



Written Submission to the EU Commission Public Consultation on the Roadmap for the Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas

November 2020

The Union of Students in Ireland (USI)

The Union of Students in Ireland (Aontas na Mac Léinn in Éirinn) is the national representative body for third-level Students' Unions in Ireland. Founded in 1959, USI now represents more than 374,000 students in Further and Higher Education Colleges across the island of Ireland. The goal of USI is to work for the rights of students and a fair and equal post-secondary education system in Ireland. USI is a full member of the European Students' Union (ESU) which represents students from 46 National Students' Unions in 39 countries, and a member of Eurodoc, the European Council for Doctoral Candidates and Junior Researchers.

The Union of Students in Ireland (USI) welcomes the opportunity to respond to European Commission Public Consultation on the Roadmap for the Long Term Vision for Rural Areas and within our submission discuss the following areas:

- Accommodation
- Transport infrastructure
- Multi-campus within Colleges
- Health Services
- Employment services
- Climate dialogue and Just Transition

Accommodation

The Union of Students in Ireland within our Proposition paper Accommodation¹ the governments management of this system and highlights a number of concerns to be addressed when considering areas of both Urban and non-Urban for living units.

As outlined with proposition paper, Purpose Build Student Accommodation (PBSA) is a relatively new term to describe an ideal model for providing accommodation that is specific to students. While USI welcomes the steps and progress made to address this in the national student accommodation strategy, the strategy neglects to address or acknowledge the rising cost of rents as well as the over reliance currently experienced on the private sector contributing to the rising costs of accommodation.

It is also important when commissioning appropriate accommodation to students that terms such as “luxury accommodation” which come with excessive costs do not reflect the cost of living for students in Ireland coupled with Ireland now having the highest third level fees in the European Union. While it is acknowledged that luxury accommodation can come with many additional comforts at times, this is often unnecessary and is provided at a cost that students cannot afford. It is therefore deemed by the USI as not something that students need right now.

Within rural areas, student accommodation is often privately owned without proper regulation of rents or co-operation with the third level institutions. The provision of funding should be made available to third level institutions to build Purpose Built Student Accommodation (PBSA) in order to ensure resource needs are met alongside ensuring this PBSAs are regulated by said institution. Within rural areas often the only accommodation options are dig style accommodation where students have little to no protections along with not having access to the room at the weekends. USI would welcome reviewing this system and implementing legislation which ensures that the rights of the student are protected when in dig style accommodation.

With the growing number of students in full time enrolment projected to increase significantly by 2030², the growing need for purpose-built student accommodation that meets the needs of the student and is regulated by the institutes is vital going forward and while the National student housing strategy is welcome, reviewing of this over the coming years will be required in order to address the systemic barriers to students. Institutes of Technology, particularly those located in more rural parts of Ireland will need to avail of some form of grant system down the line to avail of accommodation for students and additional legislation around deposits and leases will need to be introduced to protect student renters.

Transport Infrastructure

¹ Union of Students in Ireland, [Accommodation Position Paper](#), 2020

² Department of Education, [Projections of Demand for full-time Third Level Education](#), 2018 to 2040, 2018

USI believes that transport infrastructure is something which should be dramatically improved as part of the long-term vision for rural areas. Within Ireland, access to public transport has been regressing for decades by closing train stations, shutting down bus routes, eliminating smaller towns and villages from transport routes making public transport in Ireland more inaccessible and difficult to access. The government have also rolled back on supports for students that rely on public transport to attend third level education. All these contributing factors negatively affect rural areas and communities across the island.

Many students rely on public transport to commute to and from their place of study, employment, hobbies and other social interactions. While access to public transport for those in cities and suburban areas, has its issues and problems when it comes to proper resourcing, the cost and so many other variables, those living in rural communities are affected disproportionately to other groups. In most cases, relying on public transport is not a luxury that those in rural areas have. In many cases they are mostly reliant on personal vehicles for methods of transportation. Some students face massive difficulty if they are living at home while attending college due to transportation issues. The irregularity of bus schedules in rural areas as well as the limited times and spaces is something that affects many students from rural communities.

