

LEADER

Community-Led Local Development



National Rural Network

LEADER Newsletter No. 3 June 2019

Focus on the LEADER Programme 2014-2020

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The LEADER Programme 2014-2020

Welcome to the National Rural Network's third newsletter focusing on issues relating to the LEADER 2014-2020 Programme.

Activity under the LEADER Programme increased significantly in 2018 and some key achievements include

- Funding approval of €38 million for 984 LEADER projects.
- 589 payments to over 500 individual project promoters to the value of €12.5 million.
- 180 (FTE) new jobs created in LEADER supported enterprises with a further 589 (FTE) existing jobs sustained across a variety of sectors.
- Completed works on tourist facilities attracted in the region of 350,000 visitors.
- Participation of over 6,600 young people in completed rural youth projects.
- 93 environmental based projects worth almost €2.4 million funded under the Rural Environment theme of the LEADER Programme.
- The joint launch of the LEADER Food Initiative, with a budget of €15million. The initiative will provide vital funding to support the development of artisan and small food and beverage producers.

At the end of April 2019 1,867 projects have been approved for funding of €64.4 million. A further 403 projects seeking €25.4 million are at various stages in the approval process. Funding paid to project promoters amounted to almost €20 million. The value of project payments in the first quarter of 2019 was double that for the same period in 2018.

The Department expects this increase in activity to continue throughout 2019.



The LEADER Concept

The LEADER programme, established by the European Commission in 1991, is based on the 'bottom-up' approach. A European Commission report entitled 'The LEADER Approach – A basic guide', represents the rationale behind LEADER in the following manner: 'the main concept behind the LEADER initiative is that, given the diversity of European rural areas, development strategies are more effective and efficient if decided and implemented at local level by local actors, accompanied by clear and transparent procedures, the support of the relevant public administrations and the necessary technical assistance for the transfer of good practice' (European Commission, 2006, p.8).

The current LEADER budget allocated to Ireland, funded through Ireland's Rural Development Programme 2014-2020 (RDP), provides €250 million in financial aid to promote social inclusion, poverty reduction and economic development in rural communities, up to the year 2020.

Process and Practicalities: The LEADER Approach Explained

The LEADER Programme provides funding to support community-led rural development. We explore how the LEADER funding process works in practice providing an overview of the main stages and requirements when making an application.

Some basics: Where to apply and project types supported

Local Action Groups (LAGs) and Implementing Partners (IPs)

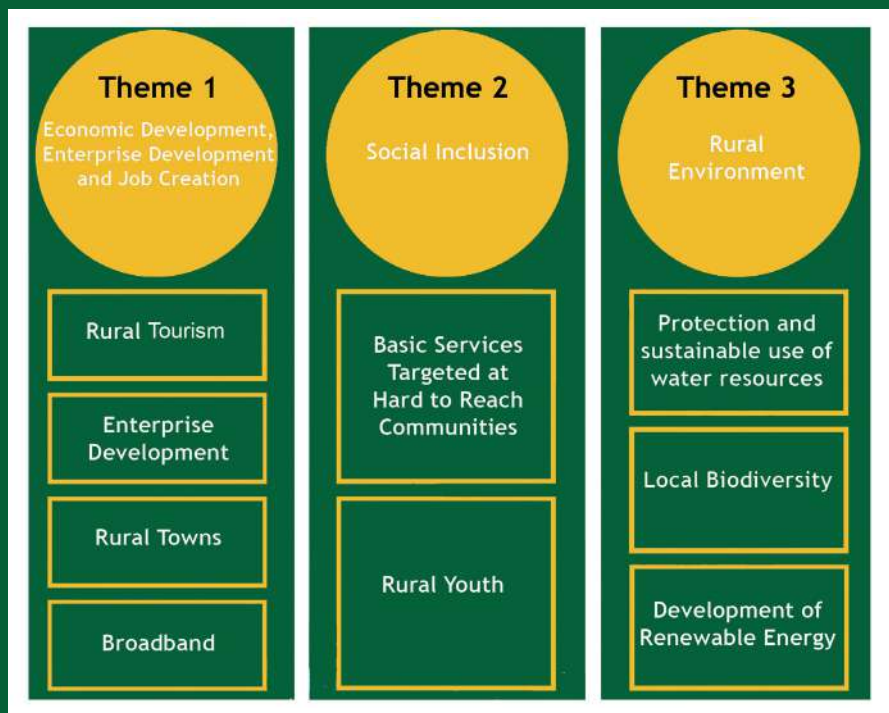
Decisions on LEADER funding applications are made at a local level by a network of 29 Local Action Groups (LAGs). They approve applications that align with the objectives of their Local Development Strategy, which is developed in consultation with the local communities. Local Development Companies in each area are responsible for the day to day management and co-ordination of the LEADER Programme, either as Implementing Partners (IPs) in a wider LAG or by acting as the LAG itself. Applications for LEADER funding are made to these Local Development Companies. Project Officers within these companies are the first port of call when thinking about applying for LEADER funding.

