



# LEADER

*Learning from the Past, Looking to the Future*



National Rural Network

# 30 Years of LEADER:

## Learning from the Past, Looking to the Future

### Conference Report



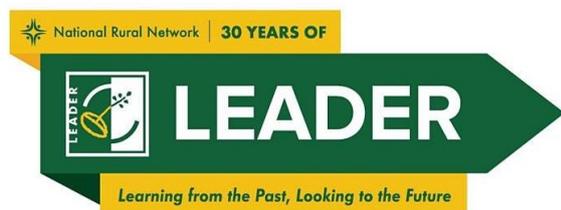
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## LEADER Conference Report

**On Monday, 15th November 2021, the National Rural Network (NRN) hosted a half-day online conference, entitled ‘30 Years of LEADER: Learning from the Past, Looking to the Future’, which provided an opportunity to reflect on past and current programmes, and to debate rural policy and practice in the context of the next LEADER Programme. The event, attended by almost 300 delegates, attracted a wide range of rural stakeholders from throughout Ireland and abroad including representatives from Local Action Groups, Implementing Partners, rural enterprises, academics, community organisations and policymakers.**



This report draws together the key messages emerging from the conference, focusing on the lessons learned from each of the guest speakers, panel discussions and LEADER themed workshops. The NRN was delighted and honoured to welcome a prestigious line up of rural development experts from Policy, Research and Practice to speak at the conference. **The full programme, containing the agenda, and list of speakers and contributors can be accessed [here](#).**



A graphic illustration by Ruth Graham Design summarising the key takeaways from the NRN LEADER Conference

Opening the conference, the Minister for Rural and Community Development, Heather Humphreys TD, highlighted the vital role of LEADER in the Government’s rural development policy moving forward:

*“Since its inception in 1991, the LEADER Programme has been a key component in Ireland’s rural development policy providing vital funding aimed at supporting and sustaining our rural communities.*

*“LEADER is integral to further enhancing the participation of local communities in shaping their future and building leadership, resilience and capacity within communities.”*



Minister Humphreys urged rural stakeholders in attendance at the conference to avail of the NRN’s LEADER Programme Case Studies Booklet, a useful resource for anyone interested in rural development:

*“Last Friday, I launched the National Rural Network’s LEADER Booklet detailing the main aims, objectives and backgrounds of 72 LEADER-funded projects located right across the country.*



*“I would urge you all to take a look at the booklet as it really does tell some inspirational*

*stories about the success and achievements of so many people. I have no doubt that the booklet will develop closer cooperation within communities and inspire future applicants to develop projects that will transform the rural landscape and tackle important issues such as climate change and rural employment.”*

This booklet can be downloaded free of charge [here](#).

## Keynote Speaker: Mark Shucksmith OBE, Newcastle University

**World-renowned rural development expert, Professor Mark Shucksmith OBE, delivered the keynote address, sharing his vast experience of rural development and the LEADER Programme.**



Professor Shucksmith began his presentation with an exploration of LEADER’s Irish Origins, with the Programme said to have originated in Kitty O’Shea’s pub in Brussels. He spoke of the central pioneering role played by Ireland in shaping the LEADER Programme over the last 30 years, through research, which has influenced LEADER and IRD across Europe, emphasising the importance of local participation, animation, capacity building, social inclusion, partnerships and a strategic approach.

*“LEADER has continued and thrived and it has been widely recognised throughout the world as a very important and indeed paradigmatic approach to rural development.”* **Professor Mark Shucksmith OBE**

Professor Shucksmith also spoke positively about LEADER practice in Ireland and of the inspiration that can be drawn from the innovative practices of Ireland’s Local Action Groups and the inspirational leaders working within these organisations.



Drawing on his own studies on LEADER across Europe, Professor Shucksmith then reflected on three themes specific to LEADER: innovation, social inclusion and spatial justice. He cited various studies which document the evolution of these themes that still remain relevant today.

*“We have learned during these 30 years – about the importance of local knowledge, plurality and diversity, capacity-building, local and extra-local networks, social innovation, social inclusion, autonomy, spaces of engagement, governance and power structures.”* **Professor Mark Schucksmith OBE**

The final section of Professor Shucksmith’s presentation looked forward. He listed some of the global challenges that lie ahead which include climate change and the transition to net-zero; the impact of the pandemic; demographic change (ageing and migration); unequal development and inequality; digitalisation; and changes to farm support and the reorientation of the CAP.

Professor Shucksmith concluded that the LEADER Programme has a key role in addressing these challenges moving forward:

*“The LEADER approach should be an important means of enabling local communities to respond actively to these challenges, the more so if they have sufficient autonomy and agency,*

and have the support of an enabling state and learning networks.

*"I look forward to continuing to learn from and be inspired by the Irish experience of LEADER beyond 30 years and into the future."*

Professor Shucksmith's full presentation is available to view [here](#).

## Panel Discussion 1: Lessons Learned from 30 Years of LEADER

The first discussion panel of the day was chaired by Dr Maura Farrell, NUIG / NRN. Dr Farrell was joined by a diverse range of rural stakeholders who have actively engaged with the LEADER Programme to reflect on the lessons learned from the last 30 years.

- Dr Maura Farrell, NUIG / NRN (Panel Chair)
- Professor Mark Shucksmith OBE, Newcastle University
- Dóirín Graham, CEO, Clare Local Development Company
- Terry Keenan, Chairperson, FORUM Connemara
- Sonya Kavanagh, Interim CEO, Kildare County Council
- Mary Clarke, LEADER Recipient, Caltra Community Development Association



Dr Maura Farrell began by asking Professor Mark Shucksmith to comment on the collective vision engrained in the LEADER approach.