Many of the people living in rural areas rely heavily on personal vehicles like cars or motorbikes to be able to move freely and travel outside of their area and while in some areas, investment is needed for improving the quality and safety of roads in rural areas, it is also essential that importance is emphasized on expanding the public transport infrastructure and resourcing in these rural areas as well. More access and more people using the public transport in Ireland would significantly assist in our efforts of reducing our Carbon Footprint while also reducing traffic congestion and commuter times, all of which would help society in general and rural communities. Furthermore, in terms of public transport, the introduction of free public transport for students, OAPs, children and those with a disability could dramatically help reduce feelings of isolation, while also reducing congestion of cars on our roads. The expansion of bus and rail services in rural areas could help end the reliance on cars in commuter belts as well as the rural areas.

There needs to be a shift from the over-reliance on private companies who base themselves in city-centric, urban locations, to public, fully resourced transport infrastructure. In order to shift our over reliance on private and individual modes of transport, government investment needs to invest and spend more on the improvement of public transport first and foremost and then also work on structural improvements of the transport system including roads and traffic congestion.

Another area which we view as a regression in financial support for students from rural communities is the change to the Non-Adjacency Grant for third level students in Ireland. The Non-Adjacency Grant was established to provide additional support for students who commute for third-level education purposes. The grant is meant to reflect

that many students can commute but the cost of travel may be comparable to a living cost in the college town.

For example, Killarney in Co. Kerry has a population of 14,504 and is 36km from its nearest third level institution, IT Tralee. In 2019, it would cost €68.50 or €69.90 for a bus or train ticket, respectively, from Killarney to Tralee if booked online. At the same time, student accommodation in Tralee was available for €70 per week in Kings Court Student Accommodation. In Budget 2011, the Irish government made the decision to increase the qualifying criteria for the non-adjacency rate of the grant to 45km from 24km. This change created a significant difficulty for students who are already living far away from college, struggling with the high costs of public transport. In many rural areas the frequency and accessibility of public and rural transport has not increased while the cost of transport has increased. Considering the costs of accommodation can be the same as the cost of transport, more students may wish to live independently and seek out accommodation in the areas of the institution. With an evolving housing crisis in Ireland and the spiraling rents, it would be in the Government's best interest to review and reverse the decision made in the Budget 2011 announcement. It would help reduce other factors such as isolation, health and dropout rates.

Transport costs alone may not seem like a huge cost or very problematic. However, when other costs associated with attending third level education are considered, including tuition fees, housing, relevant materials, books, printing and resourcing costs, we get a more evolved picture of the true financial burden that so many students face in order to attain a full academic experience in higher education, especially commuting students who are typically from more rural backgrounds. Therefore, as part of the long-term vision for rural areas, looking into the financing of public transport should be considered especially regarding the possibility for free or heavily subsidized transport costs for students in general as well as looking for grants to support commuting students from rural backgrounds.

There is a big focus on students so far under this heading, but students are not the only people who would benefit from these changes and improvements. Another demographic which would be greatly helped by such transport improvements are the older generation who often suffer from isolation. Living in rural communities and having transportation resources is an extremely negative setting to be stuck in. Older individuals may lose the ability to drive due to health factors so these people need to have adequate supports and should not be at a lesser advantage because of age or natural issues. Having a connected system would also be an advantage in rural areas to try reverse potential damages from a particular town or area with an ageing population. Access to adequate public transport would encourage younger generations to remain in rural areas and encourage other young families or professionals to move to the rural communities. A new public transport strategy would be a major driver of economic growth if done correctly.

