



National Rural Network

NRN Newsletter  
July 2021

# Smart Villages and Rural Towns in Ireland



An Roinn Forbartha  
Tuaithe agus Pobail  
Department of Rural and  
Community Development



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

# Smart Villages and Rural Towns in Ireland

## Table of Contents

• Smart Villages and Rural Towns Overview .....	3
• Relationship with the LEADER Programme .....	4
• European Network for Rural Development (ENRD) Thematic Group (TG) on Smart Villages .....	5
• Smart Community Groups in Action: Tubbercurry and South Sligo Smart Community Committee.....	6
• Innovating Communities Project .....	8
• Dingle/Corca Dhuibhne Representing Ireland in the Smart Rural 21 Project.....	10
• SMARTA (Smart Rural Transport Areas) Project.....	13
• Our Rural Future: Rural Development Policy 2021-2025 .....	16
• Cootehill.ie Community Marketplace: The flagship for the Smart Village Programme .....	17
• How Remote Work Can Transform and Sustain Local Communities .....	19
• Smart Islands in Scotland and Ireland: Supporting Enterprises and Young People.....	21
• Interreg Alpine Space SmartVillages Project .....	21
• Smart Eco-social Villages Pilot Project Report .....	22
• Smart Villages: Concept, Issues and Prospects for EU Rural Areas Report.....	22
• Smart Villages and Rural Towns in Ireland: Revitalising Rural Areas through Community-Led Innovation National Conference.....	23
• ShopBallinasloe.ie – Shopping Local, Supporting Local.....	24

*Newsletter compiled by Dr Shane Conway and Dr Maura Farrell, 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 Overview

The [EU Action for Smart Villages](#) initiative was 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

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.

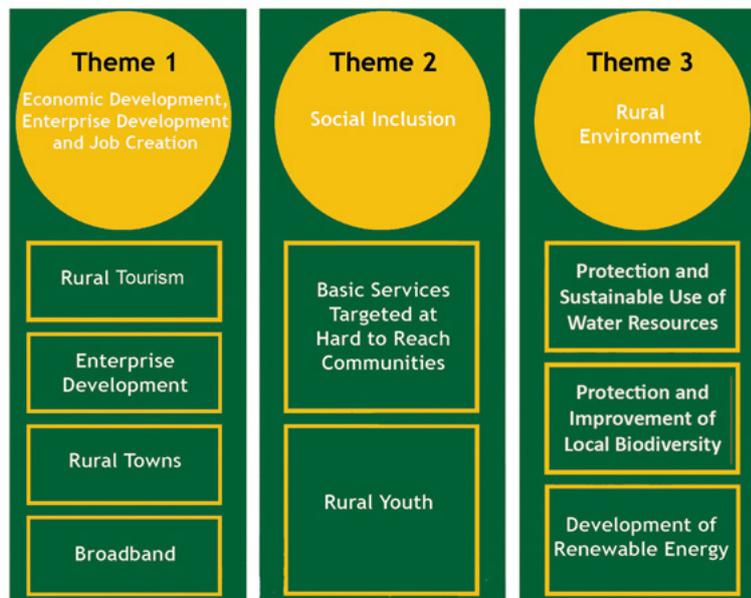
Ireland's position in relation to the development of Smart Villages and Rural Towns is that it can be greatly enhanced through the successful delivery and modernisation of the LEADER Programme. Creating synergies between the LEADER Programme and the various smart



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 'one size fits all' model that can

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, redevelop and reenergise as part of their COVID-19 recovery response.

# Relationship with the LEADER Programme



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 30 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.

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. 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 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 maintain a sustainable Smart Village/Rural Town.

# European Network for Rural Development (ENRD) Thematic Group (TG) on Smart Villages



A European Network for Rural Development (ENRD) Thematic Group (TG) on Smart Villages has made a significant contribution to the EU Action for Smart Villages, over the course of 12 meetings between September 2017 and June 2020. As well as enabling the exchange of innovative ways of creating more vibrant, sustainable and attractive rural areas, the TG also explored how Rural Development Programmes (RDPs) and other financial instruments can best be used to support this process.



In its final year, between September 2019 and June 2020, the TG turned the considerable momentum that has been created around Smart Villages into concrete proposals for designing support for Smart Villages in the new programming period, implying at this stage in the programming cycle a reinforced focus on supporting Managing Authorities, alongside other

stakeholder groups. The 9th ENRD TG meeting on Smart Villages that took place in Vähikkälä and Teuro-Kuuslammi, near Helsinki, Finland in November 2019, for example, explored the impressive support framework the Finnish have prepared for Smart Villages in the next Common Agriculture Policy (CAP) programming period. The 10th TG meeting, held in Brussels, Belgium in January 2020, focused on Smart Villages and Renewable Energy Communities. The 11th



meeting took the form of a webinar focused on Poland with the aim of exchanging ideas about their support framework for Smart Villages in the next programming period. The 12th, and final, TG meeting also took place online, in June 2020. Participants from various member states were given the opportunity to exchange ideas on how to support Smart Villages in the future CAP Strategic Plans and other EU Funds. A representative from Ireland's Department of Rural and Community Development (DRCD) presented 'Smart Villages –An Irish Perspective, A vehicle for developing Rural Communities' in the next CAP programming period at this particular meeting.

Background documents and presentations from each of the 12 TG meetings on Smart Villages can be found on the [ENRD website](#)

# Smart Community Groups in Action: Tubbercurry and South Sligo Smart Community Committee



*Joann Hosey*

*Chair of Smart Community Tubbercurry and South Sligo*



The Tubbercurry and South Sligo Smart Community Committee based in Tubbercurry, Co. Sligo, is a group of local volunteers who are passionate about creating a vibrant, sustainable and connected community in their local area. Committee members understand that the fabric of the town is changing; local retail businesses are struggling as consumer behaviour changes, two large employers (including a government department) have relocated away from the town, and young people are leaving the area for third level education and not returning upon completion of their studies. These are common issues across Ireland and throughout rural Europe. Over the past few years, the Tubbercurry and South Sligo Smart Community Committee has been a key advocate for remote working at local level as a means of re-igniting the area, both economically and socially, ultimately enabling young people and local businesses to thrive physically, mentally and financially. Remote working facilitates a better work life balance, reduces commute times and contributes to a lower cost of living. It also

allows diaspora to return home and live their life where they want to live rather than being influenced by where their job is based.