Themes, funding calls and rates

The LEADER Programme 2014-2020 targets funding towards key areas in need of support. Projects are supported in three thematic areas. Themes are broad enough to enable funding of a diversity of community-led projects both from private enterprise and community groups. Some types of activity cannot be funded such as insurance, legal expenses, planning application fees and working capital.

LAGs may operate a 'rolling call' for LEADER funding applications and accept applications on an ongoing basis. Targeted calls allow LAGs to concentrate funding in specific strategic areas of need or opportunity.

Depending on the nature of the project and the applicant type, different rates of funding aid apply. For example, analysis and development projects from a private business can be funded up to 75% of the total project costs while for community applicants it is up to 90%.



Applying for LEADER funding

Step 1: Expression of interest

Before formally applying for LEADER funding applicants must submit an 'Expression of Interest (EOI)'. This helps to establish a project's eligibility, such as its fit with Local Development Strategy objectives. It also facilitates applicants to become familiar with the application process and requirements.

EOIs are then assessed by the Rural Development Officers. Eligible applicants are invited to submit a full application.

Step 2: Making a full application

When submitting an application for LEADER funding details required depend on the type of applicant and project. For example, farmers need to provide their herd number and businesses their company registration number. Applicants must also include details of the proposed project such as a timeline, its main activities and anticipated local impacts. Each LAG uses the same standardised application form.

Budget and procurement

A budget must also be provided. If the project is also supported through other funding sources, these must be outlined and evidence documented. Previous public funding support must also be disclosed. Carrying out a procurement process is also required.

Supporting documentation

A range of supporting documentation must also be included with an application. Procurement evidence must be supplied. Accounts for three years and bank statements (three months minimum) for all accounts held are required. Depending on the applicant, different types of accounts are acceptable. Other requirements can also be needed as relevant. Specific requirements for individual projects can be discussed and determined with the Project Officers.

Match Funding

Projects generally require match funding. This can come from private funds or for community applicants also other public funds. Public funding from other EU sources is not permitted as match funding.

Step 3: Application Evaluation and Funding Decision

An evaluation committee from the LAG evaluates applications using set criteria and makes a recommendation to the LAG decision making members as to the suitability of the project for funding. If a project is not approved for funding applicants are informed of the reasons for this.

Step 4: Implementation

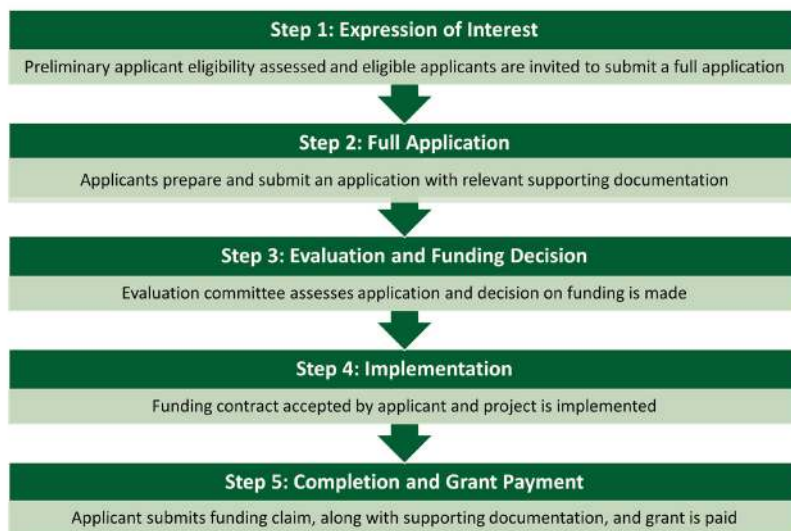
Once the applicant accepts the contract they can implement their project in line with its terms and conditions. The LAG must also check that the applicant has adequate resources (or bridging finance) to deliver the project. Bridging finance can be sourced for example through lending organisations such as Clann Credo, Community Finance Ireland, Micro Finance Ireland or Credit Unions.

Step 5: Completion and Grant payment

When the project is complete, the applicant submits a claim form to the LAG with the required supporting documentation such as invoices and the relevant bank statements. A Rural Development Officer will carry out a site visit to verify the project is complete. A grant payment claim is then made by the LAG to the Department of Rural and Community Development (DRCD). Once the funds are paid to the LAG the grant is paid by electronic fund transfer to the applicants designated account as soon as possible.

