



National Rural Network

NRN Newsletter
July 2022

Smart Villages and Rural Towns in Ireland



Rialtas
na hÉireann
Government
of Ireland

Ár dTodhchaí
Tuaithe
Our Rural
Future



The European Agricultural Fund
for Rural Development:
Europe investing in rural areas

Smart Villages and Rural Towns in Ireland

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Newsletter compiled by Dr Shane Conway and Dr Maura Farrell, Rural Studies Centre, NUI Galway, and Daniel Bennett, Irish Rural Link, on behalf of the National Rural Network (NRN) and the Department of Rural and Community Development (DRCD).

Smart Villages and Rural Towns – A Roadmap for Rural Ireland



Welcome to the second edition of the National Rural Network's annual Smart Villages and Rural Towns newsletter. This publication is inspired by the [EU Action for Smart Villages](#) initiative, launched by the European Commission in 2017. Although there is no legal definition of a 'smart village' within EU legislation, Smart Villages (and Smart Rural Towns in an Irish context) are rural areas and local 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, whilst digitisation is key to the creation of a Smart Village, social innovation is also paramount i.e. thinking smartly to create vibrant and sustainable rural communities. 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 allows EU Member States broad discretion on how to plan for, and implement, this innovative initiative in their respective countries.

Ireland's position in relation to the development of Smart Villages and Rural Towns is that it can be greatly enhanced through the successful delivery and modernisation of the LEADER Programme. Creating synergies between the LEADER Programme and the various smart supports, projects and initiatives showcased in this newsletter by Ireland's National Rural Network (NRN), 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. This newsletter's focus on innovative community-led local development is now more important than ever as villages and rural towns throughout Ireland and Europe adapt, rebuild and reenergise as part of their COVID-19 pandemic recovery response.

Smart Relationship with the LEADER Approach



Ireland, particularly through its community-led approach to rural development. Through its '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 2014-2020 (Extended to 2022) 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) which, taken together, constitute the fundamental principles of what the European Commission consider is needed to create and attain a sustainable Smart Village/Rural Town.

A booklet produced by the National Rural Network (NRN), celebrating the success of the LEADER Programme in Ireland over the past 30 years, tells the stories of 72 inspirational,

Established by the European Commission in 1991, LEADER has proved its value and endurance in supporting rural dwellers and communities to realise their potential, and overcome various challenges in Ireland and indeed across the EU over the past 31 years through its community-led approach to rural development. The LEADER approach is based on seven key principles – all of which must collaborate and positively interact for it to be successful.

Rural development strategies and projects such as the Smart Villages initiative are considered to be most effective and efficient when decided and implemented at a local level by local actors, hence the appropriateness of building on LEADER's 'bottom up' framework in supporting the economic and social development of local areas in the coming period.

LEADER is therefore well positioned to become the key policy ingredient and catalyst towards the 'smart' revolution of rural towns and villages in

'smart' LEADER projects located throughout Ireland funded under the Rural Development Programme 2014-2020. Commenting on the launch of the booklet in November 2021, the Minister Humphreys said, 'LEADER is all about that community-led, bottom up approach. I really believe this publication will help guide future applicants to develop worthy projects that will benefit the community as a whole'. All 29 Local Action Groups (LAGs) throughout Ireland and their respective Implementing Partners (IPs) are represented in this publication. Dr Shane Conway, Researcher at NUI Galway's Rural Studies Centre working on the NRN Project who led the production of this publication highlights that, 'Rural Ireland has benefited enormously from the LEADER Programme; not only through capital invested, but more specifically through the enhancement and accumulation of social capital in rural areas'.

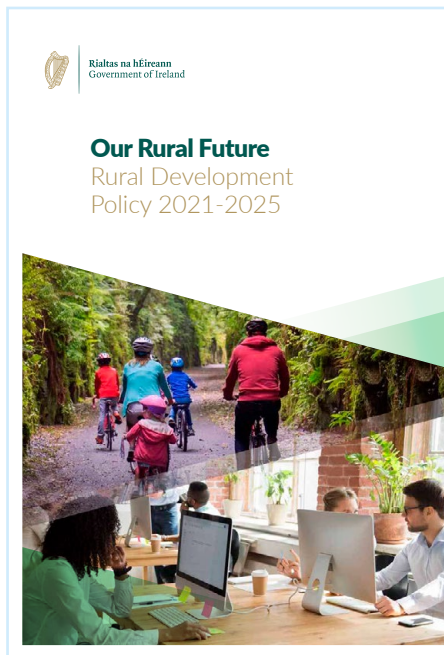
You can freely view/download this booklet [here](#)

Our Rural Future: Rural Development Policy 2021-2025

On the 29th of March 2021, the Irish Government published 'Our Rural Future', the blueprint for a post-COVID-19 recovery and development of rural Ireland over the next four years. Through this policy, the Government is adopting a more integrated, place-based approach to rural development to maximise investment and meet the long-term needs of individual, villages and towns.

