



# **SMART VILLAGES**

# **Look to the Future Programme**

Smart Villages Look to the Future Programme is a series of training events for rural communities and businesses in Kilkenny in 2020/21 to explore innovative ways to develop new opportunities and improve quality of life. The Smart Village concept emerged from the EU's efforts to ensure that rural areas get the same focus in terms of the implementation of innovation as do cities and large towns. It will likely be very influential on both the EU and Irish government's plans for local development in the next five years. The events will happen in venues around the county, and KLP hopes to make them both stimulating and entertaining for participants. COVID 19 will affect how the training is delivered.

These are the broad themes that the training programme will explore building on the assets, experience and opportunities of resilient communities across the county:

- Nature and Nurture
- Food for the Soul
- Access All Areas
- Our Town















# **NATURE AND NURTURE**

How do we develop our community's rivers, streams and waterways in an environmentally friendly and biodiverse way?

Investigate sustainable land management practices

Explore the potential to develop practices that enhance water quality and riparian biodiversity

Optimise assets to the environmental, social and economic benefit of the community.

Emphasise biodiversity in planning and development

Support the research and development of biodiversity and the natural environment such as innovative renewable energy and environmentally friendly initiatives



#### **FOOD FOR THE SOUL**

How can Culture, Heritage and the Arts flourish and support rural communities?

Explore small scale culture and heritage tourism

Contribute to the community's economy and sense of wellbeing through culture and heritage.

Examine the social and economic potential of community arts

Create a welcome and warm place for artists in the community

Celebrate culture and heritage within the community, including both local and new identities.





#### **ACCESS ALL AREAS**

How can we use Transport, Energy and Broadband to optimise our access to services?

Understand the importance of transport, energy independence and quality broadband to a local economy

Develop cycling's role in Kilkenny's future- including commuting, activity/ adventure and rural recreation aspects

Build supports for business creation and innovation

Make the community's economy diverse and active with links to the ocal labour market for job creation.

Plan the development of loca economies in the context of regions





#### **OUR TOWN**

How do we achieve a sustainable future for our Rural Towns and Villages?

Support bottom-up, communityled town centre renewal

Develop local events, groups and structures for the participation, integration and individual outcomes for rural youth

Establish the Kilkenny waterways as tourism destinations through tourism infrastructure in towns and villages

Further develop Kilkenny's Greenway and Blueways - linking towns and villages to outdoor recreation

Promote and develop Kilkenny as a regional destination for activity/ adventure and culture/heritage tourism



#### TRAINING OVERVIEW

#### Training Aim:

The training introduced KLP membership and other rural communities and small businesses to the concepts and opportunities of Smart Villages. A key objective for the training was a meaningful engagement of participants to create fruitful outputs and experiences for all. The Smart Villages 'Look to the Future' event is the first of six training sessions. It presented a broad introduction to Smart Villages under the four themes.

#### Training Methodology:

The training was delivered through several methods - taking into account the diverse ways in which people engage with training. The Workhouse Union team liaised with KLP to ensure the training was delivered with a clear offer and invitation - meeting the expectations of KLP membership.

A panel discussion was followed by six training workshops. Appropriate and clear signage was used throughout the venue. Additional time was calculated for safe and slow movement between the amphitheatre venue and workshop space. On sign-up, all participants received a screen-printed tote bag with the colour indicating the section of the amphitheatre they are seated in. A welcome training pack was included in the tote bag which gave an overview leaflet about Smart Villages and KLP membership info.

#### Panel Discussion:

The panel discussion, chaired by Helen Carroll, with Minister Malcolm Noonan and representatives from cutting-edge Kilkenny projects. Each of these projects had information boards detailing its background, how it happened, how it grew, and its influence and impact. Each of the projects related to the Smart Village themes of the workshops:

- Nore Vision, Nature and Nurture
- · Linguan Valley, Food for the Soul
- · Ballykeeffe Amphitheatre, Our Town
- · Broadband for Piltown , Access All Areas

Padraic Flaherty spoke about how a closed slate quarry was repurposed into the Ballykeeffe Amphitheatre through local initiative and voluntary commitment. Ann-Marie McSorley described the training and engagement initiatives with the Nore Vision Project. Brendan Finn outlined plans for promoting an improved cycling culture in Kilkenny City with Cycling Culture Kilkenny. Frank Walsh spoke about the development of a heritage tourism destination in the Linguan Valley from Knockroe to Owning. Brain Doyle from Better Broadband For Piltown described what was undertaken to supply, install and operate a fibre broadband network. They were joined by KLP Chair Denis Drennan who drew on his own experience of KLP projects. Everyone got a feel for relevant ideas and activities that they would be drawing on and discussing later.