The Tubbercurry and South Sligo Smart Community Committee's valiant and continued efforts to build and develop an innovative remote working community in a rural Irish setting has led to the town being selected as Ireland's first Smart Community by the Irish Government in 2019. The experience garnered as a result of the bottom-up planning required for this national initiative, combined with the lessons learned from being engaged in the process, has greatly assisted the Committee in implementing a remote working strategy for its area.

As a result of its various innovative, community-led endeavours, the Tubbercurry and South Sligo Smart Community Committee has built a proven track record organising and hosting events that support the digital revolution of villages and rural towns, best evidenced by the International Remote Working Conference the Committee hosted in conjunction with the Grow Remote movement in April 2019. Grow Remote is an organisation which seeks to use the power of remote working as a tool to promote community development. They help rural communities attract remote workers to rural locations, thus developing a broader economic base and thereby supporting rural businesses, particularly local retailers and service providers. This conference focused on distributed employment – 'locationless' jobs that can be undertaken anywhere in the world, and was the first of its kind in Europe. This event



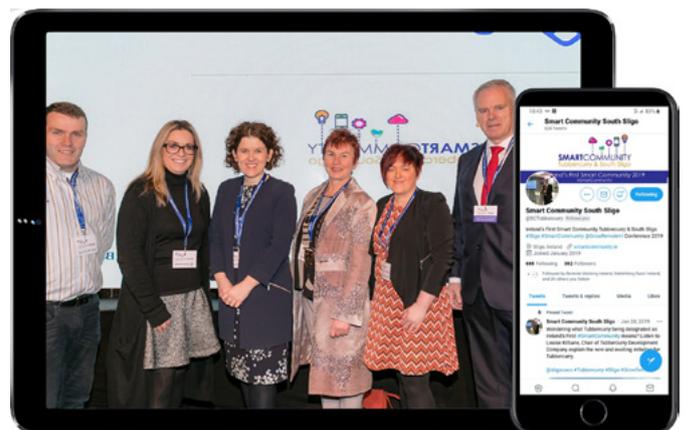
demonstrated how a small rural community like Tubbercurry, with limited resources, has the capacity to spearhead a large-scale initiative in the form of an international conference. This illustrates the Committee's work ethic, ambition and collaborative spirit, something that rural communities across Ireland and the EU can learn from.

Whilst parts of Tubbercurry and South Sligo have an average broadband connectivity, the community's technical capacity to facilitate remote working is enhanced by their local co-working space named 'An Chroi'. This shared workspace can also be used as a training facility that provides job seekers with the necessary digital skills to source employment in line with Ireland's national digital skills for citizens programme, for example. Also available in this community facility is a digital skills programme for businesses which helps to build the digital capabilities of local enterprises.

The Tubbercurry and South Sligo Smart Community Committee has recently partnered with the Institute of Technology Sligo (IT Sligo) and a number of software companies in the North West of Ireland to roll out an EU funded e-invoicing project. The objective of this project is to foster innovation and to facilitate private entities, particularly micro-enterprises supplying goods and services, to use the European standard e-invoicing in order to enhance their services and make their

businesses more efficient. Such linkages with a third level institution is a particularly strong facet of the Committee's structure.

The innovative work carried out by the Tubbercurry and South Sligo Smart Community Committee to date, is an inspirational story, as it illustrates the power of voluntary local community groups in bringing about rural regeneration. The Committee's focus on the merits and benefits of remote working has made it possible for the local area to become more viable, sustainable and vibrant moving forward.



Most recently the Tubbercurry and South Sligo Smart Community won the Digital Rising Star Award at the national .IE Digital Town Awards 2021 for their virtual reality and community podcast project.

More information on the Tubbercurry and South Sligo Smart Community can be found [here](#)

# Innovating Communities Project



Collette McEntee

Innovating Communities Network Admin Coordinator



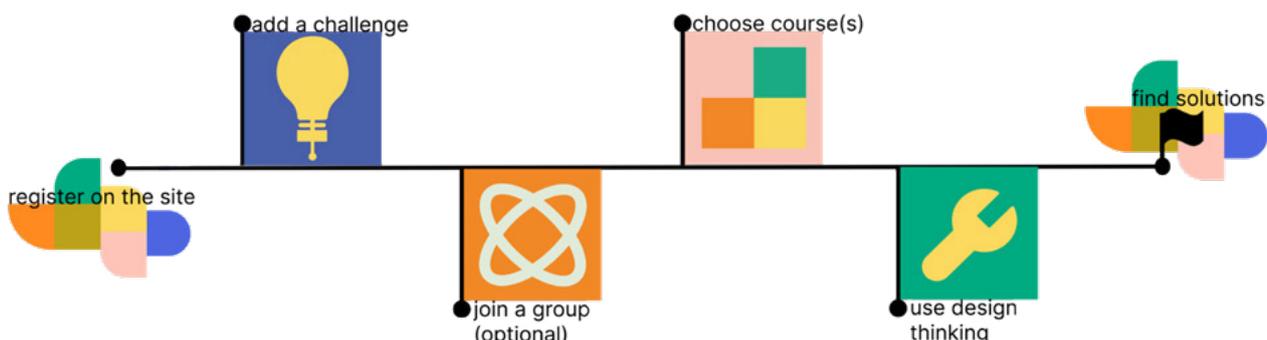
Innovating Communities is a LEADER Cooperation project which aims to strengthen resilience, local development and community-led action in all of the 6 partner counties by training community groups, businesses and individuals in Design Thinking. The free training and mentoring in Design Thinking will be delivered through a series of free facilitated courses formed around a local Challenge. Over the project's 2-year duration, over 900 people will participate in over 100 courses.

The project is led by Monaghan Integrated Development across the counties of Louth

LEADER Partnership CLG, Leitrim Integrated Development Company CLG, Donegal Local Development CLG, Breffni Integrated CLG, T/a Cavan County Local Development and County Sligo LEADER Partnership Company.