One of the policy commitments highlighted under the theme of 'Revitalising Rural Towns and Villages' in the new rural development policy, is the need to 'support the development of Smart Towns and Villages which use innovative solutions to improve resilience, build on local strengths and maximise opportunities to create desirable places for people to live and work.' The LEADER programme is noted as having a fundamental role in achieving this, through its community-led approach to rural development. Tasked with the delivery of this policy commitment over the next five years is the Department of Rural and Community Development, supported by Local Authorities, Local Development Companies, and communities.

Social innovation is a fundamental part of the new rural development policy, with communities at a local level being challenged to find practical solutions to overcome challenges faced and capitalise on opportunities that may arise. Among the policy commitments aimed at supporting communities in Our Rural Future is



the establishment of a Rural Youth Assembly to allow young people to engage in issues that impact on them; the provision of mentoring and training for community development leaders, particularly between the ages of 18 and 25; and the enhancement of the Public Participation Network and Local Community Development structures to ensure that local communities are fully involved in decision making. Also recognised within the policy is the importance of Information and Communications Technology (ICT), and digital innovation. A €2.7 billion investment in the delivery of high-speed broadband to rural areas will be a key factor in ensuring a better quality of life for rural dwellers, enabling people to access online information and resources including the provision of online services such as education and personalised health care.

Our Rural Future, Ireland's new Rural Development Policy is available to view [here](#)

Smart Villages: Bridging Practice, Research and Policy

Dr Oskar Wolski

Geographer, National Science Centre, Poland



The diversity of rural places, villages and towns across Europe, makes it necessary for us to think the rural development is a process based on local resources and, as a result, to remember rural places need to meet various challenges. Consequently, the key to understanding rural development is to identify the way the resources are used and understand the challenges. These yield a situation where creating policies that satisfy various groups of stakeholders living in different rural areas is difficult and requires flexible solutions, as well as it shifts the interest into local approaches.

Although rural development is a process that involves different levels of government, from local to global, action or policy intervention always finally occurs at the local level, in specific places and via specific individuals. Any response to challenges demands changes, and

changes are hence made for people and by people.

So what makes smart villages different in the above context if so much has so far been discussed? The approach is about the way local actors respond to challenges and induce changes, and not about specific thematic areas of action or policy instruments. To be a 'Smart Village', according to the European Network for Rural Development (ENRD), means using digital technologies when it helps achieve goals, while, at the same time, these are not the only tools used in the process; thinking out-of-the-box and activating linkages, knowing that rural places function as part of broader socio-economic environments, despite all initiatives being rooted at the local level; establishing new forms of cooperation and new networks of stakeholders (farmers and other rural actors,

local governments, the private sector, and the community as a whole), as well as implementing effective management of them; independent thinking, because there does not exist a one standardised model of smart villages or a closed set of tools used by smart villages. For all of these reasons, smart villages need to assess their resources, use the best available knowledge, and take the initiative in shaping their local reality.

Smart villages are smart communities being able to respond to challenges associated with changing realities. As the very nature of the challenge is not important, but the response is important, it is also an approach to rural development which may be adapted independently of the characteristics of the given village or town or the whole area. This corresponds to contemporary notions of rural development part of the broadly defined neo-endogenous school of thought.

How to do that? First, change the perception of what an effective solution at the local level is and include the approach in local development strategies to strengthen its legal basis, which will serve as the foundation for further action. Second, democratise the action, which

manifests itself in the reduction of the distance in the relationship between local governments and other representatives of the local community, who are all treated as equal partners. Third, let local governments meet the basic needs of the local community and build trust. Having these in hand helps release the creative potential of the local community, who instead of thinking only about current needs, can develop bold ideas. Lastly, seek and find opportunities resulting from the utilisation of the local potential, knowledge and technology. Put best practices to work by developing horizontal relationships (work with other villages) and vertical relationships (work with other institutions managing development at other levels).