Public Transport is a public good and should be treated as such. Currently students and other people cannot avail of adequate transport links across the country and improving this would serve both the interests of society as well as Ireland's economy. The use of public transport should be affordable and accessible to all regardless of location or socio-economic factors. The expansion of bus and rail services in rural settings is key to the survival and future prosperity of rural communities. It would act as a great tool to connect communities together and revitalize economic activity in a rural setting. Lack of investment in public transport and poor resourcing for public transport can prevent people from accessing and fully participating in their education. It can also heavily influence the options available to those pursuing education. Therefore, focus on transport infrastructure is paramount when looking at the long-term vision for rural areas.

Multi-campus within Colleges

In recent years, the educational landscape in Ireland has dramatically changed with the introduction of Technological Universities, from the merging of Institutes of Technology around the Island. With this change it is important to bear in mind the multi campus nature and diversity between institutes in this process. Institutes of Technology typically seek to develop courses that serve the region in which they are established, it is important to acknowledge the important role satellite campuses play in providing education within the region they are based and providing financial support for these institutions is vital for the area.

Satellite campuses are a vital resource for rural areas of Ireland, bringing an economic boost to these areas while offering a wide range of courses as well as bolstering the work force and re-vitalising areas which otherwise lose out to more populated urban areas.

Health Services

The availability and abundance of health services in Ireland is something which can be dramatically skewed depending on your location or locality. While city areas usually tend to have adequate services, often, smaller towns and rural areas are left in need of basic health services. Mental Health and Sexual Health specifically are some areas which, from interacting with students from rural backgrounds, are somewhat stigmatized in their communities.

The ramifications of the long-standing connection and relationship between Ireland and the Catholic Church are still evident in 2020 and something which modern Irish society is continuously trying to correct be it through the Irish Constitution, access rights or general mindsets and opinion. The teachings of the Catholic Church have found themselves woven into many aspects of Irish life, healthcare being no exception. We

have seen this previously with the restriction of healthcare including contraceptive rights, abortion rights, which are slowly being readdressed in modern Irish society. Although efforts are being made to eradicate the influence of the Catholic Church on state powers, it is by no means solved and very much still exists in our society today, especially so in the rural areas of Ireland. Therefore, separation of church and state is integral for the long-term vision of rural areas in Ireland so residents and citizens can avail of important and necessary healthcare without judgement. Access to healthcare is paramount to the survival of many and those in rural areas should not be more disadvantaged than their counterparts living in more urban areas. The ramifications include issues in education and a lack of resourcing around sexual health services which has left many people vulnerable, preventing more education and access to treating a range of health issues or services including STI checks, contraception and other sexual health services. This is definitely something which is in the process of being redressed. In most healthcare practices, sexual health is not stigmatised and deemed as an integral part of general health. However, in rural areas of Ireland where access and education surrounding sexual health is largely stigmatised - be it concerning Sexually Transmitted Infections, LGBTQ+ sex, contraception, unplanned pregnancy, abortion access and much more.

In a similar vein, another area which can be highly stigmatised in rural areas is with mental health, and in particular issues or difficulties with mental health. Lack of understanding and resourcing for mental health supports leave many from rural areas lost and jeopardy, and more at risk than others. Lack of resourcing leaves many people vulnerable and unable to understand or diagnose issues like depression, anxiety, bipolar etc. There are factors which leave those from rural areas more susceptible to developing mental health issues, such as the isolation element discussed briefly in this document already but coupled with the 'taboo' or 'stigma' often attached with mental health issues, results in difficult terrain for someone to get through. Care and services for mental health supports in rural communities are vitally needed and of utmost importance for the survival of these communities, as well as the individuals who make up said rural community.

