EVENT REPORT

1. Event Summary

This event was the first in a series of five events organised by The Wheel with support from the European Commission Representation in Ireland. The aim of the series is to engage civil society, and by extension the communities they represent, with the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE). The topic of this particular event was Rural Communities and it was delivered in collaboration with Irish Rural Link, an organisation that represents the interests of locally based rural groups in disadvantaged and marginalized rural areas at local, national, and EU level.

The event featured an introduction to the CoFoE with a demonstration of how to engage with the CoFoE's online platform and input from Brendan Mulry of Irish Rural Link on rural communities and the EU. Facilitated breakout rooms allowed participants to discuss their key recommendations for the EU on overcoming challenges and creating opportunities in rural communities. All ideas were collected by breakout room moderators and shared via the Mentimeter app in a plenary session. Brendan Mulry closed out the event with a summary of the recommendations and The Wheel encouraged participants to continue to engage with the Conference on the Future of Europe by registering on the digital platform and sharing their ideas about other topics of importance to them.

2. Participants

There were 35 participants comprised of people working with rural communities on a professional basis, those living in rural communities themselves, and citizens with a general interest in the topic.

3. Statement from Irish Rural Link

Irish Rural Link were delighted to take part in the Conference on the Future of Europe and value the expansion of European Union democracy to include the citizen's voice directly in as many fora as possible. We've seen first-hand in Ireland in recent years the impact of such citizen engagement efforts. Meaningful citizen engagement is essential to the future of the European Union. At a time of dramatic change on the horizon for rural Europe, with unprecedented climate, economic and social challenges to be met, the voice of the ordinary rural citizen in policy formulation is needed more than ever.

4. Statement from The Wheel

The Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE) is a year-long EU-wide project to seek citizens' views about Europe's future challenges and priorities on a variety of topics, including issues facing rural communities. The Wheel's goal with this event series is to facilitate Irish citizens and civil society playing a more participative role in shaping future developments across Europe and thereby influencing the decisions that directly affect them.

Through participation in EU initiatives like the Conference on the Future of Europe, civil society organisations can make their voices and the voices of their beneficiaries heard at EU level and have a chance to make real change. If it proves to be successful, the Conference's online platform might become a permanent public consultation tool – there's no time like the present to get familiar with it and do our part to make sure the future EU is an inclusive one.

5. Main topics and recommendations discussed during the workshops

The following ideas and recommendations were contributed by the participants in the breakout rooms and via the Mentimeter app.

- **Mental health, isolation & social cohesion**
    - Provide access to restorative practice, mindfulness and meditation programmes in schools and community centres
    - There is a need to develop monthly meet ups to combat isolation
    - Social structures have changed with the decline of the church – need for a new social focus
    - Each area should be able to develop their own area plans with a set list of achievable objectives

- o Important to hold on to the unique-ness of each area - need to catalyse a warmth and willingness - warm development is how together people are
- o The GAA is excellent as a model for rural areas in how to be inclusive. If councils, LEADER etc. could look at that and learn, they will know more about how to reach and engage communities. The GAA green clubs is an example
- o Importance of local and bottom up development – partnership approach is needed
- o Need a new scheme for recruiting volunteers – building up a reserve of volunteers; team in place in rural communities essential
- o Empowering people to take care of their own mental and physical wellbeing through education programmes including holistic approaches
- o More tailored development programmes focusing on a particular demographic group and their specific needs, for example ACORNS
- o Develop community networks and learning eco-systems e.g. knowledge transfer scheme.

- **Jobs, Employment & Upskilling/Reskilling**
  - o Need for peer support for developing enterprises
  - o Need to invest in good quality, suitable jobs for young people to keep them from moving away
  - o Extremely high cost of insurance really stifles enterprise development in rural area
  - o The sectors that employ women have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic – will these sectors recover?
  - o There is remote work (for those with broadband) but that doesn't suit everyone's skillset
  - o Salaries are lower and housing is expensive
  - o There needs to be an investment in a publically funded universal child and social care system so there is not a barrier to women's participation in society – politically, socially, in terms of employment.

- **Infrastructure & Services**
  - o Commuter towns are detrimental to social fabric areas
  - o Need for high speed broadband
  - o Impact of loss of services on rural communities for example, the difficulties of using cash – local shops – when banks close
  - o Need to find ways of viably delivering services e.g. through post offices, garda stations - there is an impetus for delivering innovative services
  - o Public transport is not just service for older people; still need for local hackney service; still a lot of reliance on cars
  - o Local link services are a good example of how to deliver public transport
  - o Getting people trained in using online services – getting more important
  - o There is a lot of innovation happening but on informal basis and need supports, for example there is a social car scheme in Leitrim – offering lifts locally
  - o Historic houses – upwards of 90% are privately owned
  - o Rollout of the national broadband plan and digital hubs
  - o Supports for transitioning to electric cars and installation of public charge points
  - o There should be equal access to affordable services regardless of where you live.

- **EU funding opportunities**
  - Streamline the process and make the application form itself easier (language should be in Plain English)
  - Remove the bureaucracy around these opportunities – process needs to be demystified and simplified
  - Provide mechanisms to network and support each other locally around these application processes
  - Create a mentoring programme for the LEADER fund
  - There's a gap between getting access to the funds and the ability of communities to plan and apply for that funding - it's not an intuitive process and they need support
  - EU bodies (e.g. SEUPB) hand down the risks to the communities by layering on the admin, reporting, etc. - these communities CANNOT absorb risk, especially financial
  - Put money into staff and developing community capacity rather than just funding projects - community capacity building needs continuous investment to allow for healthy renewal and turnover
  - Conduct a rigorous audit on the impact of these programmes
  - Invest in communities and groups, not just projects.

- **Awareness/communication about services and resources**
  - Provide a grassroots connection explaining the EU's link with rural communities
  - Develop better communication channels between bureaucracy and communities
  - Create better public awareness of EU policies and programmes
  - There's no outreach now - it's all waiting for expressions of interest and helping proactive projects over the line
  - Community groups who provide services are often not well known – they find it hard to get the word out about what they can offer the community
  - Collate all nonprofit groups within a community and provide direct links to local, national and European aid organ
  - Need to highlight good news stories – role of media important.

- **Climate change**
  - Provide compensation scheme to offset damage done to communities (for example, EU offsets for peat fuel)
  - Rejuvenate commercial farms
  - Needs to be a move towards agro forestry - look towards Israel in this regards
  - Polluting industries such as cement need to support such measures as carbon tax
  - Foster energy development within communities and allow them to become self-sustaining
  - Develop and implement a deciduous tree policy
  - Transitioning from farming to other activities and income generation projects
  - Green our local areas and encourage individual responsibility
  - Climate change actions need to reach most vulnerable.

- **Women in Rural Communities**
  - Women are working more - they used to be key to community work and local development. Now they are much more stretched and they don't have time for this anymore. That gap isn't being plugged by men either
  - 90% of land in Ireland is owned by men, women in farming don't get a look in, unless there is some mechanism or targets put in place that focus specifically on women

- There's a lot to learn from other EU colleagues in terms of women's inclusion
- Women are more reliant on public services – there's an anxiety about austerity and cutting on services because women will have to cover that gap, even more so in rural areas
- The structures that make decisions about how rural funding is spent (e.g. councillors) are overall male, and lack female perspectives and investment.

6. Follow-up

This report was created based on the ideas and recommendations shared by the participants in the breakout rooms and jointly collected during the event. This report will be uploaded and shared on the CoFoE online platform and sent to all participants to encourage them to continue to contribute their ideas to the platform.