More information

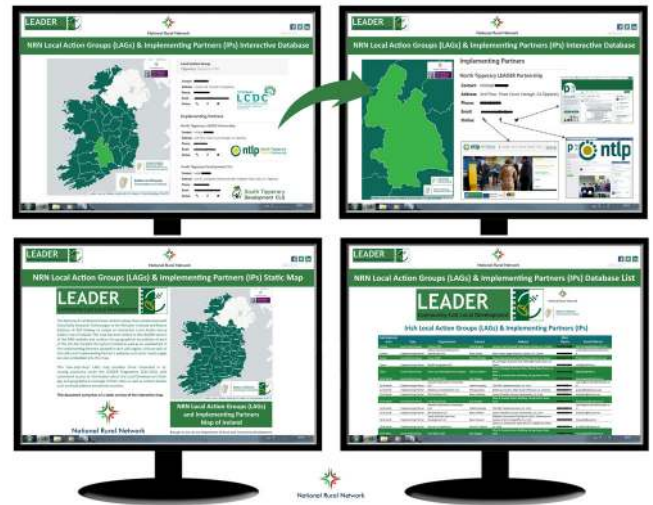
To find contact details for your local LAG and IP, consult the National Rural Network's interactive database here: <https://www.nationalruralnetwork.ie/leader/local-action-groups/>



Irish Local Action Groups (LAGs) and Implementing Partners (IPs) Database

Interested in applying for LEADER funding, or learning more about accessing assistance under the LEADER Programme 2014-2020 from those responsible for selecting and approving community-led local development projects in your county? An interactive map featuring all Irish LAGs and IPs can be found in the LEADER section of the NRN website: <https://www.nationalruralnetwork.ie/leader/local-action-groups/>

This helpful 'one-stop-shop' map outlines the geographical boundaries of each of the 29 LAGs located throughout Ireland as well as a list of the IPs. This freely available database provides those interested in accessing funding under the LEADER Programme 2014-2020, with easy and convenient access to information about the Local Development Strategy and geographical coverage of their LAGs and IPs. It also contains relevant contact details, as well as links to each of the LAGs and IPs websites and social media pages. A booklet version, and PDF list of this Irish LAGs and IPs database have also been updated on the LEADER section of the NRN website



Source: National Rural Network

Image Credit: National Rural Network

LEADER Thematic Workshop Highlights Report

December 4th 2018 - Part 1: Social Inclusion

Organised by the National Rural Network and the Department of Rural and Community Development, the LEADER Social Inclusion and Broadband workshop on December 4th 2018 brought together over 80 members of Local Action Groups and Implementing Partners. The workshop aimed to strengthen capacity around delivery of the social inclusion and broadband LEADER Programme themes through sharing ideas, knowledge and challenges.

This short highlights report draws together key evidence and messages emerging from the Social Inclusion part of the workshop, focused on the sub-themes of rural youth and basic services targeted at hard to reach communities.

At the workshop, Anne Walsh from the National Youth Council (NYC) and Seamus Boland of Irish Rural Link both gave presentations highlighting rural social inclusion issues, challenges and needs. Barbara Carolan from Accora Orchestra and Abiodun Ladigbolu from Ankara Festival discussed how LEADER funding has contributed to expanding and developing these projects. Gloria Callinan from Clare Local Development Company (CLDC) presented how it approaches community-led local development. The session closed with a panel discussion on overcoming barriers to social inclusion and reaching hard to reach communities.



Rural Social Inclusion - Seamus Boland, CEO of Irish Rural Link and member of the European Economic and Social Committee

To set the scene, Seamus presented statistics on social exclusion in the EU and Irish context. He discussed definitions of social inclusion and 'rural', how they are constantly changing and difficult to gain consensus on, but needed as part of the policy process.

Key messages

In the EU, almost 1 in 4 are at risk of poverty or social exclusion and those in rural areas are at higher risk. Social exclusion can be less visible in rural than urban contexts. The rural social exclusion problem can be transplanted into cities as the social excluded can move to urban areas.

Social exclusion is a complex problem with multiple groups impacted for multi-faceted reasons. Some issues persist through times of economic prosperity and decline, such as rural youth unemployment.

LEADER has a role to play in rural social inclusion. In light of the complexity of the problem we need to think more deeply about what influence LEADER can have. For example, how can LEADER'S influence be strengthened by leveraging synergies with other programmes and how we can better measure its impact on social inclusion.



Rural youth, minority groups and social inclusion issues - Anne Walsh, Equality and Intercultural Programme Manager, NYCI

Focusing on minority ethnic youth social inclusion issues, Ann presented the findings of the 'Make Minority a Priority' research assessing minority young people's experiences of growing up in Ireland and its recommendations for the youth sector. She also discussed the findings of another research project mapping youth organisation activities that engage young asylum seekers and refugees.

Key messages

Minority young people's experiences of growing up in Ireland can be conflicted in terms of identity and belonging, such as feeling Irish but not being seen as Irish as well as maintaining a balance between connections to cultural origins and Irish culture.

To support integration, there is a need for greater cultural awareness and education around cultural and religious competencies. Racism is also experienced by minority young people which can go under-reported or acknowledged and needs to be brought to the fore.

A crucial need and first step is for more safe spaces where minority youth can come together to share experiences, meet and develop projects from the bottom up, alongside support for leadership so youth themselves can be leaders and facilitators of new initiatives.

Rural youth can often need to travel to access youth services and mobile youth services can help to increase accessibility. Access is even more difficult in the context of youth in direct provision centres.