Communities have been invited to submit their local needs in the form of Challenges in the Challenge Bank on the project website at [www.innovating.ie/ideas](http://www.innovating.ie/ideas). From there, people can view the challenge, agree, 'like' it and perhaps get involved in addressing it. If a challenge is securing enough interest, it will be turned into a free Design Thinking training course to help the group work through the challenge or problem. Using submitted Challenges, each county has formed their first batch of free Training Courses and welcome anyone who wants to learn the Design Thinking process and/or have an interest in the particular topic, to register to participate.

Design Thinking is a 5-stage problem solving process; at Stage 1 you will learn how to EMPATHISE with the people affected, at Stage



2 you DEFINE the challenge, at Stage 3 you will be supported to develop IDEAS, at Stage 4 you TEST these ideas and then finally, at Stage 5 you MATERIALISE your solutions.

Innovating Communities can be used in a local approach for tackling major issues like climate change, inequality and much more. It can help planning and preparation for funding applications such as LEADER which supports job creation, tourism, social enterprise and innovation in a post COVID-19 and/or post Brexit world.



Gabriel O Connell, CEO of Monaghan Integrated Development, explains that ‘Along with learning the Design Thinking process, Innovating Communities will serve as a means of integrating people and ideas from various backgrounds, groups and businesses that would not otherwise meet. This expansive spread of local thinking will result in significant, in-depth solutions to local challenges.’

The contracted training body for the project, icecream architecture, have vast experience delivering similar training programmes over the years and each partner county has recruited 5-7

volunteer co-trainers who have been trained to co-facilitate the training courses, alongside one of the designated contracted trainers. The local volunteer co-trainers are important in bridging any knowledge gaps between the challenge and participants, and the trainer and process itself. Further to this, each county has selected two LEADER Learning Labs which will act as local focal points, when COVID-19 allows, where innovation can truly come alive.

Some current courses are; ‘Reimagining Community Spaces as Digital Hubs’ (Monaghan), ‘Designing Killyclogher’s Future’ (Leitrim), ‘Reducing Costs and Generating Income for Social Enterprises’ (Donegal), ‘Social Enterprise: An Answer to the Digital Divide’ (Louth), ‘Action Planning for Community Facilities’ (Sligo) and ‘Killeshandra Revitalising the Town Centre, Facilities and Spaces’ (Cavan).

The training’s ‘person centred design’ approach will help identify topics important to an area and the training support will help people explore ideas and best possible solutions. The process will provide a high level of support to help community groups and would-be innovators move more confidently and creates a process for the discovery of community needs, idea generation and the testing of solutions, rather than the LEADER

Implementing Partner guessing and second guessing what is needed. It also facilitates new community people, who may not yet be part of a formal group, to join in on a project idea.

We welcome you to visit our website at [www.innovating.ie](http://www.innovating.ie) to get involved in a course in your county. For more information, please contact [collette@innovating.ie](mailto:collette@innovating.ie)



# Dingle/Corca Dhuibhne Representing Ireland in the Smart Rural 21 Project



*Dr Breandán Ó Caoimh*  
**Geographer and Social Scientist**

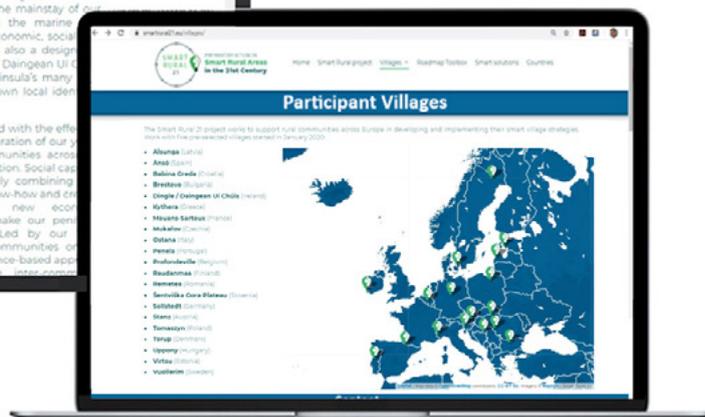
## Project Overview

Smart Rural 21 is a two-and-a-half-year project, coordinated by the E40 Group and supported by the European Commission (DG AGRI), with the overall aim of promoting and inspiring villages/rural towns, across Europe, to develop and implement smart village approaches and strategies. The project seeks to enable villages / rural towns to draw evidence-based conclusions and to support future CAP interventions on Smart Villages. Twenty-one (21) rural communities, from throughout the EU, have been selected from a total of 736 applications (of which 25 were from the Republic of Ireland) to receive bespoke guidance and

technical support. Their selection follows a rigorous review and assessment process by the Smart Rural 21 project team and the EU Commission. Dr Shane Conway, Researcher in the Discipline of Geography’s Rural Studies Unit at NUI Galway is Ireland’s National Expert on this project. More information about the Smart Rural 21 Project can be found [here](#)

## Responding to Local Needs and Potential

Dingle/Corca Dhuibhne, in Co. Kerry, has been chosen as the Irish representative in this exciting initiative. The Dingle Peninsula has long grappled with the effects of peripherality, isolation and the out-migration of its young people. Challenges persist, but communities



across the peninsula are at the forefront of innovation. Social capital on the peninsula is strong, and its citizens are effectively combining local knowledge and skills with technical know-how and creative technologies. Led by their Local Development Company (NEWKD), Dingle has pursued a strong evidence-based approach in the formulation of its Smart Villages strategy. Its approach emphasises inter-community collaboration and strong local governance. The overall objective of Dingle/Corca Dhuibhne's Smart Village Strategy is to enhance liveability for people throughout their lifetime, through strategic and innovative interventions in housing, family services, clean energy and a resilient economy. As part of their participation in the Smart Rural 21 project, NEWKD and local communities are currently liaising with Empirica, a specialist research and consultancy firm, with experience in the use of e-health technologies in enabling older people and those with special needs on the peninsula to live independently in the community and access innovative medical and ancillary services without the need for travel. More information about the Dingle/Corca Dhuibhne's Smart Village Strategy can be found [here](#)

### Giving Effect to Community-Led Local Development (CLLD)

NEWKD's Local Area Advisory Council (LAAC) is the main instigator and driver of Corca Dhuibhne / Dingle Smart Village. This inter-community civil society network, which has representation on NEWKD's Board of Directors, promotes information sharing and collaboration. Since the advent of Smart Rural 21, and in the context of COVID-19, its activities have moved online and become more frequent and purposive. According to its members, Smart Rural 21 has given community leaders a new lens through which to view their peninsula and a new set of tools to address local issues. They welcome the innovations



and additional opportunities associated with smart villages, including the increased application of information and communications technologies (ICT), but they insist that these are about complementing, rather than replacing traditional social interactions and community development. Indeed, the smart village process has propelled and further increased emphasis on, and investment in, community development; NEWKD has recently undertaken bespoke community surveys, convened weekly information and consultation meetings and engaged facilitation expertise in progressing its smart village strategy from concept to delivery.