In response, Professor Shucksmith said:

*"Having a collective vision is very motivating. It can be a real way of enthusing everybody to work together for a common aim and with a common identity."*

He went on to talk about the difficulty in generating a collective vision as often there are conflicting interests within a community. He stressed the importance of leadership to overcome this, something he feels is often neglected:

*"This is the ability to actually carry with you the different groups within a community and when tensions arise, to resolve the conflicts and be able to move forward together."*

Dóirín Graham, CEO of Clare Local Development Company, was asked for her thoughts on the key lessons learned during her years of engaging with LEADER.

Dóirín was able to draw on her 28 years' experience of LEADER in Ireland:

*"From the early stages, when it started, right up to 2014, LEADER went from strength to strength in Ireland. It covered all of the country in those years. Our relationships with Government and with the EU went from strength to strength, and our involvement and our impact in rural areas was very significant."*

According to Dóirín, things changed in 2014, at the beginning of the last LEADER Programme. She explained:

*"Most of the LAGs were divided into two entities. One which was delivering and one which was making the decisions... What happened was we moved from a very developmental focus, a strong social inclusion focus in LEADER to a grant giving, bureaucratic programme."*

Building on this point, Dóirín called for a change in the structures and to the budget of LEADER in order to sustain a developmental approach moving forward.



Dr Farrell then called on Terry Keenan, Chairperson, Forum Connemara, to share his thoughts on the LEADER Programme, from the perspective of a volunteer and community representative on the board of a Local Action Group.

Terry began his response by comparing Mountbellew Moylough’s success in winning the County Championship in Co. Galway with the work volunteers do on the ground:

*“When a local team wins, it brings the community together in a very positive outlook, a very positive frame of mind... And if you bring this back to the beliefs of community-led local development - we celebrate the small wins in LEADER in our community because as a volunteer, I believe in trying to help my neighbour, my friend, my community, my neighbour in the next village.”*

Terry went on to stress the importance of capacity building and animation in getting projects off the ground. He also passionately highlighted the need to consider the seven principles of LEADER together at all times.



Next up, we heard from Mary Clarke, Treasurer, Caltra Community Development Association, who was asked about her experience of applying for LEADER funding.

Firstly, Mary acknowledged the support provided by Galway Rural Development in helping to streamline the LEADER application process for the Association.

She went on to provide some background on the LEADER supported extension to the Caltra Community Centre. Although it was reasonably newly built, the Centre did not have a stage fit for purpose. This space was needed both for the talented local drama group and for bingo.

The LEADER grant received of almost €97,000 has had an extremely positive impact on the local community. The capacity of the Centre has risen from 250 to over 700, enabling the Centre to hold a more diverse range of events:

*“The people who partake in those events are people who probably have never stood on a stage before. It takes people out of their comfort zone, broadens their horizons, gives them more experience and gives them confidence. I think that’s part of the whole LEADER ethos of social inclusion.”*



Dr Farrell then asked Sonya Kavanagh, Interim CEO, Kildare County Council, to reflect on how local communities have been impacted by the LEADER Programme.

Echoing Terry Keenan’s earlier point, Sonya began by highlighting the fundamental

importance of capacity building and animation at a local level:

*“It is about helping groups to access funding so that they can go and make really positive change in their areas.”*

Sonya showcased two project examples that have benefitted from LEADER support in Co. Kildare. The first of which was a community-led Climate Action Programme which has been taken elsewhere and replicated in other counties. The second of which was LEADER funding secured towards an economic plan for the Barrow Blueway, which according to Sonya is a fantastic example of a project with a local focus in Co. Kildare, and an example of agencies networking and communities coming together.



At this point, Dr Shane Conway, NUIG / NRN, selected two questions that had been posed in the interactive chat to ask of the panel. Firstly, a question was put to Dóirín Graham about the value of volunteers at community level with regard to LEADER.

In response, Dóirín said:

*“The value of the community-led board and the community-led LAG is that they have an ethos and an influence over that LAG which pushes it very strongly towards being a developmental programme that offers support, animation, capacity building and innovation towards the community.”*

Another question from the interactive chat was put by Dr Conway to the panel, this time to Professor Shucksmith, who was asked how the seven key principles of LEADER can be adapted, modernised and developed moving forward.

Professor Shucksmith talked about the importance of capacity building and animation. He also emphasised the importance of ensuring that the composition of the LAG reflects the communities involved, and has the power to pursue the priorities identified in the Local Development Strategy, through an active participation process.

Next, Dr Farrell asked Sonya Kavanagh specifically about the role of innovation in the LEADER Programme.

Sonya spoke about how innovation has always been key with regard to the LEADER Programme and will continue to do so:

*“I don’t think there has ever been a shortage of ideas. Terry spoke about coming up with solutions and I would totally agree. It should be a solution-focused attitude that we have because there are always good ideas coming through.”*

Sonya went on to stress the importance of things like capacity building, animation and support that can be so useful in helping to shape an idea or innovation:

*“Where there are communities who maybe don’t have that capacity as it stands, at the moment, having the space in the (LEADER) Programme to actually facilitate and support those is absolutely key.”*

Moving on from this, Professor Shucksmith was asked about what we need to concentrate on in the next LEADER Programme to ensure that it is successful.

He spoke about having the right structures in place with regard to how volunteers are engaged as these are the people who are at the heart of the Programme, who make

connections, and who contribute their knowledge and skills.

