

Seán Ó Riordáin and Associates
with the support of
Mrs. Maureen O'Reilly,
Independent Economist



Mid-Term Review Clare Rural Development Strategy 2026



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1. BACKGROUND AND OVERVIEW

1.1 Introduction

Seán Ó Riordáin and Associates, in association with Maureen O'Reilly, Independent Economist, have been commissioned by Clare County Council to provide a mid-term review of the Clare Rural Development Strategy 2026. The Review is being undertaken at a time of considerable policy change in Ireland and, consequently, will reflect upon delivery to date whilst having regard to the current policy changes. This will allow adoption of a renewed strategy to 2030 which will position the County, through the Council and the Clare Rural Development Forum, to take advantage of new opportunities and funding that are expected to become available at National and EU Level. The renewed strategy will also align with the preparation of the forthcoming Clare County Development Plan and other local policy initiatives as well as informing preparation of Council budgets up to and including 2030.

The Brief agreed with the Council specifically provides for

- Examination of the pillars in the Strategy, identifying the projects that have been progressed
- Addressing the extent to which improvements with animation through the local statutory agencies has occurred
- Identifying if and where local partnership/ partnership is working or has improved
- Identifying if and where collaboration and integration around rural development has occurred
- Identification of Government investment in rural development in the County and comparison with national investment over the three years
- Review of the National Government Rural Development Plan, and any forthcoming national initiatives, including funding, which may arise over the course of this review
- Examination of the key Strategy metrics and

how implementation has performed against objectives set

- Consideration of the post Covid context

1.2 Review Methodology

The review is primarily based upon material made available to the consultants by the Council and, critically, a series of virtual workshops, meetings and engagement with members of the Council, the Forum, the Public Participation Network, Senior Council Staff, and other relevant stakeholders. A desk top review of relevant documents pertaining to policy development in both Clare and at national level was also completed. A series of on-line surveys through Survey Monkey, taken in confidence, was also undertaken, and will be reported upon in a general context in this report to preserve the confidence of those contributing.

The review commenced in June 2021 and was completed to draft stage by October 2021. The next phase to finalise completion of the review required the coordination of a series of engagements with the Forum and Council, including the Rural Development Strategic Policy Committee to finalise the actual Renewed Strategy for implementation between 2023

and 2030. Reflecting on the challenges of Covid 19 and the recent war in Ukraine, it was considered important to provide a realistic timeframe for the renewed strategy to align with other local policies and plans, i.e. Local Economic and Community plan 2023 -2028, Tourism Strategy 2030 etc. The final renewed strategy is expected to be adopted by the Council in quarter two 2023.

1.3 Research Limitations

The research undertaken is qualitative in perspective, based upon the professional judgement of the consultants and informed by the consultation completed.

1.4 Research Confidence

The research reflected in this review is based on the material available at the time of writing to the consultants. Notes taken during the interviews are being retained on a confidential basis by the Consultants. This primary material will be destroyed on delivery of the final report and renewed strategy to the Council.





2. CONSULTATION

2.1 Overview

As noted above, several consultation strands were applied to gain a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of the Forum, and the implementation of the Strategy to date. Each strand is addressed in the following section.

2.2 Consultation

A series of virtual workshops with members of the Forum, the Council, the Rural Development Strategic Policy Committee, and the senior staff group in the Council, took place over the Summer of 2021. The Rural and Community Development Officers in the Council were also consulted. The key messages from each of the workshops follows:

2.2.1 The Forum

The Forum membership in broad terms acknowledges the importance of the move to create a forum and develop a strategy which has as its focus the rural communities of Clare. In this the Council does stand out relative to other local authorities in Ireland. The fact that rural development is explicitly recognised by the Council is an important political priority given the national policy pressures to focus on greater

urbanisation and investment in large urban centres. The Forum itself, notwithstanding prevailing public health conditions, has established itself as a critical body that is well placed to provide a framework for inter-agency cooperation and collaboration, albeit that more will need to be done to recover the early enthusiasm of the Forum pre-covid. In that context the sooner the Forum membership can be facilitated to engage again is an important demonstration that things are beginning to return towards some form of normality. The move to complete the review was also welcomed.

These positive points noted, there was a clear demand to advance more fully, several of the strategic objectives of the strategy along with providing the Forum with the resources to give greater direction as the strategy is advanced. Much of the early achievements of the Council, most notably, were as a consequence of having the foresight to plan at strategic level the rural future of the County. This now needs to be built upon by once again focusing on rural opportunity coming through from the changed policy environment, including climate change, and the continuing need to provide more economic balance between the larger urbans of the County and the distinctly rural character of much of the remainder of the County as well as having a

more specific focus on tourism, agriculture and marine development and renewal of the town and village fabric which is necessary to achieve a key measurable outcome for the members of the Forum, that of increasing the population of rural Clare.