Over recent months, LAAC members and other community representatives have been participating in virtual information-sharing and networking events, facilitated by E40. Thus, in several respects, Corca Dhuibhne / Dingle Smart Village manifests several of the LEADER specificities (specific features).

### Future Trajectory

As NEWKD and communities on the Corca Dhuibhne Peninsula begin to give tangible effect to their smart village strategy, they are engendering a fusion of hard and soft skills and competencies, and they are endeavouring to increase knowledge and social capital locally. Community development will continue to be integral to delivering the strategy, and NEWKD envisages increasing the capacity of local communities to undertake research, engage



young people, promote inter-generational projects and foster well-being. The specialist knowledge inputs from Empirica, among others, will enable local stakeholders to make greater use of ICT.

Simultaneously, the project's delivery will

have 'bricks and mortar' elements, and the communities will harness local expertise while also buying in specialist knowledge and technical assistance. Project actions include, inter alia, the construction of a cluster of houses for older people in an inter-generational setting. NEWKD is committed to eco-proofed and low carbon design and construction. Construction will dovetail with local ecological projects including community gardens and the rollout of enhanced public transport. It will also seek to support making private homes, particularly those of older people, more energy efficient – thereby helping to reduce fuel poverty and carbon emissions. Over the coming year, delivery will continue to be community-led, while external and agency inputs will become more prominent.

You can also watch a video about Dingle/Corca Dhuibhne's participation in the Smart Rural 21 project [here](#)

### Three Irish Initiatives Featured as European Smart Solutions

Three innovative Irish initiatives have been featured as Smart Solutions on the 'Smart Rural 21' project website. The Smart Solutions database, supported by the European Commission (DG AGRI), gives access to a wide range of innovative practices which can be adapted to various local contexts. Cloughjordan Community Farm's Open Food Hub is featured as an example of how to provide access to local produce through an open-source digital farmers-market platform. Grow Remote's example illustrates how a not-for-profit, volunteer driven community project can connect remote workers, companies, and



local communities, so people can choose to work where they want to live, and not vice versa. Finally, the Burren Ecotourism Network (B.E.N.) is featured as an example of a network of enterprises in a locality/region which demonstrates ecotourism 'best practice' and which has achieved independent accreditation with regard to sustainable standards in tourism. The Smart Rural 21 project has also added Ireland to their 'What's Happening in my Country' database, featuring information from different EU Member States on the planning and implementation of Smart Villages. More information about the Smart Rural 21 project can be found [here](#)



# SMARTA (Smart Rural Transport Areas) Project



**Brendan Finn**

*Independent Transport Consultant*

Throughout rural Europe, most people have little or no choice about how they travel. Their only choice is whether they can travel at all. Almost all travel is made by personal car, other than what can be accessed nearby on foot. Households own multiple cars, often from sheer necessity. Those without cars are dependent on others for lifts, or they must forego travel and their lives become limited.

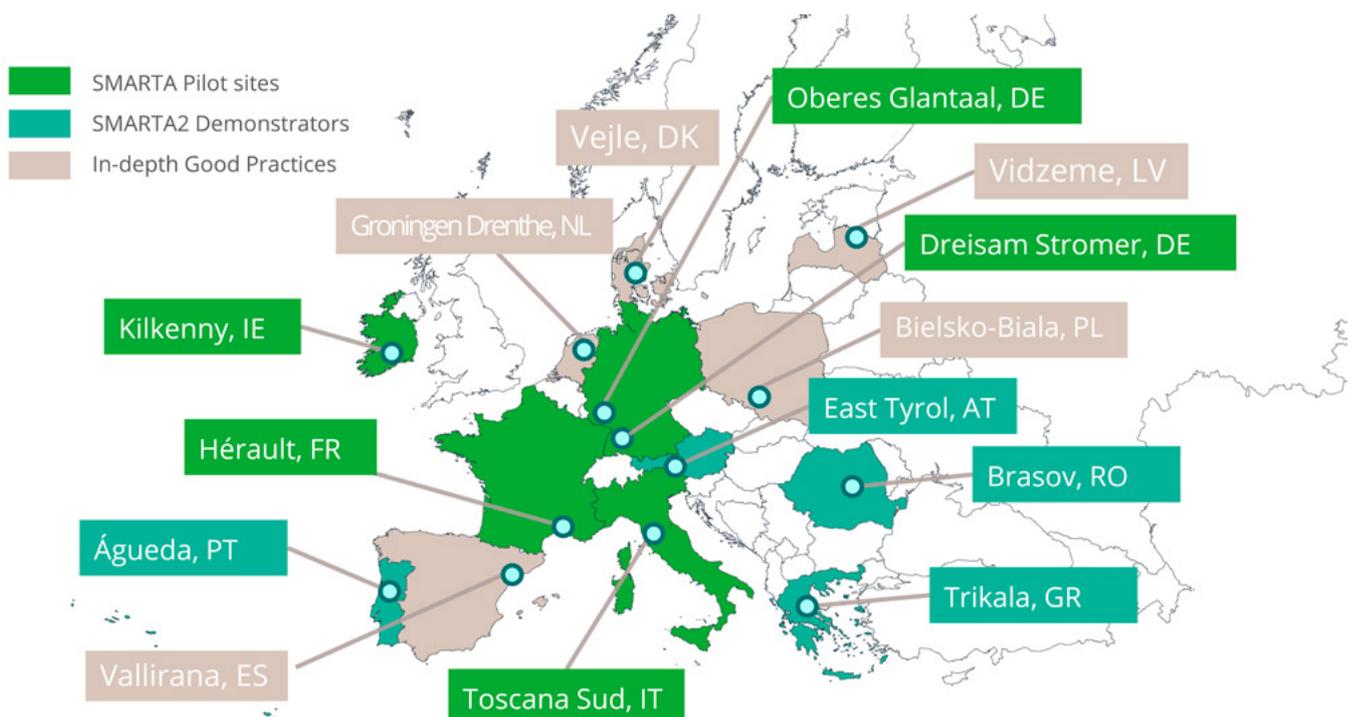
The SMART Rural Transport Areas ([SMARTA](#)) project was mobilised in 2018, on the initiative of the European Parliament. It sought to understand existing frameworks for rural mobility across Europe and how these can be improved. The aim was to gain knowledge of

the mobility problems, needs and preferences of people living in and visiting rural areas. SMARTA worked with sites across Europe that are implementing various forms of rural mobility, including Kilkenny, to evaluate and understand how Good Practices can be used to enhance services and inspire wider take-up.