Professor Shucksmith also stressed the need for more funding for staff, capacity building and animation, as well as the need to simplify the model in order to reach far beyond the people who are capable of accessing the funding.

Panellists were asked for their final thoughts on the most successful aspect of the LEADER Programme to date.

Dóirín Graham spoke about innovation and how it has driven the success of the LEADER Programme:

*“This has been enabled by strong animation, capacity building, resource and ethos within the Programme.”*

Terry Keenan commented on the capacity and the assistance provided to the community over the years from LEADER companies, whether it be an entrepreneur or a community looking for assistance.

Sonya Kavanagh highlighted the importance of animation and support for anybody with a project idea. She also commented on the LEADER application process and the need for improved efficiency moving forward:

*“There’s a balance between getting the governance right in terms of the spending of public money but also helping individuals, groups and communities to get through that process in as easy a way as possible.”*

*The final word of the discussion panel was given to Mary Clarke. She was asked how LEADER has enriched the community of Caltra.*

Mary talked about how LEADER has supported the growth of a community:

*“I think fear is generated, not by a lack of ability, but a lack of perception that maybe you are going to be caught out, maybe you are going to get something wrong. It’s that lack of confidence that holds people back.”*

According to Mary, LEADER support has enabled the Caltra Community Centre to offer activities to a diverse range of people, providing them with an opportunity to integrate into the community, something that they may not have been able to do otherwise.

## Guest Speaker: The Future of LEADER – Iwona Lisztwan, LEADER Policy Coordinator at the European Commission (DG AGRI)

***After a short break in proceedings, attention turned to the future of the LEADER Programme in Ireland and the EU. Iwona Lisztwan outlined her vision of what that might look like during a really insightful presentation.***



At the beginning of Iwona’s presentation, she outlined two principles which she believes are fundamental to the philosophy of the new CAP 2023-2027. The first of which is flexibility. Iwona remarked that the new CAP is less defined at the EU level. Instead, there will be more responsibility with regard to decision making at EU Member State level. The second fundamental principle, according to Iwona, is performance. The new CAP adopts less of a prescriptive approach to assessing if a project is compliant or not. Instead, it will be judged on its performance.

Iwona then expanded on the importance of the LEADER Programme as a means of bringing Europe closer to the citizens of the various EU Member States moving forward:

*“We see LEADER as a very important instrument that brings Europe to the kitchen table.”*

Iwona spoke in-depth about the continuing importance of the seven key principles of the LEADER Programme's community-led local approach to rural development.

*"We must ensure all the seven principles of LEADER are being implemented. Every single one of them is important. The real value is in the interaction between the principles. Do not take them for granted."*

Moving on from this, Iwona showcased a number of ways in which we can capitalise on the added value of the LEADER approach, and make it more visible in the implementation of projects and the wider policy discussion.

Citing a 2017 ENRD report on LEADER Evaluation Guidelines, Iwona suggested three ways:

1. Increase social capital in rural areas;
2. Improve local governance; and
3. Deliver projects with unique values compared with the standard delivery mechanism.



At the end of her presentation, Iwona summed up the future of LEADER in one sentence:

*"In today's complex world, the LEADER approach can transform current individual and global uncertainties into working collective solutions locally."*

**Iwona's full presentation is available to view [here](#).**

## LEADER Themed Workshops

**Delegates were given the opportunity to attend a workshop of their choosing, which was facilitated by a Rural Development Officer. Within each of the five themed workshops, an overview of the topic was provided by an expert in the field. This was followed by a LEADER project presentation and an open discussion focused on two key questions relevant to the theme.**

### 1 / LEADER and Social Inclusion Workshop

- Workshop Moderator: Judy Dunne, Fingal LEADER Partnership
- Topic Expert: Dr Anne Cassidy, Galway Rural Development
- Project Example: John MacNamara, ACM Community Development Society
- NRN Support: Niamh Nolan, IRL
- Note Taker: Louise Weir, NUI Galway

*The LEADER and Social Inclusion workshop was broken down into three parts.*

#### Part 1 – Presentation by Topic Expert



Dr Anne Cassidy examined the role of LEADER in supporting social inclusion, in her presentation. She outlined her belief that work in this area is critical to reducing the rural-urban divide. Key infrastructure enables and stimulates enterprise and development:

*"LEADER can play an important role in reducing the rural-urban divide through providing*

*support for enterprises in rural areas. This in turn generates employment and creates economic opportunities for other people in local areas, directly impacting on social inclusion.”*

Dr Cassidy expanded on the impact of social inclusion / exclusion at both the individual and community level. At the individual level, social inclusion increases life chances and fulfilment in terms of being able to play a more active role in a community and wider society. On a community level, social exclusion has economic and social costs. Research shows social isolation has an impact on health outcomes, hospitalisation and severity of illness.

Through capital funding, LEADER facilitates and creates essential services in communities. Dr Cassidy provided an example of a LEADER supported community centre, which has been equipped with computers, enabling SICAP to provide training sessions in the centre:

*“If we did not have access to the facilities, we (SICAP) would basically not be able to function. LEADER enables a lot of programmes to function within local communities.*

*“The LEADER model is something that can be adopted to other countries.”*

**Dr Cassidy’s presentation is available to view [here](#).**

### Part 2 – Presentation by Project Example

John MacNamara, of ACM Community Development Society (ACM), spoke about the Shannon-House Project in Limerick which facilitates social integration and social inclusion.



ACM has grown and developed over the years and now employs seven staff and has three buildings under its ownership. The Society strategically targets areas and projects within the community that encourage integration and

social development. Examples of initiatives that ACM provides across its three centres include card nights, art classes, youth programmes, professional training and social groups.

