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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

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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

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.¹

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

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.² 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	–
	Total	70	60	45	9

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
II. Revitalising rural towns and villages					
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
III. Revitalising jobs for rural Ireland					
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
IV. Rural living					
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
I. Remote working					
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
II. Revitalising rural towns and villages					
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
III. Revitalising jobs for rural Ireland					
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
IV. Rural living					
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
V. Rural Ireland's unique tourism, culture and heritage					
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 accommodation s 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
VI. Supporting communities to create their own future					
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
VII. Agriculture, the marine and forestry³					
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
VIII. Islands and coastal communities					
1.	Job creation on the islands	Islands only	Jobchurn components: job creation (numbers)	National	CSO: Jobchurn
IX. Transitioning to a climate-neutral economy					
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
I. Deprivation					
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
II. Income and wealth					
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
III. Economy and jobs					
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
IV. Access to services and transport					
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
V. Well-being					
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	CSO: Irish Health Survey Carers
VI. Health					
1.	Prevalence of disabilities	Six-way classification	Population usually resident and present with a disability	Six-way classification	CSO: Urban and Rural Life in Ireland
2.	Self-rated health	Six-way classification	Population: general health	Six-way classification	CSO: Urban and Rural Life in Ireland ^a
3.	Mental health	Six-way classification	All persons aged 15 and over, mental-health status in previous two weeks	Region	CSO: Irish Health Survey ^a
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	CSO: Quarterly National Household Survey Sports and Physical Exercise ^b
VII. Education					
1.	Educational attainment	Six-way classification	Population aged 15 years and over by sex and highest level of education completed	Small area	CSO: Census
2.	Engagement with further education	Six-way classification	Persons aged 25–64 who wanted to participate more in further education	Region	CSO: Adult Education Survey
VIII. Housing and built environment					
1.	New dwelling completions	Six-way classification	Recently constructed dwellings	Local electoral area, local authority, region	CSO: New Dwelling Completions
IX. Environment, climate and biodiversity					
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	CSO: SILC

	Required KPI	Spatial level required	Available KPI	Spatial level available	Source
X. Other					
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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