This SMARTA [video](#) gives a 5-minute overview of the project. The main outputs, recommendations and good practice cases can be found [here](#).

## Lack of Rural Mobility Policy is a Key Issue

SMARTA identified that while the toolbox of measures to transform mobility in rural areas



is readily available, throughout Europe there is little effort to use them. This is in stark contrast to the major investment and transformation of mobility in urban areas. The root cause is the lack of policy or specific targets for mobility in rural areas, at both EU level and the individual Member States.

In consultation with rural stakeholders, SMARTA identified that meaningful deployment requires urgent action - first on Policy for rural mobility, then on programmes to implement such policy throughout Europe. The goal should be to have target-bound rural mobility policy in all Member States by 2025, and effective frameworks in place in all Member States by 2030. While decisions on matters such as coverage, service levels and means of delivery would always be the prerogative of the individual Member State, it cannot continue that there are neither mandated levels of service nor assigned responsibility to ensure their provision.

SMARTA proposed four main points:

1. *Recognise mobility as a core enabler for rural areas and all its activities.* Good mobility means access to work, education, services, society. By contrast, if mobility is absent, there are a lot of issues and negative consequences.
2. *Debunk the common view that 'in rural areas, everyone has a car'.* Of course, this is not true. Many people cannot drive, by reason of age, condition, or affordability. In the absence of good public transport or shared mobility services, many people cannot get around, which limits their participation in society, and their contribution to the economy.
3. *There is a need for urgent action, first on policy for rural mobility, then on programmes*

*to implement such policy throughout Europe.* The lack of policy and responsibilities leads to limited supply of mobility services, which leads to limited mobility for people without cars. Leaders must act to change this.

4. *Once the policy is in place, develop a package of mobility solutions.* Develop suitable blends of organised forms of mobility with complementary measures, including shared mobility, customised to the needs of each area and its available resources.



### Integrated Transport Initiative in Kilkenny

Kilkenny LEADER Partnership (KLP) has been very supportive of improving rural mobility, dating back to assisting the formation of Ring a Link in 2001. More recently, building on the iRoute conference in June 2017 and the subsequent Comprehensive Mobility Plan, KLP has mobilised the Kilkenny Integrated Transport Evolution (KITE).

The core of KITE is to provide the physical and digital platform through which different mobility services in the County can be integrated. In particular, this will enable people to transfer between regional and local services, while also improving facilities for all users. KITE is providing three main elements: (i) "Smart Stops" at selected locations, with modern bus shelters, real-time passenger information and local information; (ii) a digital traveller

information platform that generates the real-time bus arrival information to be displayed at stops, web, apps, and other channels; and (iii) support to bus operators to install in-vehicle and back-office equipment that feed to the digital platform and allow them improve their operational capacity.

The first set of Smart Stops is being installed around County Kilkenny this summer. Working with national operator JJ Kavanagh & Sons and Ring a Link (the Local Link coordinator covering Kilkenny), KITE will provide bus arrival times and other traveller information. After the initial demonstration period, it is expected that information from other operators will also be displayed. The next steps will be to work on coordination at both scheduling and operational levels, to provide smooth and reliable transfers between regional and local services.

### What Actions could be Implemented Now to Enable Better Rural Mobility throughout Europe?

Actions for rural mobility are naturally local. However, they will remain limited and vulnerable without national frameworks that enable them, or that even permit local stakeholders to act. Throughout Europe, local actors are constrained by lack of policy, lack of permission or lack of resources, plus the need to build up know-how.

SMARTA proposed three key near-term measures to break through these barriers, so that communities throughout Europe are enabled to improve their local mobility:

1. *Set up a European 'Policy Debate' on Rural Mobility:* The debate should mostly be conducted in existing fora such as the EP Committees, conferences of Ministers, events and conferences of ELARD, ERP, ENRD, etc. Start with an appreciation of the rural mobility challenge, plus how it impacts other European and national policies; examine potential solutions; and identify whether there

is the basis for consensus on structured intervention. Then proceed to focus on key features of European and national policies, implementation pathways and supporting instruments.

2. *Establish a 'Rural Mobility Forum', and establish and support a 'Rural Mobility and Technical Assistance Programme':* There is currently no forum in Europe dealing with rural mobility. Initially, this would be an accompanying measure to the Policy Debate, but with the aim of becoming permanent. It would enable a much broader discussion and sharing of ideas among local stakeholders including communities, local government, agencies, health and social services, etc. The Commission could also establish a Rural



Mobility Technical Assistance Programme to bridge the know-how gap of local agencies, communities or service providers, and enable local implementers and innovators to implement integrated shared mobility solutions. The US Rural Transit Assistance Programme provides a good model – [www.nationalrtap.org](http://www.nationalrtap.org)

3. At the Member State level: Develop specific policy on rural mobility, then develop Programmes to implement such policy. The challenge is to motivate each Member State to develop such a policy. The SMARTA Project has proposed three different policy [pathways](#) aiming to achieve this.

# 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 five 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 parishes, 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. In addition, the development of 400 remote working facilities will aim to facilitate, and accelerate, worker-led decentralisation, with a further commitment by the Irish Government to move to 20 per cent home or remote working in the public sector in 2021, with annual increases over the lifetime of the policy.