From practical point of view, it appears to be most important to build structures and so called 'good climate' at the local level to help implement the smart village approach. Local governments play a key role in this process, as they have the needed authority and obligations to the local community. Of course, other stakeholders should also participate, as to achieve the best possible results, it is necessary to generate a wide range of competencies and strengthen synergies at the local level.



iRoute 2 Conference and KITE Project

Declan Rice

CEO, Kilkenny LEADER Partnership (KLP)



The inadequate state of public transport in rural Ireland has been a sporadic issue of concerned discussion for local development companies and other rural stakeholders, over the last quarter century. Which is not to say that the service is ever adequate when it is not prominent in the public discourse. It's just that sometimes the lack of decent transport is particularly evident. The arrival of tens of thousands of displaced people from Ukraine, most initially anyway, without cars, and many into rural Ireland, has highlighted it now, but it's been there forever. We need to talk about rural transport... once again!

The Integrated Rural & Urban Transport Evolution (iROUTE) conference took place in Kilkenny City on the 5th of May. It was attended by over 80 participants from across Ireland,

with speakers from the Department of Rural & Community Development (DRCD), the National Transport Authority (NTA), the National Rural Network (NRN), local authorities, and from transport experts from Germany, Italy and Belgium. Kilkenny LEADER Partnership (KLP) led the local stakeholder group which organised this event. The overall objective of the iROUTE Conference was to highlight the dire need for a national policy for rural mobility and public transport. Supporting this goal was the stakeholders wish to contribute some community-led suggestions on





how such a ‘much desired’, policy might be frameworked.

Like many of its colleague bodies, KLP has been active in the area for over two decades, and in 2001 supported the formation of Ring a Link, one of the 11 Local Link community-led companies covering rural Ireland with a range of flexible services. The Local Links are funded through the National Transport Authority. Ring a Link is independent of KLP and covers a much larger area than Kilkenny, including Carlow, Wicklow and the Fingal area of Dublin.

Local Link services are funded to complement that of the fixed corridor licenced bus transport providers. But while the services of the licenced providers and local links are valuable, particularly for those with little other transport options, older people, children, the unemployed among them, most reflective parties would agree that the overall service is not fit for purpose. One basic reason is the low level of funding afforded to rural transport, when compared to its urban equivalents. Another operational reason is that the Local Links and the licenced services are rarely proactively linked to each other. A bigger overall reason is the lack of a national policy: the main motivation for organising the iROUTE event.

At the conference a pilot initiative to integrate conventional bus and Local Link services was launched. KLP, its partners and JJ Kavanagh & Sons announced the ‘Kilkenny Integrated Transport Evolution’ (KITE). JJ Kavanagh & Sons is the largest private bus operator in Ireland, with its headquarters in County Kilkenny. The iROUTE partners are confident that not only will the KITE pilot prove its worth in the county, but that it is a transferable model to elsewhere in Ireland.

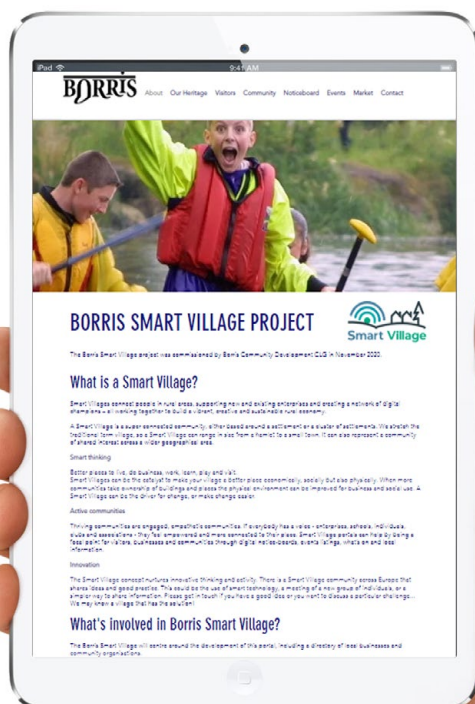
More information can be found on the Kilkenny LEADER Partnership website: <http://www.cklp.ie/iroute-conference/>