#### Design:

The panel discussion stage was decorated with a biodiversity and our future theme. Artist Jennie Moran and Callan based Living and Growing nursery collaborated on a backdrop of plants planted into everyday objects such as shopping trolleys and sinks.

Graphic design elements for the event were created by Paul Bokslag. They included a series of four information boards in the green area allowing people to engage with them in their own time. The panels illustrated the four projects from the panel discussion and their connection to the workshop themes. An introductory leaflet distributed in everyone's tote bags gave a clear and concise overview of the Smart Villages training.

#### Workshops:

The panel discussion was followed by 6 workshops on the themes Nature and Nurture, Food for the Soul, Access All Areas and Our Town. These were led as a broad group discussion, with feedback captured and written up onto harvesting sheets and a map on an easel. Participants were all seated at 2 metres apart to ensure social distancing while still being able to have a group discussion. The workshops are devised to highlight the assets and experience of existing initiatives and bring a sense

of ownership to the concept of Smart Villages. The workshops were led by a member of KLP with Workhouse Union acting as scribes. Following introductions, the workshops were structured around the questions:

- 1. RURAL INITIATIVES I am proud of
- 2. What NEEDS does your village/town/community/business have
- 3. What are POTENTIAL projects in your village/town/community/business
- 4. What is the potential for local/county/regional/national/EU COLLABORATION?



# **FINDINGS**

# NATURE AND NURTURE

This theme looks at how we can develop our community's rivers, streams and waterways in an environmentally friendly and biodiverse way. Discussion in the workshop focused using rivers for regeneration and tourism, and raising awareness of ecological sustainability by adding environmental elements to cultural events. Citizen Science programmes, Keep Kilkenny Beautiful, Greenway networks, Callan's environmental focus in its festivals, Goresbridge's use of the river to encourage tourism and Thomastown's weir swimming pool were suggested as Smart rural initiatives.

Responding to the second prompt focusing on needs, workshop participants suggested that the approach has to be locally led and through a core committee. How it is led is important; a holistic, community, collaborative route should be taken. The approach must make the incentive clear to everyone in the community, particularly with respect to farmers, so that the new opportunities are balanced with the existing needs. The approach must also not separate environmental issues from the need for amenities; development should synchronise economic and environmental sustainability priorities.

The potential of developing Kilkenny waterways was widely recognised in the workshop discussion. However, when focusing on this potential, the challenges that would be met took over in the conversation. A particular concern surrounded insurance obstacles and the hesitancy of allowing children to engage with the river. Discussion also focused on raising awareness of our rivers and the potential of developing education programmes. It was also recognised that now is an opportune time to attract farmers and communities as more funding sources were available, though examples of funding streams were not given.



#### **FOOD FOR THE SOUL**

This theme looks at how Culture, Heritage and the Arts can flourish and support rural communities. There were two workshops looking at this theme. Together they gave a list of Smart cultural initiatives including Ballykeeffe Amphitheatre, Camphill and L'Arche Communities, Castlecomer Discovery Park, Men's Sheds, Castlecomer Artist in Residence, Kells Priory, Callan Heritage Society publications, Thomastown Craft School, the Piltown Cultural Festival, the cafe hub in Muckalee and site-specific theatre productions in Callan.

When discussing needs, safe accessibility to heritage sites was highlighted as well as social and recreational activities for young people, who have few options of places to go and are further limited to daylight hours. Participants spoke about the need to create creative hubs to draw on artistic talent. As discussion got going, the needs took a more broad form. Participants spoke about how their small towns were losing a sense of identity and there was a need for culture and the arts to look at this. They also spoke about the need for people to participate in something meaningful. Mens Sheds were drawn on as an example here as while they are inviting for men who are good with their hands and making, it doesn't offer the same to others.

Participants across both workshops spoke about the potential that culture and the arts can offer to Smart initiatives. Plenty of potential was seen in craft culture, sports, festivals, food, history and heritage activities. Suggestions were made on how these kinds of activities could boost positive senses of community in small towns, such as through a social choir. Participants recognised the important role culture can play in new developments as change can be initiated through a cultural project. Possibilities were seen in utilising the assets that are already there. For example, pubs could be used as hubs, town vernacular architecture could be explored and history could be drawn on for place making and branding.