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

# Cootehill.ie Community Marketplace: The Flagship for the Smart Village Programme



**Pat Kennedy**  
eTownz CEO

Community Development and Management policies are undergoing an evolution, and exciting new developments under the banner of 'Smart Villages and Rural Towns'. Minister for Rural and Community Development, Heather Humphreys TD, recently declared at the launch of Cootehill.ie that the new Our Rural Future policy is part of *'The most ambitious and most transformational policy for rural development for decades'*. Minister Humphreys added that *'As we emerge from the challenges of COVID-19... an unparalleled opportunity exists to reimagine and revalue what rural Ireland means to our society'*.

Cootehill in Co. Cavan wishes to be among the initial pioneers of communities in Ireland to embrace the new EU directives on connecting rural businesses through technology. Cootehill Chamber of Commerce with financial support from Cavan County Council, the Department



of Rural and Community Development (DRCD) and web development partners eTownz developed a multi-functional community website [www.Cootehill.ie](http://www.Cootehill.ie)

The website boasts an array of services including:

- Events Calendars
- News Section
- Classified
- Tourism & Heritage profiles
- Directory of all business and community groups
- Key functional component, Multi-vendor community marketplace

The Multi-vendor marketplace was a key component of the overall build. The platform is still being rolled out and allows local businesses and also local clubs to create a vendor profile, add in their products / tickets and sell them through the portal while also managing stock levels.

This approach to supporting local e-commerce in the community is novel and has the potential to transform how businesses and groups engage and sell locally.

Following the launch of Cootehill.ie, the Chamber of Commerce was delighted to be shortlisted for the 'Digital Rising Star' category of the .IE Digital Town Awards. The judges of the .IE competition have deemed Cootehill to have demonstrated ambition, creativity, and the ability to use digital thinking to disrupt and improve their town.

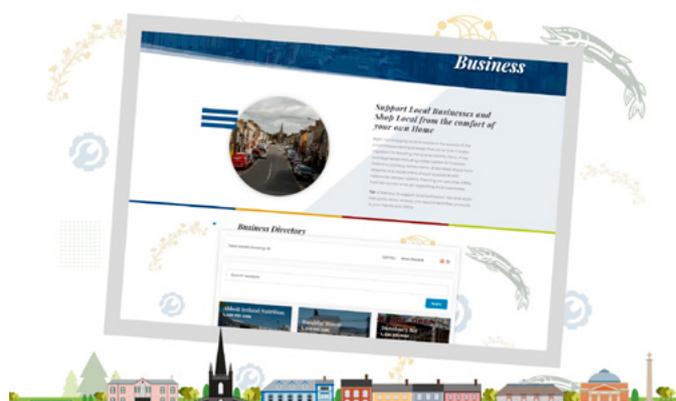


The system was developed and is supported by eTownz.ie, an Irish company which develops and supports smart / digital communities projects in Ireland and across the EU. The online community marketplaces developed by eTownz have the potential to be a powerful component of the overall smart village strategy. The idea is that a well-run community website can attract the ‘digital footfall’ by presenting local news, events and classifieds and this in turn allows local businesses such as retailers, food producers and artists as well as community groups, to effectively and cheaply receive payments for goods and services online.

Attracting this ‘digital footfall’ to each individual business and community group is difficult,

but by bringing them together in a common marketplace, selling online becomes feasible. Cootehill Chamber is working hard on phase two which involves engaging with all local businesses and groups to roll out a ‘content engine’ to create the critical mass of online activity to attract the attention of buyers nationally and from across the globe.

Local project coordinator Connie Whelan and her team in Cootehill Chamber are working on phase two of the project. They are planning a series of follow-on projects to support the continued development of Cootehill. ie as an example of best practice in ‘digital communities’, supporting both community and business interests.



# How Remote Work Can Transform and Sustain Local Communities



*Joanne Mangan*

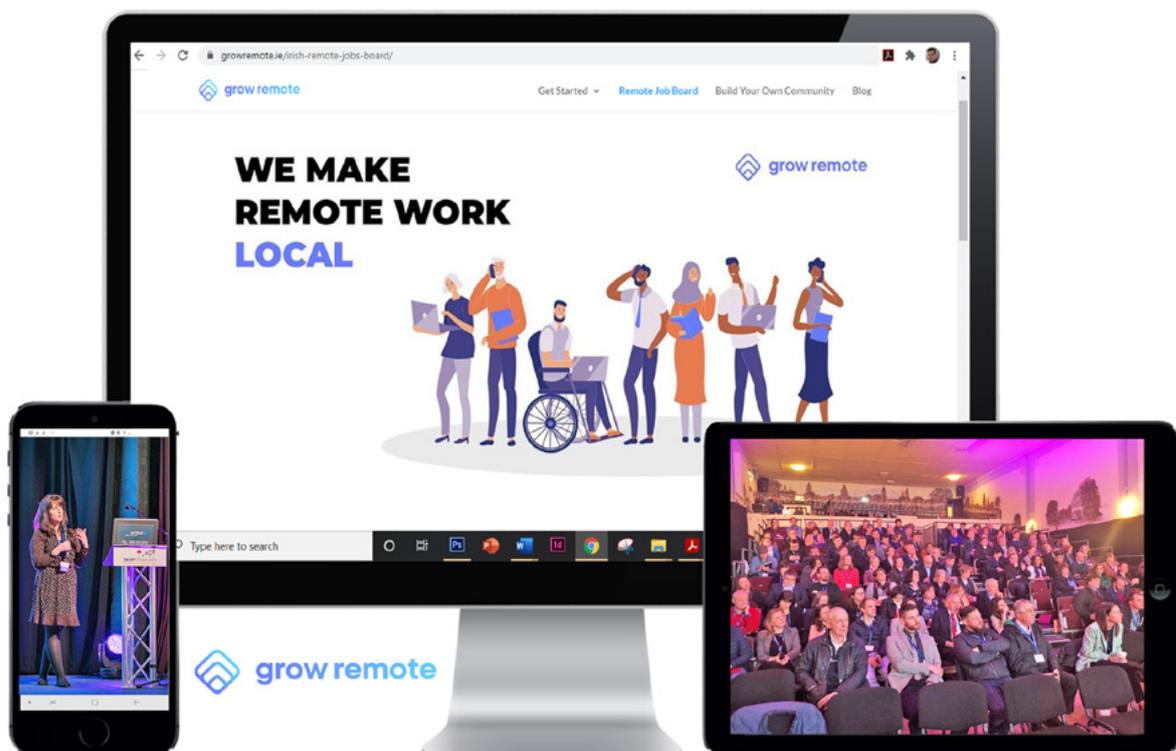
*Employers Lead at Grow Remote, a social enterprise on a mission to make remote work local.*

One of the most dramatic transformations we have witnessed since the COVID-19 pandemic struck our shores last year is the shift to remote working, with employers across Ireland being forced to shutter their businesses and employees forced to work from their kitchen tables or whatever space was available to them at home.