As well as sexual and mental health, there are cases where general healthcare is also overlooked and under resourced for rural areas. One example of this is with the lack of 24/7 Cardiac Care in Waterford Regional Hospital. While Waterford is a city, and an urban area, Waterford Regional Hospital services surrounding areas which incorporates many rural areas in Waterford itself as well as other counties in the South East region of Ireland. For a long time now, people in the South East of Ireland have been campaigning for 24/7 cardiac care in Waterford Regional Hospital which would help the entire region. As it currently stands, should someone be unfortunate enough to experience health related problems such as a heart attack, after 5pm midweek, or at any stage during the weekend, ambulances would take nearly two hours to arrive in the South East and the patient would ordinarily be taken to University Hospital Cork, about 2 hours away. In many instances this is far too late for these patients and many die due

to a lack of resources available to them. This simply isn't good enough. In drafting up a roadmap for the long-term vision for rural areas, homogenous access to necessary healthcare must be paramount. No one should be disadvantaged due to a location and healthcare is such a crucial element to people's physical survival in life. It is unequivocally one of the most important public goods that governments and countries can offer and attribute too. It is also important to add that the privatisation of healthcare has many risks and while some may opt for private healthcare, the standards and ³availability of public healthcare should not and cannot be compromised or devalued in nature.

Employment services

COVID-19 highlighted the barriers which rural and non-urban areas experience in accessing essential services for maintaining employment and business including broadband, postal service and office space. In light of COVID-19, and restrictions on the movement of people many businesses moved their staff members to working from home. For many years, the issues of connectivity within rural Ireland has been an issue but this was further heightened by COVID-19. Research completed by the Central Statistics Office in 2019 concluded that nearly 80 percent of people in Ireland use the internet every day⁴ with the number of students using the internet daily at ninety-seven percent⁵. Regarding supporting business, the use of e-Commerce plays a vital role in rural areas. In 2020, 35% of small enterprises had e-Commerce sales, compared to 58% for medium sized enterprises and 61% of large enterprises had e-Commerce. Development of broadband infrastructure and connectivity in rural Ireland is vital to continue the development of and support communities, business and households in rural Ireland.

Alongside connectivity, access to postal services is vital for people in rural Ireland, Research by the CSO concluded that just 69,960 people in Ireland resided 10km or more from their nearest post office, or 1.5% of the total population⁶. Access to these vital services within rural areas can allow for the existence of rural based businesses.

Climate dialogue and Just Transition

The European commission's paper on turning a new deal into an opportunity highlights the new green deal which seeks to make Europe an international leader in the race to reach commitments of becoming carbon neutral in the future. With commitments to reducing its carbon emissions within the next few decades, Ireland hopes to be a major player in Europe when tackling the climate crises as outlined in Ireland's climate action

³ Central Statistics Office, [Information Society Statistics](#) – Enterprises, 2020

⁴ Central Statistics Office, [Information Society Statistics – Households](#), 2019

⁵ Central Statistics Office, [Information Society Statistics – Households](#), 2019

⁶ CSO, [Measuring Distance to Everyday Services in Ireland](#), 2020

plan. While the EU adjusts its plans for green house gases from now until 2030 and from 2030 to 2050 towards becoming carbon neutral, Ireland is in contrast seeking to set out a roadmap in contribution with hopes of reducing its carbon emissions by up to 20% by 2030.

While steps are being taken however it is important to note that Ireland is hard pushed if it is to be anywhere on track towards meeting its carbon emission reduction goals in the timeline specified. More pressure must be applied to the government who must be held to account on keeping up its commitments.

A concern to consider when tackling the matters of energy and sustainability is the emphasis sometimes placed by government campaigns on the individual's responsibility to recycle and reduce ones carbon footprint. We must be clear that while everyone has their part to play, we must take our eye off of the full picture that meaningful change on a large scale means also making a system change, for which the main onus lies on the government who must be held to account on such matters.

Regarding messaging, it is important when engaging with the wider populous regarding climate action that the message does not portray actions which interrupt everyday life. Instead it is felt that the government should be making systematic change that allow everyday life to be lived as normal while also been more sustainable.

In conclusion, the Union of Students in Ireland welcomes this public consultation and the opportunity to provide a written submission on the Roadmap for the Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas and highlight the issues for students based within the rural areas of Ireland. In providing this written submission EU Commission Public Consultation on the Roadmap for the Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas we would welcome the opportunity to meet with officials to discuss the contents of this submission further.