Borris Smart Village Portal



Aoibheann Murphy
Committee Member, Borris Smart Village

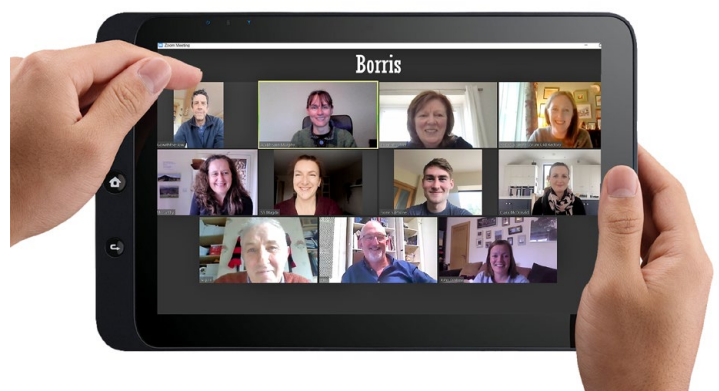


In 2017, the people of Borris came together and began the process of preparing a vision for the town. 'Borris - Our Vision' describes what is special about Borris, sets out the shared ambition for the town and identifies key projects that will make a difference. The project was compatible with the Smart Village concept - a rural community, using innovative solutions to improve resilience, building on local strengths and opportunities. Following on from this project, we felt that the development of a Smart Village Portal (SVP) would enable the community to realise some aspects of the Vision. The SVP is essentially a website which opens up digital opportunities for the community.

The project was awarded funding under the Town and Village Scheme and was launched in April 2021. The purpose of the portal is to wrap around and support all aspects of the community to facilitate development and growth in a smart manner in line with the principles of the Smart Villages concept. The project involved a number of stages:

- Community engagement to determine the needs which could be met through the portal
- Developing capacity within the community, ensuring that the portal will be updated regularly post completion and remain relevant
- Training the digital champions identified through the community engagement and capacity development stages
- Build stage and rollout.

Some of the keys aspects of the SVP are:





- **Communication** - The SVP provides a single point of reference for all community information, providing a Noticeboard facility together with an Events listing. Subscribers receive regular updates direct to their email. In addition, we regularly post on our social media platforms. This is a critical role for our Digital Champions who actively gather details of notices and events to update the SVP.
- **Message Group** - The SVP includes a community WhatsApp group where the community can post their own messages. That can include buy/sell second hand goods, lift sharing, community alert notifications etc.
- ***Visitors** - the SVP provides all the information a visitor to Borris would need, including suggested itineraries. Local volunteers also produced quality videos exploring local walking/cycling trails which have proved very popular.
- **Market** - The Borris Food and Craft Market runs every Friday morning. It provides an opportunity for local suppliers to sell directly to local customers, reducing the carbon footprint and improving sustainability. The SVP includes a Market facility where customers can order their goods and pay online before collection on Friday morning. We plan to expand the facility through collaboration with a local business. As traders will have more visibility on their sales, this will reduce food waste. In addition, we expect that it will encourage more local producers to sell through the Market and fewer car trips to larger towns.

The concept of the Smart Village Portal is one which can be replicated, and connected, throughout Ireland.

Borris Smart Village Website: <https://www.borriscarlow.ie/projects>

Lusk for Life: Lusk Vision 2030

Miriam Delaney

Architect and Lecturer at the Dublin School of Architecture, TU Dublin



‘Lusk for Life: Lusk Vision 2030’ was shortlisted for the European Bauhaus Prizes 2022. It was the only Irish project among the 52 finalists from over 1,100 submissions from across the EU. The New European Bauhaus is a creative and interdisciplinary initiative that connects the European Green Deal to our living spaces and experiences, and the awards aim highlight projects that embody the aspiration for building a more sustainable and inclusive future.

The plan presents a vision for how the small town of Lusk in North County Dublin could develop with the best interests of the current and future citizens to the fore. This project provides a model for community-led spatial and social planning, making best use of the existing assets and latent potential to structure multiple future funding and development strategies.

Aligned with Dublin Rural LEADER’s theme of social inclusion, broad community engagement was at the heart of the project, in early 2021 an intensive programme of public engagement was undertaken with numerous public meetings and workshops and an open access online survey (completed by over 750 residents). The level of involvement from local clubs, community groups, and individuals demonstrated the huge appetite for positive change in Lusk. The public engagement phase involved listening to and understanding community concerns and their priorities for the future, and invited participants to suggest creative ideas for a sustainable and inclusive future for Lusk. The team also met with stakeholders including the Dublin Rural LEADER team, key personnel in local government, local and national political representatives to understand the complex

challenges faced by Lusk. The proposals emerging from the community engagement phase aimed to address multiple targets on inclusion, focussing on the feedback received which indicated a lack of social cohesion across age profiles.