As we inch closer to the reopening of society, one thing is clear - remote work is here to stay. Recently, the results of the third [National Remote Working Survey](#) were released and the results were striking - a whopping 95%

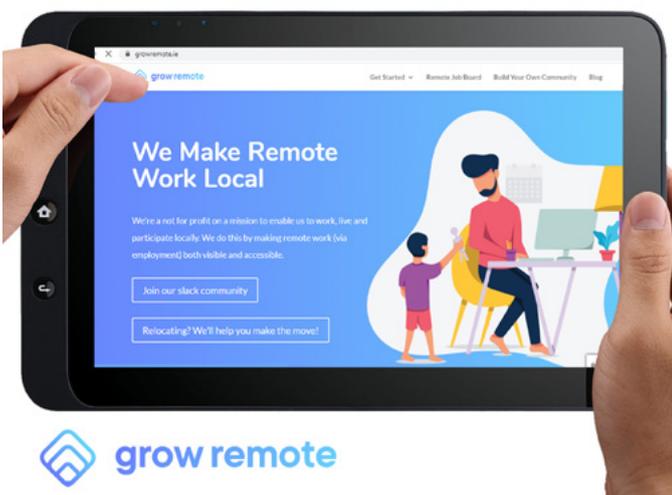
of employees surveyed said they wanted to continue working remotely after the crisis ends. Employees do not want to return to the days of the long commute, spending hours in their cars or on public transport, when they could be spending this precious time with their families and friends at home. And employers see the benefits too, with remote work offering cost savings and giving a competitive edge when it comes to attracting and retaining top talent.

But the benefits of remote working extend far beyond the boundaries of companies and their employees. Local communities thrive and grow



when people can work from anywhere. Remote work gives people the freedom to choose where they want to live, bringing more people back into local communities, which in turn opens up and sustains further local job opportunities. People who were forced to relocate to expensive urban areas to find job opportunities now have the chance to move back to their hometowns and contribute to their local community and local economy, while still being able to enjoy successful careers.

Recently the Irish government launched its new rural strategy 'Our Rural Future: Rural Development Policy 2021-2025' which plans to revitalise rural Ireland over the next 5 years. The policy aims to reenergize town centres, enhance outdoor amenities, develop rural infrastructure and services, and bring more job opportunities to people in rural Ireland.



Central to this plan is a significant investment in remote working, with relocation grants, tax incentives and funding for local authorities and community groups, and a 'town first policy' with investment in enterprise spaces, co-working hubs, and remote working facilities in rural towns.

For the nearly 2 million people who live in rural areas, the government's plan represents a roadmap to address the decline which they have witnessed over the past decades, where empty shops, shuttered pubs, derelict post offices and garda stations are the everyday reality. If the government's plan is implemented

successfully, people in rural communities will no longer have to say, 'there are no jobs here'. Young people will no longer be forced to migrate to cities for work, putting further pressure on an already unsustainable housing market. Job opportunities will be available to everyone, no matter where they live.

Remote work is not without its challenges, and one of the biggest is the potential for social isolation. That's why we need to build and support communities of remote workers and ensure they have opportunities to connect. There is already a thriving ecosystem of remote communities in Ireland and beyond, led by people who volunteer their time to foster thriving communities of remote workers locally - running meetups, getting local people employed, and running re-location programmes - and we need to build more of these. Grow Remote has 60+ local remote working chapters in Ireland who are helping their communities find remote employment, helping remote workers engage locally and helping to repopulate and reinvigorate their local communities.

Education is key to the development of a remote-ready workforce in Ireland and Grow Remote has developed remote work ready training programmes in partnership with the Laois-Offaly Education and Training Board, IDA Ireland and Solas. We also need to increase the visibility of remote jobs, so that people living in regional communities are aware of the opportunities available. There are 55,000 remote jobs open in Ireland today - now it is about making sure rural communities are aware of these opportunities and are ready and able to take advantage of them.

At Grow Remote we believe that remote work can transform - and is transforming - how people work and live in Ireland. We are a social enterprise on a mission to enable people to work, live and participate locally. By making remote jobs accessible and visible we can enable local communities to transform and revitalise every town and village in Ireland.

You can find out more about Grow Remote [here](#).



# Smart Islands in Scotland and Ireland: Supporting Enterprises and Young People

This LEADER transnational project, led by CoDeL - Community Development Lens and supported by the Scottish Islands Federation, in partnership with the Irish Islands Federation (Comdhail Oileanean na hEireann), brings together island communities in Ireland (off the coast of Co. Donegal, Mayo, Galway and West Cork) and Scotland (especially Uist in the Outer Hebrides) to share and develop experiences and methodologies that can make their islands smart, dynamic and sustainable. It focuses on the critical role of young people returning, settling or staying on island communities, and the contribution they can make to reviving these remote communities.

More specifically, the Smart Islands in Scotland and Ireland initiative:

1. Supports young people in contributing to local development in their island communities through community initiatives and/or enterprise; and
2. Shares knowledge and experience of innovation to enable island communities across Scotland and Ireland to learn from each other, about innovative and effective strategies for community development, not least around attracting and supporting young people.

More information on the Smart Islands in Scotland and Ireland project can be found [here](#)

## Interreg Alpine Space SmartVillages Project

The final conference of the Interreg Alpine Space SmartVillages Project was held virtually on The 29th of April 2021, to present results of the project which has been running in the Alpine region since 2018. During this period, a Smart Village approach has attempted to unlock the potential of local actors in these mountain and rural areas to make them more attractive places to live and work. 21 pilot activities were undertaken across 11 test areas in six Alpine countries, each relying on a participatory approach to develop and implement strategies to improve economic, social and environmental conditions, by promoting innovation and mobilising solutions offered by digital technologies. Among the pilot activities presented at the conference were co-working spaces, an innovation lab, car sharing apps, a fibre optic network and digital marketing platforms.