In one of these workshops, participants also focused on how to collaborate. The importance of networking was emphasised, especially arranging meetings between similar projects to share ideas. It was also highlighted that village initiatives could be used as methods and learning for projects on a larger scale in towns and cities.



#### **ACCESS ALL AREAS**

This theme looks at how Transport, Energy and Broadband can be used to optimise our access to services. Rural initiatives such as Ring-a-Link providing rural transport, Callan Neighbourhood Foods and Better Broadband for Piltown were mentioned.

There was a huge amount of discussion about needs in this workshop as gaps in services were highlighted as a major issue for rural communities. There is a need for public transport routes as bus services are scarce or non-existent. These patchy services also greatly affect those most in need of them: young people have difficulty getting to school and activities and older people become isolated. The approach to public transport routes was also highlighted as important: services needed to be connected to larger routes, and that frequency rather than passenger capacity was more important. Along with public transport routes, improvement is needed in cycling, pedestrian and traffic infrastructure for better safety and mobility in and through towns and villages. Broadband across many rural areas is a key issue. This is also connected to the potential for remote working in small towns and villages. An overarching need was for feedback sessions on the efficiency of services and infrastructure to ensure that a community's needs were met.

Participants at this workshop had highlighted the need to keep people in the area and suggested that small work hubs would make remote working possible. Developing rural working hubs in empty properties would make it easier for people to live in small towns instead of cities while curbing the isolation of working from home. It also creates the potential of a knock-on industry through the need for cafes, adding to the local economy and creating social opportunities. For addressing public transport issues, technology and infrastructure should support what people are doing to meet their transport needs: carpooling and E-hitchhiking should be supported in this way.

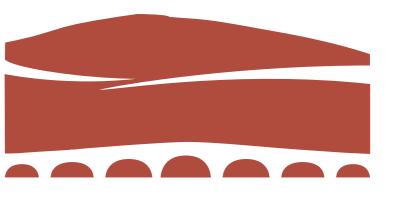


#### **OUR TOWN**

This theme looks at achieving a Sustainable Future for our rural towns and villages. The discussion on needs centred on space, both indoor and outdoor, for socialising. The closure of churches, pubs and GAA pitches during Covid highlighted the need for socialising outside of these outlets. Public space needs to be thought of in a different way; participants focused on towns' squares and year-round weatherproof options. There is not only a need for infrastructure improvements but also a change in attitude, with gathering in public places seen as a healthy habit in a community. In the conversation, workshop participants also cited the different needs of different generations: young people need job opportunities while older people need activities to do. A need to invite and welcome new members to communities as new immigrants bring valuable new culture to small towns. Finally, participants brought up that there needs to be new ways to spend money locally.

Various suggestions were given as to how sustainability could be achieved in small towns. Developing further infrastructure for places like playgrounds would make them a social space. Pets, in particular dogs, were highlighted as a route for socialising space. Making it easier for people to bring pets would increase the sociability of places. Community allotments were also an idea put forward. Focusing on history and heritage and rivers was suggested as beneficial. Finally, linking with schools to get young people to think about smart towns would add an intergenerational element to initiatives.









### **Response to Event**

The event was a great success with fully booked attendance from KLP members. Attendees gave positive feedback throughout the evening. There was great appreciation at being able to attend such an event following months of lockdown and restrictions. The convivial atmosphere at the beautiful venue of Ballykeeffe made it possible for members to enjoy themselves, participate in workshops, learn about Smart Village initiatives, network and socialise all safely and adhering to Covid-19 guidelines. The event was covered in a 2 page spread in the Kilkenny People.

There was positive feedback on the design elements such as the information boards on projects. The tote bag system for organising workshop groups also seemed to be clear for everyone to follow. In the workshops, while little was known about the policy initiatives for smart villages, participants had plenty of ideas, enthusiasm and heart to make change in their community. There was great idea sharing particularly around rivers and rural public transport solutions.

There are also things that we can take on board for the planning of future events and workshops. As discussed in the feedback meeting after the event at Ballykeeffe, KLP will aim to host one more event in October, depending on restrictions, in a venue that could do both inside and outside space, for example Windgap. An arts venue could also be used to compliment the Food for the Soul theme.

The next event should include an energy-focused initiative such as a community group-led wind farm. It is important to examine the themes to see what would work well in combination so that there can be cross-pollination of ideas. It would also be positive to broaden the attendees. The crowd at Ballykeeffe was from a similar profile - we can aim to diversify this at future events to capture the views and ideas of younger and diversified participants.