The ‘Lusk for Life’ report contains strategies to build social cohesion, and a road map for local groups to use in the implementation of these approaches. It also





identifies relevant funding streams and support mechanisms to achieve success in delivering on community priorities. Rather than proposing a single transformative project, this project is unique in emphasising incremental approaches and a range of small feasible projects as part of a holistic transformation.

The completed 'Lusk Vision 2030' report was presented to the public in August 2021, receiving a very high level of support. While 'Lusk Vision 2030' is a place-specific, it directly addresses national targets on climate change, active transport and town centre renewal- it aligns with international priorities on small scale urban renewal as a means to address climate change.

'Lusk for Life' is an exemplary model for citizen-led spatial planning in which objectives relating to sustainability, aesthetics and inclusion are seen as interdependent. 'Lusk for Life' connects high-level, long-term ambitions for climate action directly to self-identified community needs. It translates the needs of citizens into spatial and design proposals, and sets out the means to achieve these targets. 'Lusk for Life' includes practical and feasible ways for local community groups to work cohesively to transform their surroundings for the better,

along the themes of the New European Bauhaus of aesthetics, sustainability, inclusion.

The winners of the New European Bauhaus Prizes 2022 will be announced during the official ceremony in Brussels on 11 June 2022.

The full 'Lusk for Life' report can be accessed here: <https://www.appluse.eu/TOWN-VISION>



Mountbellew - A Rural and Smart Future



Steve Dolan

CEO, Galway Rural Development



Prior to Christmas 2021, a national Smart Villages plan was announced in a collaboration between three local development companies; Galway Rural Development (GRD), Kilkenny Leader Partnership, and IRD Duhallow. The trio are among sixteen regions in the country and twelve local development companies involved in the cooperation project, with training being rolled-out over the past nine months. GRD announced Mountbellew as its pilot location in County Galway with CEO of Galway Rural Development, Steve Dolan describing it as a game-changer for rural areas, in-keeping with the aims of Our Rural Future, and offering a proven record of success across the European Union in terms of cultural and economic growth and regeneration.

For GRD, the aim was to enhance cooperation, build new alliances, and target funding for rural areas like Mountbellew. A capacity crowd attended Mountbellew Pastoral Centre in October to discuss the potential for the town as a 'Smart Village' destination, with Mountbellew District Development Association and Galway Telework leading the way. The official event then took place in November 2021.

Senior Manager of GRD's LEADER team Conor Carty stated 'the Smart Villages concept brings a fresh approach and opens up new opportunities to improve the sustainability of rural areas. It aims to deliver on the promise of 'a better life in rural areas' and it reflects the



principles and methods associated with ‘smart and competitive’ rural areas. As a start, Smart Village training was developed to address the needs of rural communities and businesses in towns like Mountbellew. This training has helped up-skill rural communities under a number of strategic themes in the areas of food, nature, towns, and transport. We are about to open our first office in Mountbellew and we will be out and about offering guidance to get ready for future investment’.



In launching GRD’s Smart Villages programme MEP Maria Walsh was keen to acknowledge the potential in Mountbellew and praised the ambition. ‘Given my own background in community work, I am intimately familiar with LEADER and I am also well aware of the success of ‘Smart Villages’ across the EU so I’m delighted to see it embraced in Ireland – specifically here in East Galway’ said the MEP Walsh. “Smart Villages are communities in rural

areas using innovative solutions to improve their resilience for the challenges and opportunities ahead. Across the EU, ‘Smart Villages’ have implemented improvements to the lives of millions of rural dwellers in terms of their economic, social, environmental, and cultural lives – including through mobilising digital technologies and the potential in Mountbellew is self-evident’.

Senator Aisling Dolan also said she looked forward to seeing the fruits of the work in East Galway over the coming months. ‘Sharing ideas, sharing experience, and building intercommunity relationships are core concepts of Smart Villages. If we are to build a rural future for all of our citizens’ then proven initiatives like this will be key to our endeavours. I’m overjoyed to see this being led out of Mountbellew for the region’.