**You can view John’s presentation [here](#).**

### Part 3 – Key Points from the Session Discussion

Local groups are best placed to identify the issues and challenges associated with social inclusion / exclusion within their communities. A number of key points were extracted from, and identified within John McNamara’s ACM project presentation.

#### Importance of volunteerism

- Volunteers are integral to the success of any local group but it is imperative to avoid volunteer burnout:

*“It’s really difficult to get people to join committees, so we have a process where we get volunteers for particular events. For example, we run the ‘Halloween Fest’ - we have 45-50 volunteers from the community who help with stewarding and so on.”*

- Reach out to people within the community with the skills and expertise specific to an event / project.

#### Capacity building

- This is necessary for committee members and the community:

*“It shows what can be done when the right people are at the table, when they are willing to literally leave the board table and go dig out the garden, go fundraising or whatever needs doing.”*

#### Shared learning

- Sharing knowledge, experience and insights within and across groups is so important. It can help identify funding

opportunities, avoid mistakes and stimulate new innovations:

*“In most areas, there is a Local Development Company. Don’t be afraid to pick up the phone and call them to seek advice. They will know what is available within your own local area.”*

#### Community strategy planning

- It is imperative to develop a community consensus and action plan.
- Develop and focus on one project at a time; get experience, learn lessons, build a network:

*“I suppose the strategy is that when you’re in community development, you have to mitigate your risk, so did we foresee that we would end up with three buildings over a period of 20 years, absolutely not... We would take one project at a time and make that work and maybe five - seven years later, when we felt comfortable and confident financially to take on the next challenge, then we would do that.”*

#### Importance of youth:

- Engaging youth is hugely beneficial, not only in terms of helping to run events but also to engage them so that they will continue volunteering into adulthood. It is also vital that they voice their needs and aspirations.

## 2 / Smart Villages Workshop

- Workshop Moderator: Conor Carty, Galway Rural Development
- Topic Expert: Pat Kennedy, eTownz
- Project Example: Collette McEntee, Innovating Communities Project
- NRN Support: Paddy Malone, IRL
- Note Taker: Dr Shane Conway, NUI Galway

This workshop was structured to build a greater knowledge base around the EU Action for Smart Villages initiative. Specifically, it

sought to develop an understanding of what Smart Villages are and demonstrate how it can be planned for, implemented and realised in an Irish context, particularly in the context of its relationship to the current LEADER Programme and the design of the LEADER Programme post 2022. A number of key rural development stakeholders, including members of Local Action Groups and Implementing Partners, from across Ireland exchanged ideas on how rural communities can 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 during this workshop. Policy instruments which can support the development of the Smart Villages and Rural Towns concept in Ireland and bring it to fruition in the future were also explored, with a particular focus on the LEADER Programme.

*The Smart Villages workshop was broken down into three parts.*

### Part 1 – Presentation by Topic Expert

When: 15<sup>th</sup> November 2021 from 9.00am to 1.00pm.

**LEADER**  
Learning from the Past, Looking to the Future

**LEADER Conference Speakers**

**Smart Villages Workshop**  
Topic Expert - Pat Kennedy  
CEO of eTownz & eConcept.ie

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The European Union  
European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development

National Rural Network

The first part of the workshop aimed to give an overview and provide an understanding of the concept of Smart Villages and how the concept can address some of the challenges experienced in rural areas through a presentation from an expert working in this area, Pat Kennedy, Owner and Digital Strategist at eConcepts Web Solutions and eTownz. Pat presented his work supporting a

number of rural villages and towns to plan, develop and create easy-to-use Smart community development curriculum programmes, training manuals and custom smart community websites for rural villages and towns throughout Ireland and the EU. He explained that like with the term ‘sustainability’, there is no one clear definition of what a Smart Village really is as it is formed in different ways, in different places, but all with innovative thinking at local level at the heart. Pat highlighted that the ‘Smart’ movement in rural areas is constantly evolving, and there are a number of exciting new European initiatives under the banner of ‘Smart Villages and Rural Towns’, such as the Smart Rural 21 project that he is involved in, exploring the potential and future direction of this ambitious initiative. Pat pointed out that the Smart Villages concept can bring exposure to digital content and technology in rural communities, and also to support rural dwellers in discovering the value of using digital in their daily lives in an innovative, integrated and inclusive manner. He added that Smart Villages are also about local people taking stock of local assets and responding to issues within their community.

**Pat’s presentation is available to view [here](#).**

### Part 2 – Presentation by Project Example

The second part of the workshop illustrated how



Smart Villages can work in practice by focusing on a ‘real-life’ ‘Smart’ initiative example in Ireland, the Innovating Communities LEADER Cooperation project led by Monaghan Integrated Development alongside 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. Collette McEntee, Innovating Communities Network Admin Coordinator, explained how this two-

year project is strengthening resilience, local development and community-led action in all of the six partner counties involved in this smart initiative by training community groups, businesses and individuals in Design Thinking through a series of free facilitated courses formed around a local challenge. The training’s ‘person centred design’ approach is ‘smart’ as it helps identify topics important to an area and explore ideas and best possible solutions. It can also help planning and preparation for funding applications such as LEADER.