"When seeking to reach the hard to reach a key challenge is the lack of networks. Trying to build up and open out those networks for young people, that is the biggest piece of work. It is a long process and needs a lot of support behind it. It is not enough to reach out to them once. You also need to reach out to young people and their parents so it is across the generations." Anne Walsh, NYCI



Accora Orchestra - LEADER funded Rural Youth project, Barbara Carolan, Accora Orchestra

Under the social inclusion and rural youth sub-theme, Accora Orchestra received a LEADER grant to support rebranding and investment in new equipment bringing a wide range of benefits.

The new equipment has enabled the orchestra to accept invitations to perform outdoors which previously was not possible. Re-branding has rejuvenated the orchestra, bringing a newly revived sense of pride. The funding also went towards purchase of a laptop and software with significant organisational benefits, streamlining administration, enhancing communication and use of digital services.

Key messages

The LEADER grant covered 75% of the total project costs. Fundraising was essential to raise the match funds. Fundraising is an ongoing activity, but is an unpredictable source of funds and challenging to raise significant amounts of funding. This makes wider funding sources such as through the LEADER programme of vital importance to the sustainability and development of groups such as Accora Orchestra.

The voluntary nature of most local music and youth groups leaves time limited to commit to the process. Strong cooperation and trust between promoters and Implementing Partners is of vital importance to overcome challenges and get through the LEADER application process.

"Ongoing guidance and assistance to project promoters is essential, don't take anything for granted. Some committees may not have the experience or skills base. Have endless patience and understanding of the difficulties the promoters face. Trust was strong between us and the staff at Breffini Integrated CLG. Promoters also need to accept the need for openness and transparency. Once we had a reason why things had to be done in a certain way then I could go back to committee and rationalise what was needed."

Barbara Carolan, Accora Orchestra

Social inclusion with a LEADER focus, Gloria Callinan, LEADER Programme Coordinator, CLDC

A case study of CLDC provided an example of the LEADER approach from the Implementing Partner perspective. Gloria provided examples of a diverse range of LEADER funded projects in Clare but also pointed to a number of wider issues beyond the project level that cut across the LEADER approach to support rural community development.

Key messages

Bottom-up community development is a process that takes time. It also needs a number of different types of interventions.

Capital investment projects such as community centres, which can receive criticism, are essential to provide spaces for further community development which need continuing community engagement, participation and empowerment.

Community plans are another type of intervention. Part of the 'soft' supports under Clare Local Development Strategy is to develop a community plan for 50 communities in the county. This can help build cohesion, connections and further strengthen communities. Community plans provide a valuable resource for making local community resources such as community centres more inclusive providing evidence to guide how services should be tailored or particular groups to target identified as hard to reach.

A challenge raised is effectively reaching the hard to reach. Well-organised community groups are often not composed of hard to reach populations. One way to address this involves finding ways that more well organised and resourced communities can share their learning and skills, such as experience of the LEADER process, with others who are hard to reach and lack those resources.



Ankara Festival - LEADER funded Hard to Reach Communities project, Abiodun Ladigbolu, Association of Nigerian Community in Clare

Organised by the Association of the Nigerian Community in County Clare (ANCC), the Ankara Festival is an annual cultural event growing in popularity that supports social inclusion. It brings diverse communities together that didn't previously have a space to do this. The ANCC successfully gained LEADER support towards essential sound equipment in 2017. Abiodun presented the ANCC's experience of the LEADER process and how the funding has benefited Ankara Festival.

Key messages

LEADER funding supported the ANCC take Ankara Festival to a new level, as a larger scale event. The sound equipment is also available to other community groups for use.

While the ANCC found the LEADER process initially daunting, all issues were surmountable. Encouragement and support from CLDC staff was essential to effectively engage this 'hard to reach' group with the LEADER programme.

"People discouraged us, said this is a very hard process, but what we learned is never underestimate what can be achieved, be proactive and organised. Have all the requirements ready before the time. Nothing is impossible if you are ready to take it on and are organised and prepared." Abiodun Ladigbolu, ANCC

Panel discussion: Overcoming barriers to social inclusion and reaching hard to reach communities?

The panel discussion focused on ways to effectively overcome barriers to reaching rural youth and wider hard to reach populations.

Key messages

Effectively overcoming barriers is a process that takes time. Work is required through various layers of the process to achieve results.

"Reaching hard to reach for NYCI is about trust building. Linking to existing groups helps to push an open door. Collaborate with people who have the relationships on the ground. Connecting people to other people and joining the dots is important." Anne Walsh, NYCI

"We start to engage youth from a very young age, from as young as four upwards. They are not only learning a skill but there is a social element to it. It is a different network outside their school friends. They also travel with the orchestra and build friendships. They see benefit of investing the time." Barbara Carolan, Accora Orchestra

The reputation of the LEADER programme as a difficult, long and challenging process needs to be addressed so hard to reach groups are not discouraged from engaging with the process. There is also a need to raise awareness of LEADER funding among the hard to reach and to work closely with these groups to assist them access supports that enable them to advance their objectives.