Galway Rural Development Website: <https://www.grd.ie/homepage>



Urban Foresight Smart Towns and Villages for the SEUPB



Elliot Burns

Graduate Project Specialist, Urban Foresight



Urban Foresight was commissioned by the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB) to inform the structure of the €30m Smart Towns and Villages investment area of the upcoming PEACEPLUS programme. Sitting within the Delivering Economic Regeneration and Transformation investment area, Smart Towns and Villages aims to allow rural communities to take a smart approach to rural development. Therefore, our mission was to define what smart is, review what smart projects currently exist and what smart could mean in a cross-border context.

One of the key aims of our work was to understand the complexities around smart, particularly issues regarding definitions and the capacity of local groups. After research into local communities and input from stakeholders,

we settled on a definition of smart in practice as ‘a town, village or rural community where technology is used to enable, accelerate or support strategic goals like economic growth or sustainability’. It was crucial to emphasise that smart projects don’t necessarily have to be technology led. Projects can be technology supported and still considered smart so long as they contribute to supporting and developing the local community.

Our project began as desk-based research, scoping existing smart projects to understand the situation on the ground. We then engaged with a range of stakeholders across academia, local authorities, local development companies and other relevant organisations with interviews and digital workshops. This engagement shaped our research and led to three in-person workshops across NI and Ireland in May to sense check our findings with key





stakeholders. We travelled across the North Channel with some key case studies in mind, the Innovating Communities local development and community group platform, the Atlantic Economic Corridor Enterprise Hubs Project, Eurovelo Route 1 smart cycling infrastructure and the Armagh Local Full Fibre Programme. We visited Derry/Londonderry and held a workshop in Strabane, visited Monaghan and held a workshop in Castleblaney and concluded our trip with a workshop in Newry. The workshops were invaluable for gaining key contextual understanding of the local environment and facilitating knowledge exchange between stakeholder groups.

Key points of emphasis that emerged from our research included the importance of the funding programme being accessible to a range

of organisations and being able to facilitate a lasting cross-border legacy. On the ground, some stakeholders raised the point that there's often a lack of capacity within communities to apply for funding or see out the aims of a project. It's therefore important that funding is administered in a way that supports these groups to lead smart local development from the bottom up.

With so many innovative ideas for projects, it's an exciting time for rural communities as smart technologies become increasingly accessible, helping to enhance social service delivery and economic development and impacting the quality of life.

More information on our projects can be found [here](#)

Broadband for the Community, by the Community



Vernon Buckley

PRO and Board Member of Broadband 4 Our Community (B4OC)



Spotty, intermittent and unreliable broadband is no longer acceptable in a fast-moving world. So said the village of Piltown in rural south Kilkenny in 2019. Encouraged by Kilkenny LEADER Partnership and Piltown Community Enterprise, a public meeting was held to plan a way forward. Assisted by fibre technology expert John Graves, a committee was established, eventually becoming a not-for-profit company, Broadband 4 Our Community (B4OC). Our aim is to future-proof our village by establishing a world-class fibre- to-the-home (FTTH) gigabit broadband network. This will benefit 750 homes within a 3.4km squared area and complement the work of the National Broadband Plan.

Having conducted a LEADER funded local study to establish the feasibility of such an undertaking, we concluded that a network was technically possible and financially viable. B4OC thus embarked on the ambitious project of offering high speed broadband to every home and business in the villages of Piltown and Fiddown. This community-led initiative has never before been attempted on the island of Ireland.

B4OC comprises volunteers from the community with over 30 years experience in telecoms, business development, fixed networks, engineering, IT, marketing and community engagement. We were also fortunate to be able to draw on the technical ability of a number of local people and businesses who willingly provided assistance. The goodwill of landowners is also crucial to enable us to lay fibre cables and erect poles on





their lands. Project manager Jim O'Brien, with the assistance of board member Paul Walsh and local contractors directed operations on the ground, and the orange Hi-Viz jackets worn by our volunteers have become a familiar and welcome sight.

As expected, the project experienced the usual delays and frustrations. Hampered by lockdowns in 2020/2021, the fortnightly board meetings generally provided inspiration as each milestone was reached. A communications exchange was constructed and B4OC connected to the national backhaul in January of 2022. Node 1, the townland of Ardclone (which includes Piltown's largest employer Iverk Produce/O Shea Farms) was the first to "go live", with nodes 2 and 3 being rolled out shortly afterwards.

B4OC later received a further vote of confidence from LEADER and the Tomar Trust philanthropic organisation with the assurance of further funding which will ensure the extension of the network to the more outlying areas of the parish. It is anticipated that the costs to the individual subscriber will reduce over time and that any

excess funds can be disbursed to community projects.