**You can view Collette’s presentation [here](#).**

### Part 3 – Key Points from the Session Discussion

- It was agreed that digital technologies are not a precondition of Smart Villages, contrary to the somewhat widespread belief. Whilst digitisation is key to the creation of a Smart Village, social capital is also paramount.
- The ‘elevator pitch’ to explain the Smart Villages (and Smart Rural Towns in an Irish context) concept to communities on the ground would be rural areas that put measures in place to help retain and attract people to live and work in their locality, be it through practices of digital innovation and/or social innovation.
- The concept of Smart Villages is not prescriptive and there was an acknowledgment amongst participants 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 interpret, plan for, and implement this innovative initiative in their respective countries.
- As the LEADER Programme is widely regarded as one of Europe’s most successful rural development programmes, it is well positioned to forge a strong relationship with the European Commission’s new Smart Villages initiative and 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.

- It was argued that the Smart Villages concept is essentially a new ‘suit of clothes’ for LEADER to ‘wear’ moving forward into the future.
- It was widely acknowledged that the development of Smart Villages in Ireland and indeed across the EU would be most effective and efficient if decided and implemented at local level by local actors, hence the appropriateness of the Smart Village’s concept of building on LEADER’s ‘bottom up’ framework in supporting the economic and social development of local areas in the coming period. For Smart Villages to be truly successful, however, they must be community driven, industry supported, and government enabled.
- The Smart Villages concept must align to the seven key principles of the LEADER approach – all of which must collaborate and positively interact for it to be successful and durable. The seven principles are deeply connected and work together in tandem as a toolkit to safeguard and build a brighter future for rural communities.
- A number of participants highlighted that Smart Villages policy cannot take a one village approach, and it would be better to take a regional network approach, which requires networking partnership between towns/ communities. Many rural communities live in isolation, and therefore require a clustering of communities to remain sustainable and viable.
- Smart Villages can add value to the great work that is already been done in rural Ireland. Meitheal was used as an example to explain this existing ‘smart’ mind-set and actions in rural communities. Meitheal is an old Irish term that describes how neighbours would come together to assist

each other with various tasks. Any village/rural town can therefore be ‘Smart’ because much of the collegiality, ambition and skills base already exists at local level.

- The role of high-speed broadband and digitisation in enhancing the way we work through remote working for example was highlighted as a key element of the Smart revolution of rural Ireland moving forward.
- It was highlighted that the Smart Villages concept needs to be more ambitious by embracing emerging opportunities such as climate change mitigation measures and the potential of renewable energy and the bioeconomy.
- It is important to ensure that communities throughout Ireland, including those who have not benefitted from the Programme to date, have access to LEADER supports and funding specific to the creation of Smart Villages.
- Whilst it was largely agreed that the development of Smart Villages and Rural Towns can be greatly enhanced through the successful delivery and modernisation of the LEADER Programme, creating synergies between the Smart Villages concept and other rural supports, projects and initiatives through increased levels of collaboration and linkages was also recommended.

**For more information on Smart Villages, you can view the NRN’s 2021 Newsletter on Smart Villages and Rural Towns in Ireland [here](#).**

### 3 / LEADER and Cooperation Workshop

- Workshop Moderator: Claire Connors, Waterford LEADER Partnership
- Topic Expert: Frank Kelly, Former Rural Development Manager, Donegal Local Development CLG
- Project Example: Frank Kelly
- NRN Support: Louise Lennon, IRL
- Note Taker: James Claffey, NRN

The LEADER and Cooperation workshop was broken down into two parts.

### Part 1 – Presentation by Topic Expert



Frank Kelly a former LEADER Programme manager, provided a presentation on LEADER Cooperation guidelines.

Frank’s presentation is available to view [here](#).

### Part 2 – Key Points from the Session Discussion

- Cooperation is much more than networking, it presents an opportunity to share experiences and knowledge; it creates more significant economies of scale; it is crucial for developing geographical links; and it offers an opportunity for more strategic thinking.
- Cooperation projects take considerable time and can overlap programming periods. They are hard work but are rewarding and beneficial.
- Agency support is important for many cooperation projects, from Local Authorities, Fáilte Ireland and others.
- One of the key points from workshop participants was: *“LEADER without cooperation is not LEADER”*. Cooperation is a key principle of LEADER that must be prioritised.

Some recommendations moving forward:

- Provide a Cooperation Animation Officer.

- Increase the rate of funding as match funding is an issue.
- Consider incorporating cooperation into Local Development Strategies.
- Preparatory support is crucial to cooperation projects, not just the funding but appropriate planning.

### 4 / LEADER and the Rural Environment Workshop

- Workshop Moderator: Peter Ormond, Westmeath Community Development
- Topic Expert: Dr Fran Igoe, Local Authorities Waters Programme (LAWPRO)
- Project Example: Rebekah Keaveny, Green Offaly
- NRN Support: Declan Phelan, NRN
- Note Taker: Aoife Smith, NRN

The LEADER and the Rural Environment workshop was broken down into three parts.

### Part 1 – Presentation by Topic Expert



Dr Igoe gave a presentation on ‘Maximising the potential of the LEADER Rural Environment Theme’, focusing in particular on water and biodiversity. Significant LEADER investment in this area has become the catalyst for rural communities getting involved in these types of projects.

Dr Igoe’s presentation is available to view [here](#).

### Part 2 – Presentation by Project Example

Green Offaly is a countywide Sustainable Development Trust, empowering communities to transition into a sustainable 21<sup>st</sup> century rural future.



Rebekah Keaveny spoke of how Green Offaly acts as a facilitator to help get projects rolled out across the county. Fundamental to the Trust's work is capacity building and networking.

You can view Rebekah's presentation [here](#).