"Reaching the hard to reach is easier when there is a critical mass. It is difficult to reach those who are more dispersed. Development officers spend a lot of time on the process and outreach to rural dispersed socially excluded populations is particularly challenging. Reputational damage to the LEADER programme is also issue. We need to work on fixing this. Case studies illustrating positive stories are part of the solution." Gloria Callinan, CLDC



LEADER Thematic Workshop Highlights Report

December 4th 2018 - Part 2: Broadband

Organised by the National Rural Network and the Department of Rural and Community Development (DRCD), the LEADER Social Inclusion and Broadband workshop on December 4th 2018 brought together over 80 members of Local Action Groups (LAGs) and Implementing Partners (IPs).

The workshop aimed to strengthen capacity around delivery of the social inclusion and broadband LEADER Programme themes through sharing ideas, knowledge and challenges.

This short highlights report draws together key evidence and messages emerging from the broadband part of the workshop.

At the workshop, two DRCD staff gave presentations. Dympna Harney gave an update on the LEADER Programme, focusing on progress specifically relating to broadband projects. Dr Stjohn O'Connor discussed LEADER project funding possibilities in the context of the National Broadband Plan (NBP) and the need for no duplication of funding. Next

focus changed to local supports and project ideas. Local Authority Broadband Officer Christine Collins gave an overview of the work of a Broadband Officer in the Longford context. David Hodge of CoderDojo Ireland gave an introduction to CoderDojo, the aims of this global organisation and the need for more local coding clubs in rural Ireland.



LEADER Update – Dympna Harney, DRCD LEADER Unit

Progress on delivery of the €250 million LEADER Programme has seen a steady rise in project approvals with approximately 1,500 projects approved in early December 2018.

Key messages

The enterprise development and social inclusion LEADER themes have received the greatest allocations of funding. Over €10 million in project payments have been issued in 2018.

Allocations under the broadband sub-theme have been low to date and the DRCD would welcome an increase in funding approvals. Figures from December 2018 indicate just 15 broadband projects have been approved with just under €115,000 in funding allocated to these projects. The Local Action Groups have indicated in their Local Development Strategies that €3.5 million in funding will be made available to support projects under the broadband sub-theme.



LEADER and Broadband, Dr Stjohn O'Connor, DRCD Regional Telecommunications Development Unit



In the context of the NBP, Stjohn discussed how LEADER can complement it emphasising the importance of demand focused digital initiatives utilising broadband in rural communities.

Key messages

Small scale infrastructure projects (i.e. less than €10,000 in grant aid) may be funded under LEADER. Other types of projects should focus on demand elements (e.g. digital skills and services) that support digital engagement once infrastructure is in place. The State cannot double fund and the NBP is an infrastructure investment plan to roll out high speed broadband across Ireland.

A Broadband Officer has been appointed in 30 of 31 local authorities. In relation to the broadband theme, the local Broadband Officer is an important contact for those implementing the LEADER Programme. Consult the List of Local Authority Broadband Officers for details. A FAQ Guide for each of the NBP intervention areas (amber, blue and light-blue) is available on the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment website.

LEADER funding under the broadband theme should focus on uptake and use of high-speed broadband. Opportunities exist for example in relation to Internet of Things (IoT), smart elderly care, smart farming and more broadly around how digital technology and high speed broadband can be applied in rural areas to deal with rural issues.

Planned Broadband Connection Points (BCPs) provide a space for potential LEADER projects. As a part of the prioritisation strategy for the NBP, a network of 275 BCPs will provide free high speed broadband in rural locations such as community centres and national schools. It is expected they will be connected within the first 12 months of NBP rollout. Local Broadband Officers have details of BCP locations.

"BCPs provide an opportunity to develop digital initiatives around training and digital skills in these communities. LEADER is well placed to support this, such as through funding training and/or equipment, for example." Dr StJohn

O'Connor, DRCD

Local Digital Strategies are in development and each local authority area will have a strategy. Strategies are structured around seven key pillars of digital maturity and informed by a digital readiness assessment. Some counties have already launched their strategies, such as Clare and Limerick. Digital strategies can help inform LEADER Programme funding under the broadband theme and LEADER has a role to play in the longer term delivery of digital strategies.

"The NBP is fundamentally an infrastructure plan. What we do with it when it arrives is the fundamental thing. Locally, we need clear digital strategies for what we are going to do with it comes. LEADER funding can feed into this."

Dr StJohn O'Connor, DRCD



Role of the Local Authority Broadband Officer, Christine Collins, Longford Broadband Officer

The Broadband Officer is part of a multidisciplinary team in Longford County Council working to support implementation of the NBP and remove barriers to rollout.

Key messages

Broadband Officers are a dedicated point of contact on broadband in each local authority. Officers work together sharing good practice and exploring collaboration opportunities. They have direct engagement with both DRCD and the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment (DCCAE).