Also unveiled at the conference was a Digital Exchange Platform, created as part of the project. Containing a smartness assessment

tool, this online platform enables any individual to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of their local area across six criteria: smart mobility, smart governance, smart economy, smart environment, smart living and smart people. The platform also proposes tailored best practices in how to develop a Smart Villages project most effectively. To conclude the conference, a Smart Villages Charter for the Alpine region was presented, outlining a continuing commitment to build on the learnings and successes of this project. For more, visit the [project website](#)



**SMARTVillages project**  
How could your rural community become smart?

29 April 2021 - Final Conference (online)



[www.alpine-space.eu/projects/smartvillages](http://www.alpine-space.eu/projects/smartvillages)  
[@project.SmartVillages](#) [@SmartVillagesEU](#)



# Smart Eco- social Villages Pilot Project Report

The Smart Eco-social Villages Pilot Project, financed by the European Commission and proposed by the European Parliament, took place between January 2018 and April 2019. The conclusions of the Pilot Project are important for the future application of the Smart Villages concept in the EU. The Project identified many examples of villages and rural towns currently engaged in initiatives to address rural challenges and / or to improve the quality of life of inhabitants. These initiatives have adopted innovative, smart solutions covering a wide range of thematic areas including agriculture, environment, energy, mobility, health, education, culture and tourism. O’Gonnelloe Exchange, a community-based social enterprise start-up, which develops and nurtures collaboration at

a local level, in the village of O’Gonnelloe, Co. Clare, is featured in this report (p.71).

The final report of the Smart Eco-social Villages Pilot Project can be found [here](#)



# Smart Villages: Concept, Issues and Prospects for EU Rural Areas Report

The European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS) has published a new policy briefing entitled ‘Smart villages: concept, issues and prospects for EU rural areas’. This document presents an overview of the Smart Villages concept, its policy framework and the funding opportunities. The reports highlights that the Smart Villages concept implies the involvement of local people in improving their economic, social or environmental conditions, cooperation with other communities, social innovation and the development of smart village strategies. It also explains that Smart Villages are gaining traction on the rural development agenda, coinciding with the ongoing reform of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). The full briefing can be found [here](#)

The EPRS have released a new [video](#) on the EU Smart Villages concept, as well as a [podcast](#).



# Smart Villages and Rural Towns in Ireland: Revitalising Rural Areas through Community-Led Innovation National Conference

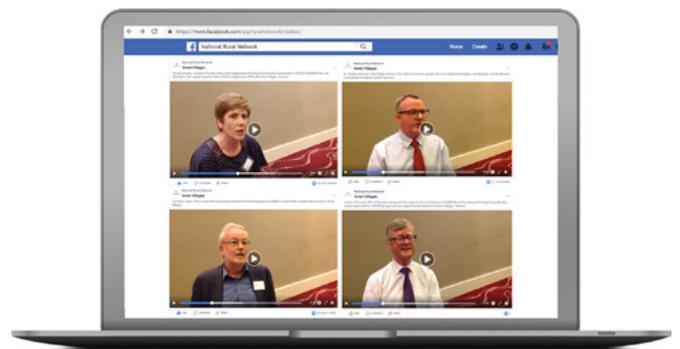


The NRN, in conjunction with the Department of Rural and Community Development, held a national seminar in Athlone, in July 2019, entitled 'Smart Villages and Rural Towns in Ireland: Revitalising Rural Areas through Community-Led Innovation'. The seminar, which brought together over 80 members of Local Action Groups and Implementing Partners from all over Ireland, sought to develop an understanding of the Smart Villages concept and to demonstrate how it can be planned, implemented and realised in Ireland, particularly in the context of the design of the LEADER Programme post 2020.

The event aimed to bring together key rural development stakeholders from across Ireland and the EU to showcase and exchange ideas on how rural communities can implement the Smart Villages concept, and help retain and attract people to live and work in their locality by implementing practical and tangible solutions to the various local challenges they face in the form of digital, social and environmental innovation.

Policy instruments to support the development of Smart Villages and Rural Towns both now and into the future were also explored.

The two-part seminar set out to give an overview and understanding of the Smart Villages concept, before going on to demonstrate how Smart Villages can work in practice, by focusing on key examples from existing projects such as the EIP-AGRI model. Videos and a full report on the 'Smart Villages and Rural Towns' national seminar, which draws together the key messages emanating from the event, can be found on the [NRN website](#)



# Join the NRN

Are you interested in rural development?

Join the National Rural Network (NRN) by signing up on our website [www.nationalruralnetwork.ie](http://www.nationalruralnetwork.ie)

Once you have joined, you will receive monthly email updates on the RDP, the LEADER initiative, best practice case studies and more.

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## ShopBallinasloe.ie – Shopping Local, Supporting Local

Ballinasloe, in east Co. Galway was recently announced the winner of the Large Town category at the .IE Digital Town Awards 2021 for their new online community marketplace initiative called [ShopBallinasloe.ie](http://ShopBallinasloe.ie). These awards 'shine a light' on the good work and achievements of local community projects and champions that have demonstrated digital thinking and innovation for the betterment of local people, services, and society. Launched in April 2020, ShopBallinasloe.ie is now regarded as the digital centre of the town, providing shoppers with a 'one-stop-shop' online platform to connect with, and purchase from, a variety of local businesses. The impact and success of this innovative initiative has been particularly profound on local businesses who had little to no e-commerce presence prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. ShopBallinasloe.ie served as the catalyst for the retail revolution of Ballinasloe during lockdown, enabling such businesses to get online and continue trading at a time when many were forced to close their doors. Over 50 local enterprises in the town of Ballinasloe and its hinterland are now signed up to this free platform, allowing shoppers to purchase multiple products and services in a single transaction through ShopBallinasloe.ie's multi-shop checkout feature. Ballinasloe is an excellent example of a smart rural town that has embraced digital innovation at local level to help ensure the survival, continuity and future prosperity of rural businesses in an era of unprecedented change in consumer behaviours and expectations.