### Part 3 – Key Points from the Session Discussion

- It is important to refer to LEADER as an approach not as a programme.
- Training is fundamental, whether it be in the form of energy audits or biodiversity training. This helps build capacity which leads to the development of community projects.
- If we (the community) don't start to define the environment, others will do it for us.
- It is so important to build trust between Agencies and communities.
- The environment should not be considered in its own silo. It should be integrated across programmes and projects.
- Relationship between farmers and environment:
  - There is a minority of farmers who are polluting. There is potential to build communications at local level to identify who is polluting, and build the capacity to address issues locally.
  - Farmers do not intentionally harm the environment. Nitrates regulations require farmers to have planning permission for all farmyard infrastructures. This hinders many farmers from applying for DAFM funded grants like TAMS II. Opportunities to help address this issue for this cohort of farmers should be explored.

## 5 / LEADER and the Rural Economy Workshop

- Workshop Moderator: Donna Cleary, SECAD
- Topic Expert: Dr Mary O'Shaughnessy, Department of Food Business and Development, UCC
- Project Example: Peter Johnson, St Vincent de Paul North East and Midlands Region
- NRN Support: Johnny Sheehan, NRN
- Note Taker: Daniel Bennett, NRN

The LEADER and Rural Economy workshop was broken down into three parts.

### Part 1 – Presentation by Topic Expert



The presentation given by Dr O'Shaughnessy was succinctly broken down into 3 sections.

#### 1. Learning from the Past

Dr O'Shaughnessy spoke about the importance of learning from the past when it comes to LEADER and carrying the lessons forward. Extensive research has been carried out specific to the rural economy. Dr O'Shaughnessy cited several different projects that she has had personal involvement in such as an NRN Case Study on Social Enterprise in Rural Communities and an NRN Report entitled 'Facilitating and Encouraging Short Food Supply Chains'.

#### 2. Looking to the Future – Research Agenda

Dr O'Shaughnessy spoke about the importance of setting a research agenda moving forward that is based around integrated and place-based development; focuses on social entrepreneurship and innovation; is locally rooted but externally connected and influenced; and taps into the resourcefulness and innovation of rural social enterprises.

### 3. The Importance of Context

Concluding her presentation, Dr O'Shaughnessy spoke about the influence of context on rural social enterprises. Social-economic issues, geography and policy context are all factors that need to be considered.

**Dr O'Shaughnessy's presentation is available to view [here](#).**

### Part 2 – Presentation by Project Example

Peter Johnson spoke of the LEADER support received by the St Vincent de Paul Order Fulfilment Centre Warehouse in Drogheda which processes and redistributes second-hand clothing throughout the North East and Midlands region of Ireland.



The LEADER Programme funded 11 EPOS (Electronic Point of Sale) tills, costing circa €7,000 each, which has eliminated daily issues with regard to discretionary discounts, has improved stock control and has strengthened credibility as a result.

**You can view Peter's presentation [here](#).**

### Part 3 – Key Points from the Session Discussion

- LEADER has provided significant assistance to SMEs throughout the country and continues to offer significant support to micro-enterprises under the theme of Economic Development, Enterprise Development and Job Creation. This has helped with import substitution, facilitated

expansion opportunities, and has aided businesses to become more sustainable.

- The LEADER Programme has helped Local Action Groups and Implementing Partners reach out to disadvantaged communities. It has engaged and financially supported local bodies and individuals in the community with the expertise that can then be shared with and extended to the less advantaged.
- The LEADER food initiative has been a major success and has supported enterprises countrywide to diversify their offering to consumers.
- Moving forward, it is important to ensure that communities throughout Ireland, in particular those who have not benefitted from the Programme to date, have access to LEADER supports and funding specific to the creation of projects under the theme of Economic Development, Enterprise Development and Job Creation. There is scope for more animation countrywide to ensure that this becomes a reality.

## Panel Discussion 2: Reflections from the Active Listeners

**The second discussion panel of the day was chaired by John Grieve, Former Team Leader, ENRD Contact Point. John was joined by three active listeners, who shared some of their observations and insights on the key themes emerging throughout the day.**

- John Grieve, Former Team Leader, ENRD Contact Point (**Panel Chair**)
- Dr Aisling Murtagh, NUI Galway
- Michael Kenny, NUI Maynooth
- Dr Brian Leonard, UCD



John began by asking the panellists for their thoughts on the stand-out achievement of the LEADER Programme over the last 30 years.

Michael Kenny spoke at length about the “*Irish sense of place and the Irish sense of community*”. He expanded on this, by pointing out that LEADER is not just about the number of projects it creates, it’s about the people involved:

*“LEADER, to me, is a person. It’s a leader in the community... If we build leaders, then our communities are in safe hands.”*

Michael queried the extent to which communities have grown over time and whether communities are now stronger across Ireland as a result of LEADER or if it is the case that a small number of people are developing a proportionally large amount of projects.



Reflecting on the biggest achievement attributable to LEADER to date, Dr Aisling Murtagh commented:

*“The power behind this conference is unbelievable and I think somehow, that in itself, is a testament to the future of LEADER.*

*“This Programme is something that is in our everyday vernacular. Everybody knows what LEADER is.*

*“It’s not a Programme that has come and gone. It’s an institution in rural development in Ireland.”*

Citing the LEADER funding received by the Caltra Community Development Association,

outlined by Mary Clarke during the first discussion panel, Dr Murtagh went on to emphasise the need to establish physical places through LEADER:

*“We need them (physical places) to be a catalyst for the drama group, that instills confidence in the young people, or whoever it might be that gets involved. That, for me, is a big achievement of LEADER.”*



Dr Brian Leonard weighed in on the discussion by commenting on two features of the LEADER Programme that have stood out for him over the years. The first of which is innovation:

*“LEADER’s biggest achievement is the innovation side of it... And innovation can be such a broad stroke, it can define anything... It is important that while innovation is happening, it’s placed within a context. And that’s what LEADER has done. It has placed this innovation in a local context.”*

Dr Leonard then went on to talk about how LEADER has facilitated the sustained involvement of groups of people across the years.