Broadband Officers play a diverse role such as supporting the development of local digital strategies, community

engagement plans, improving public awareness around the NBP and the benefits of high speed broadband.

In Longford projects have developed engaging schools and developing public WiFi access through the European WiFi initiative. WiFi4EU funding supports free, open-access WiFi hot-spots. More broadly, work is ongoing to promote transformation towards a digital society where digital technology and high speed broadband is used to create smarter communities and improve people's lives.

"We need to adapt to the digital society. Broadband is becoming like the third utility - electricity, water and broadband. Our priorities and our world is changing. It is seen as a necessity."

Christine Collins, Longford Broadband Officer

CoderDojo, David Hodge, CoderDojo Ireland and Cork Institute of Technology

CoderDojo is a worldwide movement of free, community-based programming clubs for young people where they learn to code, build websites, create apps or games, and explore technology in an informal and creative environment. The network of CoderDojo groups in Ireland is weaker in rural areas, representing an opportunity for LEADER funding.

Key messages

Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) education in Ireland needs improvement. In the future, STEM and digital skills will be needed in a growing number of industries. We have issues with uptake of subjects such as physics and chemistry and women need to be better represented in STEM.

CoderDojo can play a role in building interest in STEM subjects helping remove barriers to young people's STEM engagement. CoderDojo groups are free, volunteer-led, and community based. Group leaders don't need to be tech experts to run a 'dojo'. The ethos is self-led learning where children teach themselves using CoderDojo resources and teaching tools.

CoderDojo Ireland aims to grow its mentor network and support new champions to create new dojos. It also aims to build its network where most needed and dojos in rural areas are a major part of achieving this.

Breakout discussion: Developing rural broadband and LEADER funding possibilities

The breakout discussion focused on how LEADER can support digital initiatives in communities, as well as overcoming challenges to increase LEADER project applications under the broadband sub-theme.



Key messages

Project examples are very useful to help communities and IPs envision project ideas that harness the potential of rural broadband and support greater rural digitisation. Information on good practice digital initiatives helps to conceptualise projects and stakeholders to reach out to. Project ideas discussed were vast and varied. All may not be eligible for LEADER funding and this would need to be clarified locally on a case by case basis. Below are some examples discussed:

- Supporting training, education and public awareness to enhance application of what digital offers, including targeted training (e.g. elderly and farming community); STEM focused education projects in schools (e.g. CoderDojo); and digital champions, such as business leaders training local people about the advantages and applications of digital technology.
- Hubs such as Fab Labs and enhancing the value of BCPs such as through funding development of hot desk facilities.
- Increased use of smart technology in the rural economy such as in farming, heritage and health.
- Make more public WiFi available, such as on Local Link services, as well as wider projects harnessing public WiFi where it is available, such as through Wifi4EU.
- Local baseline analysis studies assessing existing digital facilities and how to future-proof them. Assessment from different user perspectives e.g. suitability for remote working, personal internet use.
- Showcasing projects can also feed into local animation events where successful promoters discuss their projects.
- Ultimately however projects must come from the bottom up, driven by community needs. This will also provide motivation to make an application, effectively go through the LEADER process and raise match funding needed.
- A number of challenges were discussed, suggestions for how they can be overcome, including future action points:
- Raising adequate finance for projects is an issue for broadband theme projects. The limit of €10,000 for small scale infrastructure is a barrier. Cooperation between LAGs could help to overcome this.
- Important to start to get information out to communities on where BCPs are. A number of players should be engaged e.g. PPNs, Broadband Officers and Community Groups.
- Currently, rural communities are faced with a 'chicken and egg' like scenario. Without high speed broadband, community groups are inhibited from developing digital initiatives. BCPs are not a total solution, for example they will be more suited to personal use rather than remote working.

New LEADER Economic Development, Enterprise Development and Job Creation Storyboard

The NRN team at NUI Galway and Irish Rural Link has designed a new Storyboard promoting more than 22 project examples funded under Theme 1 (Economic Development, Enterprise Development and Job Creation) of the LEADER Programme 2014-2020. This visual, user-friendly interactive database highlights a range of project examples across the rural tourism, enterprise development, rural towns and broadband sub-themes.

The Storyboard features a summary of each project, as well as links to further information. It aims to provide access to information on inspirational LEADER project examples and ideas to help potential applicants conceptualise projects and see what is possible. Storyboards also help to illustrate the value of LEADER demonstrating in a holistic way the value of projects to local rural areas.

You can explore the new LEADER Theme 1 Storyboard, as well as our other storyboards on LEADER Social Inclusion and Environment themes on the NRN website: <https://www.nationalruralnetwork.ie/leader/storyboards/>



NRN Case Studies Demonstrate the Diverse Value of LEADER

The NRN library of LEADER case studies now features eight in depth project stories highlighting the impacts of the LEADER programme including its social, cultural and economic value. The latest addition to our database is a case study on the Lands of Éogain Heritage Festival that was supported through LEADER in 2017. Based on the Inishowen Peninsula in Donegal the festival celebrates local heritage to build networks, raise awareness and support cultural tourism.