B4OC firmly believes that the model we have established could provide a template for similar rural communities without adequate broadband and we welcome the opportunity to share our experience with community groups contemplating a similar project.

More information can be found on the B4OC Website: www.betterbroadbandforpiltown.com



Donegal Digital: Leading The County's Digital Transformation



Dr Margaret Quinn

Donegal Digital Project Manager and ERNACT Programme Manager



Led by Donegal County Council, the Donegal Digital partnership aims to facilitate a perfect work-life balance in the region founded on digital opportunity. Our public-private partnership has the vision of digitally literate communities, co-building sustainable enterprises and societal services. It consists of 14 organisations, companies and institutions from government, education and research, community and business.

Donegal has become a place of real cutting-edge digital innovation. Donegal Digital continues to leverage this strength, creating strong digital communities throughout the county and empowering start-ups and existing enterprises. The consortium works together to utilise extended community as the key dynamic to implement digital transformation. The approach is to build on the strong foundation of Letterkenny's digital cluster, to create new enterprises and, increase the level of digital research and innovation in the County to ensure an engine of innovation for the future. "Donegal Digital is one of the Councils' most important policy initiatives. The Council is delighted to work with the project consortium on delivering its objectives. Donegal Digital dovetails well with

many other Council development strategies including remote working, inward investment as well as indigenous job creation", states John McLaughlin, Donegal County Council Chief Executive.

Action Plan for the digital transformation

Digital Transformation revolutionises the way we do things via new disruptive digital technology. Donegal Digital is implementing digitalisation across the county to reap significant benefits in multiple areas: efficiency, effectiveness, ease of access, economic growth, economy of resource usage, innovation for new products or services. The action plan for our county is divided into these digital transformation categories: Digital Foundations, Digital Innovation, Digital Technologies and Smart City & Region.

The objectives of our rolling Action Plan are achieved in action items agreed by the members of the Donegal Digital partnership. Each organisation takes appropriate responsibility for action delivery according to their targets and expertise. The actions include the stimulation of digital technologies in small traditional businesses, digital transformation of key sectors such as food, tourism and energy, provision of innovative digital public services, connecting talent to transfer digital research, to name a few. All of these are underpinned by the provision of high-speed broadband and a network of Digital Innovation Hubs (DIHs) distributed throughout the County. At the

moment, partners are working on a new digital skills portal and developing an innovative services directory to support SME innovation.

I believe that the Donegal Digital initiative is about making the most of the opportunity of digital for the County, all the more necessary with the challenges of COVID. It is delivering tangible local impacts such as high speed broadband, acceleration of digitalisation and, what will prove to be a massive asset, the growing Digital Innovation Hubs network. There is more to come. The message we want to get out is that Donegal is tuned in to the digital age and offers the perfect work/life balance for digital tech work and business.

Please visit www.donegaldigital.ie to find out more.



NUI Galway Rural Voices Seminar Series



Minister for Rural and Community Development (DRCD), Heather Humphreys TD launched a new seminar series hosted by the NRN team in the Rural Studies Centre at NUI Galway, Dr Maura Farrell and Dr Shane Conway in January 2022. Established in conjunction with the DRCD, this monthly seminar series provides a platform for Irish academics and

key rural stakeholders to present their research or rural projects; network with others engaged in a similar space, both within and beyond academia and to initiate discussions around key rural issues. The opening session of the Rural Voices series, featuring Dr Andrew Forde, who leads on the development and oversight of the implementation of Our Rural Future on behalf of the DRCD, focussed on the national rural development policy context, the relationship between rural development and Ireland's economic and social recovery, and the critical importance of prioritising a sustainable rural development agenda against a backdrop of mega trends such as climate change. President of NUI Galway, Professor Ciarán Ó hÓgartaigh, delivered the opening address at this event.

Recordings of all 6 Rural Voices seminar sessions that have taken place to date can be found [here](#)

Working Smart Together in Inishowen

Aine Mc Laughlin

Community Development Officer, Inishowen Development Partnership



In May 2022, twenty-two people took part in the Inishowen Development Partnership's (IDP) Smart Villages Training. The participants included representatives from community groups and individuals from a broad cross section including health and wellbeing, sport, heritage, environment and education. The Smart Village training, which has previously been run by IDP in conjunction with E-Townz in Clonmany and Buncrana, was well received in the Carndonagh area. It is now in motion in the Moville, Greencastle and Culdaff communities. The three-session training is free to anyone who wished to participate and is part of a wider programme under LEADER, which is currently being rolled out to 400 communities throughout Ireland.