*“A lot of people today, you may have noticed, referenced ‘oh, I remember when it (LEADER) started’. Those people are still here which shows a sustained dedication. This is an achievement of LEADER and also an achievement of the groups as well.”*

Dr Leonard elaborated on his previous point by highlighting the importance of involving

rural youth in the Programme moving forward. He emphasised the need for generational renewal within groups, to avoid stagnation and to enable these groups to bring in new people to champion the LEADER Programme on a regular basis.



Continuing on the theme of rural youth, John asked the panel about their aspirations for young people under the LEADER Programme moving forward.

Dr Leonard responded by saying:

*“It would be a very big wish of mine that LEADER retains rural youth.”*

He continued by voicing his desire for young people to involve themselves in groups and for these groups to create an environment conducive to different age and minority cohorts:

*“If we retain rural youth, we are sustaining rural economies, sustaining rural fabric.”*

Dr Leonard also spoke about the need for rural youth to have tangible reasons to stay in a rural area. He spoke positively about the concept of Smart Villages and the importance of infrastructure like broadband in retaining youth.

Recognising the challenge moving forward, Dr Murtagh began her response by saying:

*“Sometimes young people have a strong aspiration to leave but they have a strong aspiration to come back.”*

Building on this point, she emphasised the need to help those young people who want to stay in a rural area while also making it attractive for those returning, through remote working and by exploring the opportunities for providing education locally.

Dr Murtagh went on to raise the pertinent question of how the rural economy can be part of a new green revolution. She mentioned how LEADER has already engaged with this by supporting environmentally-focused projects. In addition, she highlighted the potential for social inclusion projects to be part of the wider environmental agenda moving forward.

In his response, Michael stressed the importance of rural youth organisations in shaping the future:

*“I personally am a product of the influence of a rural youth organisation... Macra na Feirme... They (youth organisations) know how to grow youth development.”*

He promoted the idea of tapping into, and talking to the organisations and groups who have been involved with rural youth for years.

Finally, John asked the panel if they could make one change to LEADER in the next Programme, what specifically would it be.

Acknowledging the difficulties with bureaucracy mentioned in the first discussion panel but in the interest of expanding the conversation, Dr Leonard chose to talk about the change he feels is needed with regard to the governance eco-system:

*“LEADER, sometimes, is viewed as a silo, on its own, but through my experience with Local Authorities, I’ve found that often, LEADER funding can be one aspect of a project, and it’s important for us to know that it’s part of a wider rural development eco-system.”*

Reflecting on what Iwona Lisztwan from the EU Commission (DG AGRI) had said earlier in the day in relation to the increased flexibility in the next CAP, Dr Murtagh expressed her hope that

perhaps there will be room for simplification when it comes to the LEADER application process:

*“If any layer could be simplified, it would be a benefit.”*

Dr Murtagh then spoke about the seven principles of LEADER and in particular the Cooperation principle. Inspired by conversations in the LEADER and Social Inclusion workshop, Dr Murtagh highlighted the potential for more informal cooperation between rural stakeholders, which in turn would have a positive impact on capacity building.

Rounding up the second discussion panel, Michael gave his thoughts on what he feels needs to change in the next Programme. His comments were centred on the role of people and trust:

*“Along with building trust and capacity, LEADER needs to have the long term belief that if you build people, people will build projects.”*

He continued:

*“We need to simplify. If you are going to build trust, then you must trust people. You don’t need so many requirements that makes it bureaucratic and complicated. Build trust and allow trust to work.”*

## Conference Round Up: Kevin McCarthy, Secretary General of the Department of Rural and Community Development (DRCD)

**Concluding remarks were provided by Kevin McCarthy, who expanded on and re-enforced the key messages emerging from the conference.**



Kevin began by giving his thoughts on the conference:

*“Today is a really valuable opportunity to reflect back on the 30 years of LEADER and to celebrate and acknowledge the achievements over that time.”*

Struck by a comment made by Professor Mark Shucksmith earlier in the day, that Ireland had led the way in the early development of LEADER, Kevin continued:

*“It is great to be able to pay tribute to those who have contributed along the way.”*

Those in attendance at the conference were reassured that the LEADER Programme would continue to be a really important foundational Programme moving forward:

*“It (LEADER) has been a great enabler for communities and will continue to be a great enabler for communities. It builds capacity within communities. It helps to bring people together within communities, providing means for them to develop their own ideas to improve their quality of life. It serves as a stepping stone, potentially over time, for other opportunities for development to be accessed.*

*“LEADER helps local community organisations to get out of the starting blocks, to bring their ideas together, to achieve collaboration and involvement at a local community level.”*

Looking ahead to the next LEADER Programme, Kevin stressed the importance of reminding ourselves of the key elements and values of the

LEADER approach, such as the bottom-up local community involvement; the flexibility that LEADER offers in terms of funding opportunities; the importance of broad-based teams; enabling the widest variety of enterprise, social inclusion and environmental projects to be delivered; supporting local community and local enterprise opportunities; and building community resilience.

Concluding his presentation, Kevin picked up on a comment made earlier in the day about the importance of ‘confidence building’ and the role of LEADER in making that happen:

*“Ultimately we are trying to build confidence within our communities, build confidence in the future of rural Ireland. We are all going to have a part to play in making that happen. As has been the case over the last 30 years, LEADER will continue to be a massively important vehicle in making that happen over the coming years.”*

You can watch the full NRN ‘30 Years of LEADER: Learning from the Past, Looking to the Future’ Conference recording [here](#).