Other case studies look at how LEADER can provide direct support to rural enterprise, such as Mid Ireland Adventure in Offaly and Coillte Sláintiúil in Cork. LEADER can also indirectly facilitate enterprise and economic development. The case studies on SWEETS in Westmeath and the Mountbellew Walled Garden project in Galway demonstrate this. LEADER also supports rural communities in a variety of ways, such as developing community infrastructure, supporting policy development and community planning. Based in Monaghan, the Corduff Raferagh Community Centre was upgraded with LEADER support. From Kilkenny, the iRoUTE Conference provided a key driver leading to the development of a Comprehensive Mobility Plan for the Kilkenny region. From Laois, the Cullough Community Plan project utilised the community-led planning process to map the steps for building future community sustainability.

<https://www.nationalruralnetwork.ie/case-studies/?category=leader>

Smart Villages and Rural Towns in Ireland: Revitalising Rural Communities through Social and Digital Innovation



Overview

The EU Action for Smart Villages initiative was launched by the European Commission in 2017. Smart Villages are rural areas and communities which build on, and enhance their existing strengths and assets through creative thinking and by embracing innovation to create desirable places for rural people to live and work. In creating a Smart Village, community groups and individuals often overcome local challenges by exploring and implementing practical and tangible solutions. In particular, rural communities explore how local services, such as health, social services, education, energy, transport and retail, can be enhanced and sustained through the deployment of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) tools and community-led actions and projects. As such, digitisation is key to the creation of a Smart Village; however, social innovation is

also paramount. The concept of Smart Villages therefore is not prescriptive and there is an acknowledgment that there is 'no one size fits all' model that can be applied universally. This in turn allow EU Member States broad discretion on how to plan for, and implement this innovative initiative in their respective countries.

ENRD Thematic Group (TG) on Smart Villages

A European Network for Rural Development (ENRD) Thematic Group (TG) on Smart Villages, launched in September 2017, contributes to the EU Action for Smart Villages by enabling the exchange of innovative ways of creating more vibrant, sustainable and attractive rural areas, and also by exploring how Rural Development Programmes (RDPs) and other financial instruments can best be used to support this. Seven Smart Villages TG meetings have taken place to date. Dr Shane Conway,

Researcher at NUI Galway is participating in this TG on behalf of the National Rural Network. According to Dr Conway, 'essentially Smart Villages, and Smart Rural Towns in an Irish context, are rural communities that put measures in place to help retain and attract people to live and work in their locality, be it through practices of digital innovation and/or social innovation'.



Relationship with the LEADER Programme

The development of Smart Villages in Ireland and indeed across the EU can be greatly enhanced through the successful delivery of the LEADER Programme 2014-2020. Established by the European Commission in 1991, LEADER is widely regarded as one of Europe's most successful rural development programmes. The LEADER approach is based on 7 key principles – all of which must collaborate and positively interact for it to be successful (see Fig. 1). A detailed description of these 7 key principles of LEADER can be found here:

https://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/sites/agriculture/files/publi/fact/leader/2006_en.pdf



The LEADER Programme is therefore well positioned to become the key policy ingredient and catalyst towards the 'smart' revolution of rural towns and villages in Ireland, particularly through its community-led approach to rural development. Rural development strategies and projects are considered to be more effective and efficient if decided and implemented at local level by local actors. Through this 'bottom up' framework, LEADER supports the delivery of local development actions which address the overarching needs of rural communities throughout Ireland and other EU member states in an innovative, integrated and inclusive manner. Indeed, the LEADER programme in Ireland already focuses on, and includes three core themes (i.e. (i) Economic Development, Enterprise Development and Job Creation, (ii) Social Inclusion & (iii) Rural Environment) (see. Fig 2) which, taken together, constitute the fundamental principles of what the European Commission consider is needed to create and attain a sustainable Smart Village.

Creating Synergies between the 'Smart Villages' concept and Ireland's new 'Smart Community Initiative'

The EU Action for 'Smart Villages' concept is also closely aligned to Ireland's new 'Smart Community' initiative, launched by the Department of Rural and Community Development & the Department of Communications, Climate Action and the Environment in January 2019. This innovative initiative is a new approach that aims to bring exposure to digital content and technology in rural communities, and also to support rural dwellers in discovering the value of using digital in their daily lives.

Creating synergies between the EU Action for 'Smart Villages' concept and Ireland's new 'Smart Community' initiative through increased levels of collaboration, has the potential to greatly improve the quality of life for people who live and work in rural towns and villages throughout Ireland. The realisation of 'smart' rural areas and communities can play a key role in the development and sustainability of rural Ireland by tackling issues, such as depopulation, limited employment opportunities and out-migration.