The Smart Villages training offers groups, businesses and individuals the steps and tools to develop a community development approach; listen to the needs in their local area, bring in new volunteers and collaborate with other projects in their community to work together on joint initiatives, seek out additional funding supports and create a Smart Village Plan for their area. Anywhere the course has been held across the Inishowen Peninsula, it has received a positive response from participants. It has given communities a forum to pause and really look at the assets, stakeholders and strengths already within their communities, identify areas for improvement and opportunities to collaborate and achieve collective goals. The emphasis across our training is the opportunity to work smarter not harder.



The training provides a framework for those involved in community development to create and maintain a community plan from the ground up. For those that engaged in the training, it highlighted just how many local organisations and clubs were active within the community.

The Carndonagh Smart Village participants sought to overcome local challenges by exploring and implementing practical and tangible solutions. One of the challenges identified by Carndonagh Smart Village network was the need to expand its volunteer base and retention within the community sector. To address this, the with Carndonagh Smart Village network, in partnership with IDP and Donegal Volunteer Centre, held a Volunteer Fair in the local hall. More than fifty community groups and organisations, identified in the Smart Village Plan, were invited to showcase their group at the event to highlight available volunteer opportunities. The event was a resounding success with a large group of individuals attending and many volunteer opportunities filled.

A recent Carndonagh Community Cycle event coordinated by Barrack Hill Town Park and

Community Gardens, Carndonagh, 8th Donegal Scouts, and Donegal Sports Partnership, was another example of smart village initiatives in action in the community. In addition, food education workshops funded by GIY (Grow It Yourself) have been delivered by Barrack Hill Park and Community Gardens, Carndonagh to children at St Patricks Girls National School and Carndonagh Scouts group, strengthening links between the community and local groups.

Carndonagh Smart Village network also recently commissioned a communication plan to develop an effective model for communicating, collaborating and planning together. This is leading to a combined stakeholder engagement for the future of Carndonagh and ensures that the community and the various community groups are always co-ordinated. We look forward to the continued success of #SmartCarn and #SmartInishowen.

More information can be found on the Inishowen Development Partnership Website: <https://inishowen.ie/>

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Smart Villages Training Programme Rolled out Across Wexford

Mary Dunphy

**LEADER Project Officer, Wexford
Local Development**



Wexford Local Development introduced the concept of Smart Villages to our rural communities through the delivery of a bespoke training programme delivered in 2021. Funded under the 2014-2020 LEADER Programme, four courses ran in the County, attracting 17 communities who were represented by three/four members at each session.

Delivered by Ian Dempsey of Prescience Consulting, the programme offered insights into the Smart Villages concept and presented multiple case studies from across the EU and Ireland. Communities were guided on mapping their area's strengths and opportunities and provided templates to support the development of a smart village strategy. The provider visited each community participating and spent up to half a day with the group reviewing their current offering and exploring future interests and potential. All communities found this focused, individualised support invaluable.

Delivery was at a time when social distancing rules still applied and two of the programmes were forced to go online part way through. This did limit opportunities for the different communities to mix, which was noted as a loss by those participating. Despite this, 13 of the 17 communities actively engaged with and completed the programme.

Communities have already begun advancing plans inspired by the programme; Kilanerin village is awaiting the outcome of an application to the current LEADER Transitional fund to carry out a feasibility study on the development of a community transport & communication app. Courtown/Riverchapel and Rosslare Strand have begun promoting the preparatory work they are doing on their area's smart plans. Courtown/Riverchapel has featured this work on their website and in their community newsletter. Ballymitty whose development committee attended the New Ross district training have shared their learning with the local primary school. This has resulted in the school installing a smart heating system in their new autism unit and the Ballymitty development committee have seized the opportunity to incorporate more technologies into the design of their new community centre. All communities have been offered ongoing support with the development of their Smart Village plans by Ian.

2021's training programme has been the starting block for the smart village concept in County Wexford. As part of our preparatory work for the next LEADER Programme, the consultative process will include reviewing all village strategies completed as a result of the training, ensuring new ideas generated are reflected in the next LDS and we plan to establish ongoing opportunities to strengthen knowledge sharing across communities on the smart village concept.

More information about this training can be found [here](#).

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