

LEADER 2014-2020 NRN CASE STUDY

DEVELOPMENT OF A COMMUNITY PLAN FOR CULLOHILL

Summary

This project developed a five-year Community Plan to support the sustainable development of Cullohill village in county Laois. Through a community-led planning process, it worked to establish a shared vision for the village. Challenges and opportunities were identified, alongside short and long term actions to support development. O'Leary and Associates, an external consultant with strong experience in community development, was appointed to work with the community to develop the plan. The community engaged strongly with the planning process which also activated wider community-led development projects. The project puts in place building blocks to create a more resilient and enterprising community with greater potential for local job creation.

Context

Cullohill is a small rural village located in county Laois with a population of around 400 people. Its natural environment, heritage and strong community spirit are among its positive assets. Local natural and heritage amenities include the Cullohill Mountain Trails, the Erkina/Goul River, Cullohill Castle, the Old Church and Lime Kiln. Local industry is concentrated in the agriculture sector. Cullohill residents can benefit from employment opportunities in urban areas within a commutable distance. However, poor broadband speeds exist and a lack of enterprise or industrial space in the community are examples of significant issues impacting development.

Project name: Development of a Community Plan for Cullohill

Date: 2017 to 2018

Local Action Group: Laois LCDC

Implementing Partner: Laois Partnership Company

Type of Beneficiary: Community group

Priority & Focus Area: Theme 2: Social Inclusion/
Sub theme: Basic services targeted at hard to reach communities

Project Beneficiary Name/Organisation: Cullohill Community Council CLG

Address: Cullohill, Co. Laois

O'Leary & Associates
TRAINING & CONSULTANCY



Cullohill Community Plan
2018

Before the M7 motorway opened in 2010 Cullohill was located on the route between Dublin and Cork, two of Ireland's main cities. Up to 2010, it experienced a strong through-flow of traffic connecting it to a source of passing trade. The opening of the motorway left the village disconnected from this main transport route bringing positive and negative consequences. Traffic congestion ceased but there was also a significant drop in passing trade. New directions were needed to steer Cullohill's future development.

Alongside this, the strong community spirit in the area was not translating into strong engagement with public funding programmes that could support development. The Laois Local Development Strategy identified Cullohill as one of six areas not engaging effectively with public funding programmes and an area for development. In this context, the Cullohill Community Council was established in 2016. This voluntary community group is an umbrella organisation for all local clubs and groups in the area. To strategically steer future development, the Cullohill Community Council applied for LEADER funding from Laois Partnership Company to develop a five-year Community Plan for the area.

Objectives

The overall aim of the project was to develop a community plan for Cullohill. This would establish a shared vision for the future of the village and assess development potential aligned with wider local and national policy. This was achieved by:

- Consultation working intensively with the community and other stakeholders
- Assessment of local challenges, needs and opportunities, such as around infrastructure, amenities and commercial development
- Producing a comprehensive Community Plan for Cullohill to inform actions for future community development
- Identifying project proposals for future funding applications

Activities

Developing a community plan for Cullohill involved a number of stages including research, profiling, consultation and monitoring. O'Leary & Associates Training & Consultancy Ltd were appointed to coordinate and manage each step and write the final community plan report. Initial work involved review of existing research and strategies of relevance, alongside baseline data analysis building a demographic, socio-economic and infrastructure profile of the area.

The project was overseen by the Cullohill Community Council. Alongside this, consultation with the wider local community was a vital part of the process. This involved a public meeting and online survey. This process was central to developing priority areas of action. These focused around strategic themes, objectives and actions such as developing infrastructure, enterprise, tourism and community facilities. Where actions require funding potential sources are identified in the plan. Many of the actions identified rather than requiring significant financial support primarily rely on community resources such as time, organisation and coordination skills.

"It has been hugely beneficial for us as a community to engage in the community planning process and ultimately now have a plan which will provide a road map for Cullohill for the next 5 years."

Marian Mahony, Secretary, Cullohill Community Council

The Cullohill Community Plan makes an extensive series of recommendations to direct the future development of Cullohill. In relation to infrastructure recommendations include redevelopment of the community centre, engagement with key stakeholders around high-speed broadband provision and developing a masterplan for the improvement and expansion of the GAA pitch site. In relation to tourism recommendations include conducting a feasibility study on developing bike trails on Cullohill Mountain and developing a brand for Cullohill as an activity-based tourism destination. In relation to enterprise, recommendations include carrying out a feasibility study on the development of a multi-purpose social enterprise

space; lobbying for the roll-out of fibre broadband, developing a business network, securing public funding supporting the development of enterprise facilities and starting a monthly farmers' market.

The Community Plan also includes an action plan that outlines key activities, responsible actors, a timeframe for implementation and potential funding sources. Action plans have also been developed around the strategic thematic areas of infrastructure, tourism and enterprise.



