classification level, while the remaining 13 are not. In presenting these ‘high-level outcome’ KPIs, we also include relevant indicators contained in the CSO’s Well-being Information Hub. Some of these ‘high-level outcome’ indicators could also be used to monitor how well the government’s current rural policy is meeting its key deliverables. For example, the ‘deprivation’, ‘income and wealth’ and ‘economy and jobs’ KPIs could be used to monitor the effectiveness of Our Rural Future in meeting its ‘revitalising rural towns and villages’ key deliverable.

**TABLE 2.4 OTHER POTENTIAL KPIS FOR MONITORING OVERALL RURAL WELL-BEING IN IRELAND**

|   | Required KPI  | Spatial level required | Available KPI  | Spatial level available              | Source   |
|---|---|------------------------|--|--------------------------------------|--|
| <b>I. Deprivation</b>                       |   |                        |  |                                      |  |
| 1.  | At risk of poverty, consistent poverty, deprivation   | Six-way classification | Key national indicators of poverty and social exclusion  | Six-way classification               | CSO: Urban and Rural Life in Ireland   |
| 2.  | Deprivation Index   | Six-way classification | Change in the percentage of small areas which are deemed most deprived over time   | Small area (some calculation needed) | Pobal HP [Haase-Pratschke] Deprivation Index   |
| <b>II. Income and wealth</b>                |   |                        |  |                                      |  |
| 1.  | Households making ends meet with great difficulty   | Six-way classification | Percentage of persons in the total population who are in the state of enforced inability to make ends meet   | Urban–rural split                    | CSO: SILC  |
| <b>III. Economy and jobs</b>                |   |                        |  |                                      |  |
| 1.  | Good jobs   | Urban–rural            | Percentage of people on permanent contracts (or on temporary contracts and not seeking permanent work), who earn what could be deemed a living wage and are not overworked (working more than 49 hours/week) |                                      | Such a variable is not available but could be generated from various CSO sources primarily the LFS |
| <b>IV. Access to services and transport</b> |   |                        |  |                                      |  |
| 1.  | Distance to national primary and secondary roads  | Six-way classification | Population in 2016: distance to national primary and secondary road network  | Region and county                    | CSO: Measuring Distance to Everyday Services in Ireland  |
| 2.  | Access to everyday services: GP, pharmacy, bank, garda station, fire station, library, etc. | Six-way classification | Population in 2016 to everyday services  | Region and county                    | CSO: Measuring Distance to Everyday Services in Ireland  |
| 3.  | Access to local services  | Six-way classification | Households who were able to access local services (level of accessibility)   | Urban–rural split                    | CSO: SILC Report on Household Amenities and Access to Services                                     |

| Required KPI                                     | Spatial level required  | Available KPI          | Spatial level available  | Source   |
|--|---|------------------------|--|--|
| <b>V. Well-being</b>                             |   |                        |  |  |
| 1.   | Population with at least two people to whom they are close enough to count on if they had a serious problem | Six-way classification | How many people (e.g., neighbours and friends) persons aged 15 years and over can count on in the event of a serious problem   | Region<br>CSO: Irish Health Survey Carers  |
| <b>VI. Health</b>                                |   |                        |  |  |
| 1.   | Prevalence of disabilities  | Six-way classification | Population usually resident and present with a disability  | Six-way classification<br>CSO: Urban and Rural Life in Ireland   |
| 2.   | Self-rated health   | Six-way classification | Population: general health   | Six-way classification<br>CSO: Urban and Rural Life in Ireland <sup>a</sup>  |
| 3.   | Mental health   | Six-way classification | All persons aged 15 and over, mental-health status in previous two weeks   | Region<br>CSO: Irish Health Survey <sup>a</sup>  |
| 4.   | Involvement in sports or physical activities  | Six-way classification | Persons aged 15 years and over who participate in sport or other physical activity   | Region, degree of urbanisation<br>CSO: Quarterly National Household Survey Sports and Physical Exercise <sup>b</sup> |
| <b>VII. Education</b>                            |   |                        |  |  |
| 1.   | Educational attainment  | Six-way classification | Population aged 15 years and over by sex and highest level of education completed  | Small area<br>CSO: Census  |
| 2.   | Engagement with further education   | Six-way classification | Persons aged 25–64 who wanted to participate more in further education   | Region<br>CSO: Adult Education Survey  |
| <b>VIII. Housing and built environment</b>       |   |                        |  |  |
| 1.   | New dwelling completions  | Six-way classification | Recently constructed dwellings   | Local electoral area, local authority, region<br>CSO: New Dwelling Completions                                       |
| <b>IX. Environment, climate and biodiversity</b> |   |                        |  |  |
| 1.   | Pollution, grime or other environmental problems  | Six-way classification | Percentage of households who face the problem of pollution, grime or other environmental problems in the local area such as smoke, dust, unpleasant smells or polluted water | Urban–rural split<br>CSO: SILC   |

|                 | Required KPI               | Spatial level required | Available KPI   | Spatial level available | Source                               |
|-----------------|----------------------------|------------------------|---|-------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| <b>X. Other</b> |                            |                        |   |                         |                                      |
| 1.              | Reliance on social welfare | Six-way classification | Proportion of households where working-age social welfare was the majority income | Six-way classification  | CSO: Urban and Rural Life in Ireland |

Notes: (a) The Department of Health's 'Healthy Ireland Survey' also likely contains such data. (b) Data also available in Growing Up in Ireland, The Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing (TILDA) and the Irish Sports Monitor (ISM).

For the most part, the data sources for the identified KPIs in Tables 2.2–2.4 are all publicly available, with the majority being collated by the CSO and available on their website. In some instances, the identified KPIs have been drawn from state agency data sources, such as Pobal's HP Index. For all KPI data, the DRCD will need to hold discussions with the relevant organisations that hold the required data to ensure that they obtain the data needed to monitor the impact of Our Rural Future, and for the data to be provided at the most detailed spatial level feasible.

In the context of monitoring the effectiveness of the current rural development policy, if the CSO's six-way urban–rural classification is applied to more available data, then the number of available indicators to monitor the current policy's effectiveness in achieving its key deliverables would rise from nine to 45, while the number of KPIs available to monitor the plan's effectiveness in improving overall rural well-being would increase to 69 from four. For this reason, it is imperative that efforts are made to achieve this: effective monitoring of the impacts of rural policy initiatives in Ireland is not achievable with just nine metrics available at the required spatial level.

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