A graphic illustration by Ruth Graham Design summarising the key takeaways from the NRN LEADER Conference

## LEADER Conference - Resources

### (I) LEADER Conference Programme

<https://477341-1500199-raikfcquaxqncofqfm.stackpathdns.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/LEADER-Conference-Programme.pdf>

### (II) LEADER Conference Full Recording

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bhtzbBeex1M>

### (III) NRN LEADER Case Studies Booklet

<https://477341-1500199-raikfcquaxqncofqfm.stackpathdns.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/NRN-LEADER-Programme-2014-2020-Case-Studies-Booklet-November-2021.pdf>

### (IV) NRN Smart Villages and Rural Towns in Ireland Newsletter

<https://477341-1500199-raikfcquaxqncofqfm.stackpathdns.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/National-Rural-Network-Smart-Villages-Newsletter-web.pdf>

### (V) Full List of Presentations

Keynote Address - Professor Mark Shucksmith

<https://www.nationalruralnetwork.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Keynote-Address-%E2%80%93-Professor-Mark-Shucksmith.pdf>

Guest Speaker: Future of LEADER - Iwona Lisztwan

<https://www.nationalruralnetwork.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Iwona-Lisztwan-EU-Commission.pdf>

### 1 / LEADER and Social Inclusion Workshop

- Dr Anne Cassidy

<https://www.nationalruralnetwork.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Social-Inclusion-Workshop-Dr-Anne-Cassidy.pdf>

- John MacNamara

<https://www.nationalruralnetwork.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Social-Inclusion-Workshop-John-MacNamara.pdf>

## 2 / Smart Villages Workshop

- Pat Kennedy

<https://www.nationalruralnetwork.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Smart-Villages-Workshop-Pat-Kennedy.pdf>

- Collette McEntee

<https://www.nationalruralnetwork.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Smart-Villages-Workshop-Collette-McEntee.pdf>

## 3 / LEADER Cooperation Workshop

- Frank Kelly

<https://www.nationalruralnetwork.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/LEADER-Cooperation-Workshop-Frank-Kelly.pdf>

## 4 / LEADER and the Rural Environment Workshop

- Dr Fran Igoe

<https://www.nationalruralnetwork.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Rural-Environment-Workshop-Dr-Fran-Igoe.pdf>

- Rebekah Keaveny

<https://www.nationalruralnetwork.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Rural-Environment-Workshop-Rebekah-Keaveny.pdf>

## 5 / LEADER and the Rural Economy Workshop

- Dr Mary O'Shaughnessy

<https://www.nationalruralnetwork.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Rural-Economy-Workshop-Dr-Mary-O'Shaughnessy.pdf>

- Peter Johnson

<https://www.nationalruralnetwork.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Rural-Economy-Workshop-Peter-Johnson.pdf>



## National Rural Network



Prepared by the National Rural Network team at NUI Galway and Irish Rural Link on behalf of the Department of Rural and Community Development (DRCD) and the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM).

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Report compiled by Daniel Bennett, Researcher at Irish Rural Link.



# LEADER

Learning from the Past, Looking to the Future

Welcome!

OUR CORE AIM is to MAXIMISE THE BENEFITS OF IRELAND'S RURAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME



JAMES CLAFFEY NATIONAL RURAL NETWORK

THE LEADER PROGRAMME is a VERY IMPORTANT PART OF OUR RURAL FUTURE.



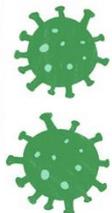
MINISTER HEATHER HUMPHREYS

TACKLING ISSUES LIKE:

RURAL DEPOPULATION

COVID

CLIMATE CHANGE



COOPERATION is Key



PROFESSOR MARK SHUCKSMITH OBE

LOCAL ACTORS MUST CONSTRUCT PLACES OF ENGAGEMENT & work with OTHERS



SOCIAL INNOVATION

"LEADER FUNDING REQUIRED INNOVATION"

# 30 YEARS OF LEADER

## LEARNING FROM THE PAST, LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

## PANEL DISCUSSION

WHEN LEADER FLOURISHED, COMMUNITIES FLOURISHED.

"YOU'RE BRINGING YOUR COMMUNITY FORWARD + YOU'RE RAISING ALL THE BOATS AT THE SAME TIME."

-TERRY KEENAN

BREAKOUTS

SOCIAL INCLUSION

RURAL ENVIRONMENT

SMART VILLAGES

RURAL ECONOMY

COOPERATION

ANIMATION

EXCHANGE & PARTICIPATION

CAPACITY BUILDING

PEOPLE

ORGANISATIONS

GET YOUR VEHICLE + CROWD + REAR

CHOOSE YOUR ROUTE

LEADER? IT'S A COLLECTIVE VISION!



DR. MAURA FARRELL

BRING THE INVISIBLE WORK INTO THE LIGHT.

-IWONA LISZTWAN EUROPEAN COMMISSION

LEADER IS NOT JUST PROJECTS

LEADER HASN'T COME + INSTITUTION IN RURAL DEVELOPMENT IN IRELAND.

THE FUTURE IS BRIGHT!

## PANEL DISCUSSION

# #LEADERCLLD



Riailtas na hÍreann Government of Ireland



Ireland's European Structural and Investment Funds Programmes 2014-2020 Co-funded by the Irish Government and the European Union



The European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development Europe