'Smart Villages' Videos on the National Rural Network Website

Ten informative videos related to the EU Action for 'Smart Villages' are featured on the LEADER themed video channel on the NRN website. The NRN would like to sincerely thank the European Commission - DG Agriculture

and Rural Development the European Network for Rural Development (ENRD), the EU Strategy for the Alpine Region (EUSALP), OriginTrail, SolarPower Europe and the Smart Village Network for kindly allowing us to feature their content on our website to inspire rural Irish communities.

For more information on the 'Smart Villages' initiative, please visit the ENRD Smart Villages Portal to discover a plethora of inspiring networks and initiatives across the EU.

Further information on 'Revitalising Rural Communities through Social and Digital Innovation' can be found below:

[**ENRD Smart Villages Website**](#)

[**EU Action for Smart Villages**](#)

[**Ireland's Smart Community Initiative**](#)



5th 'Governmental Day Workshop' at FTTH 2019

The Fibre to the Home (FTTH) 2019 conference took place recently in the RAI Amsterdam. Dr Shane Conway (NUIG/ NRN) attended and participated in the 5th 'Governmental Day Workshop' at this event on behalf of the NRN along with over 150 broadband stakeholders from across the EU. This interactive workshop, held on the 12th of March 2019, discussed the latest information on broadband and digitalisation policy developments at European level. There was a particular focus on tackling and addressing the diverse challenges faced by public local and regional authorities in relation to fibre broadband deployment and digital transformation in rural areas throughout Europe. An interactive, round table session concluded this workshop, based on three thematic dimensions of digital divide in rural areas, namely (i) fibre optic development, (ii) enhancing the use of internet services and (iii) maximizing the digital skills in rural communities. This session gave all participants the chance to discuss and exchange their views and ideas. Dr Conway highlighted the potential of the EU Action for 'Smart Villages' initiative as a means of bridging the urban-rural digital divide during the 'maximizing the digital skills in rural communities' group session.. More information about the 5th 'Governmental Day Workshop' can be found here:



<https://atenekom.eu/company/events/governmental-day-workshop-2019-amsterdam/?lang=en>

Source: Cora Project and National Rural Network

Image Credit: atene KOM GmbH

UK & Ireland Cooperation Conference

The Rural Networks of Wales, Ireland, Scotland and Northern Ireland brought together over 60 participants in a unique, collaborative LEADER Cooperation workshop in Glasgow on 20-21 March 2019.

The event, which was attended by representatives from 30 Local Action Groups (LAGs) from the four countries, not only offered valuable networking opportunities, but provided a space for actual partnership formation and project development for co-operation projects.

The workshops were designed to offer groups an opportunity to:

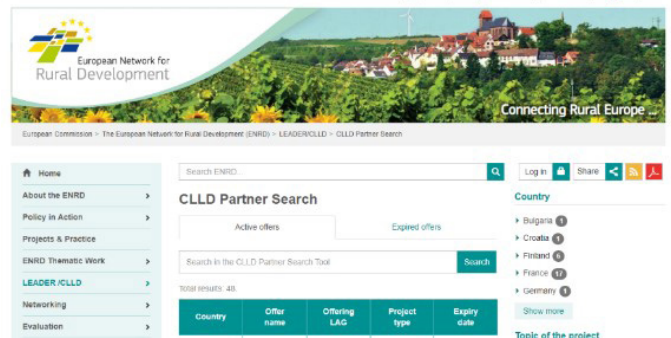
- Meet and share experiences of LEADER Cooperation
- Learn from case examples of LEADER Cooperation under a number of common project themes to help improve the quality of project delivery and outcomes
- Identify opportunities to find new partnerships that will enhance projects currently in the project development or assessment pipeline.

To view the full conference report and cooperation offers; please click the link below <https://www.ruralnetwork.scot/news-and-events/news/uk-ireland-cooperation-conference-%E2%80%93-2021-march-2019-%E2%80%93-2021-glasgow>

Partners Sought for LEADER Cooperation Projects

Approximately 40 LEADER cooperation projects are currently featured on the ENRD database and seek partners to cooperate with. The LEADER Cooperation Scheme is designed to encourage rural areas to work together on joint projects with mutual benefits for each participating area. Cooperation is a partnership between LAGs but the partnership can also involve non LEADER groups.

Cooperation offers recently added to the ENRD database include projects based in France, Lithuania, Romania and Finland. Details of projects and offering LAGs are available on the ENRD database.



Check out the database: https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/leader-clld/clld-partner-search_en

Source: ENRD

Image Credit: ENRD

New National Rural Network Website

For ongoing updates and further content on the LEADER Programme 2014-2020 please check out the LEADER section of the new National Rural Network website:

<https://www.nationalruralnetwork.ie/leader/>



Notes



Join the NRN for Free

If you are Interested in issues related to the LEADER Programme, please sign up to the National Rural Network (NRN) on our website on www.nationalruralnetwork.ie. The NRN is part of the Rural Development Programme (RDP) 2014-2020.

Our ambition is to bring the RDP into the lives of as many people as possible by communicating its key opportunities and outputs to all relevant stakeholders.

For regular updates follow us on:

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National Rural Network