Strong engagement at community consultation workshop. Image credit: Laois Partnership Company

The project also involved working directly with the Cullohill Community Council to strengthen the core committee structure and to establish working groups/sub-committees as appropriate to support the implementation of the plan. Three sub-committees were suggested in the community plan (tourism and marketing; facilities; environment and tidy towns), with a member of the Cullohill Community Council Executive chairing each group.

Results

A Community Development Plan has been prepared which provides a blueprint for future community development focusing on enhancing Cullohill as a place to live, work and visit. The Cullohill Development Plan was launched by Minister Charlie Flanagan in Cullohill Community Centre on Thursday 21st February 2019.

The process of preparing this plan also required analysis and reflection on the strengths, issues and opportunities in Cullohill's future development at the community level. The community has engaged very strongly with the planning

process. The public meeting held in February 2018 was attended by approximately 70 people.

"There has been little development in the area in the past but thanks to consultative nature of this planning process, the success of The Folly Festival, our local sports teams, our Tidy Towns efforts etc. there is a real pride and desire within the community to make Cullohill, not only a great place to live but also to visit and work."

Marian Mahony, Secretary, Cullohill Community Council

Even before completion of the community-led planning process a number of strong outcomes had begun to emerge. A community development committee was established to coordinate positive development for the area. The committee coordinated a fundraising drive accumulating a community fund. It plans to strategically align tourism development plans with the county Laois Tourism Strategy and the Ireland Ancient East tourism marketing initiative. A community managed and coordinated 'education hub' has also been established providing weekend extra tuition to small groups and hosted in the community centre. Surplus funds generated are added to the community fund. The community are looking to exploit opportunities to provide incubation space to host local businesses and also to provide hot desk facilities which will provide commuting alternatives for locals. Other plans include redevelopment of the local community centre as a universal access and multi-use facility. The community has worked on securing title of their community centre which will enable them to realise this goal.

Another interesting initiative has been the development of a festival concept to raise funds for community projects. In July 2018, The Folly Music, Comedy and Culture Festival took place in the grounds of the majestic 14th century Cullohill Castle. This festival, which is supported by Electric Picnic, is the first gender balanced festival in Ireland, staging equal numbers of male and female performers. This festival afforded the Community Council to showcase the beauty of the area and also to capitalise on the village's link with the

O'Connell family's culinary profile and reputation. Rory O'Connell and his sister Darina Allen who co-founded the world renowned Ballymaloe Cookery School are originally from Cullohill. Included in the weekend's event was the Irish Porridge Making Championships, a mountain walk, Family Fun Day, Art Exhibition, Dog Show and Food Market. The Porridge Making Championships involved people from all over Ireland competing to represent Ireland in the World Porridge Making Championships. The community applied for LEADER programme funding to develop and market this event.

The project also supports cross-cutting LEADER objectives of innovation, climate change and environment. The project will assist establishing Cullohill as a sustainable community. The community have also used the sustainable community plan as a platform to register with the Sustainable Energy Communities programme, managed by the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI). This innovative programme provides assistance to communities to reduce their energy usage by targeting the commercial, residential and transport sectors.



Promotion of the Folly Festival in Cullohill. Image Credit: Laois Partnership Company

The project is expected to have significant benefits into the future. It puts in place the building blocks to create a more resilient and enterprising community with greater potential for local job creation.

"It is easy for groups/clubs to compile 'wish lists' in terms of local development, but the Community Development Plan process has prioritised the areas for development taking cognisance of the wishes of the whole community and without any bias. We also firmly believe that the plan will assist us greatly in securing funding into the future. As always, we very much appreciate the support of Laois Partnership Company."

Marian Mahony, Secretary, Cullohill Community Council

Lessons

Wider community support essential to future planning: The community engaged strongly with the community planning exercise. But this energy needs to be sustained. Beyond the Cullohill Community Council, encouraging volunteering from the wider community will also be an important part of effectively implementing the plan. The success of the plan will need continued local community support.

Spill-over benefits can emerge from community-led planning: The process of community-led planning can also stimulate new activities. Before the plan's completion a number of community driven activities and projects had begun to emerge such as the establishment of a community development committee and alignment of the local tourism strategy with county and national level initiatives.

Inventive, novel ideas can help to increase a village's profile and visitor interest: Linking events to quirky, novel concepts and high-profile locals can also help to attract visitors and media attention. The local festival based around Ireland's first national Porridge Making Championships gained coverage in national media.

Funding

Total project budget (i)+(ii)+(iii) =	€15,990
+ (i) Rural Development Programme support (a)+(b)	€14,391
+ (a) EAFRD (EU) contribution	€9,037.55
+ (b) National / Regional contribution	€5,353.45
+ (ii) Private / Own funds	€1,599
+ (iii) Other funding sources	n/a