Other key points highlighted include:

- Need to ensure consistency around key themes in a renewed strategy which should focus on, among others: sustainable rural employment (in terms of quality and quantity) and how this is accommodated post Covid (remote working), housing (supply, choice with regard to social/affordable balance), addressing the County's ageing population and the need to focus services to support older and younger people, including young couples and families, provision of adequate water/waste water treatment, village/town infrastructure/reorientation, challenging poverty, enabling access to good services, including but not limited to transport, broadband, childcare, environment/sustainability.
- The need to recognise the continuing significance of agriculture and marine activities more fully across the County in supporting the rural economy, social and cultural dynamism, and protection of environment across rural Clare.
- The relationship between the Ennis/Shannon and Limerick triangle remains a concern given the legacy of development being drawn into this triangle.
- Mixed views on tourism focus were noted, given the relative low wages and insecurity associated with the sector but also noted was the overall importance of the sector to the local economy.
- The role of Shannon Airport as a critical node for the County in general was identified
- Along with the potential to develop Clare as a test bed for pilot/demonstration projects in areas such as rural transport, climate change and transition, rural regeneration, and development of the circular economy. Clare as a demonstration County on rural innovation was a constant theme in this workshop.

2.2.2 The Elected Members

In several respects the workshop with the elected members highlighted similar concerns to those raised by the Forum. There was a broad welcome in respect of the progress being made by the Council itself, through the appointment of the Rural and Community Development Officers, the use of national and local funds to underpin several strategically important projects across the County, the advances being made with the re-configuration of council services through delivery of Municipal District services as well as the advance of the digital hubs and major advances in town and village renewal, councillor engagement in priority settings especially at Municipal level, among other positive development under the umbrella of the strategy. The positive contribution of the Forum, especially the members of the Forum, was also acknowledged generally.

As with the Forum, the Council workshop highlighted shared concerns which ranged from issues such as availability of affordable housing in rural villages across the County, the need to secure on-going investment in the regeneration of the smaller towns and villages of the County and the need for a 'whole of County' development balance. Taking a forward perspective on the renewed strategy, the councillors called for more emphasis on having clear outputs embedded into the renewed strategy. In addition, the Members highlighted the potential of both agriculture and marine investment alongside advancing the regeneration of Moneypoint as an energy hub.

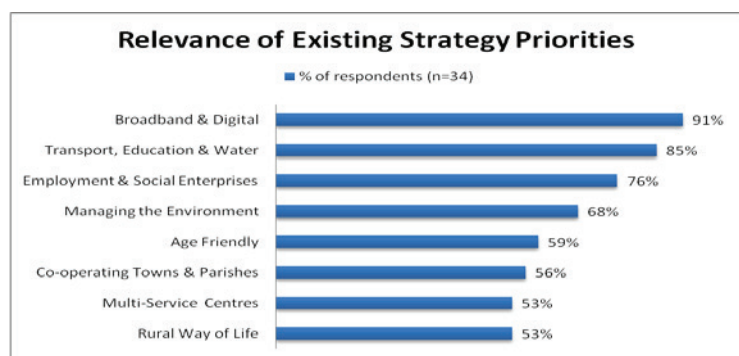
A further set of concerns relate to the sustaining of local populations in terms of social services/care supports and the capacity to have agencies with clear mandates in these areas engaging with the Council and the Forum in the overall development context of the Strategy. The Rural and Community Development Officers (RCDO's) identified potential projects of scale as a result of their engagement with communities across the County. The animation of such projects would clearly advance the development of rural Clare.

2.2.3 Clare County Council Staff

Unsurprisingly, many of the above perspectives came through from the Senior Staff Workshop. In addition, the Staff addressed the on-going need for greater collaboration at cross organisational level to support a broader understanding of community engagement and development needs. Nonetheless, given the wide-ranging responsibilities it is important that the Council engage with all of the communities in the County and are aware of the importance of the development and supporting

role which the Council plays, securing the long-term viability and vitality of the County. Acknowledgement of the improvements under the re-configuration of the Council and the establishment of the Rural Development Directorate and Municipal Districts were noted, but it was clearly the case that the staff have greater expectation of themselves, the Council Management, and other Public Bodies to advance quality of Life, sustainability, and balanced cross-county economic development. Hence the cross-cutting impact of the current strategy and the continuing need to support cross cutting effort within the Council and externally with others such as their local communities, the local development sector, and other public stakeholders such as the education sector.

2.3 Survey Findings



Surveys were carried out over the summer period. Some 34% of those surveyed responded to the questionnaires issued to members and staff of the Council and Forum as well as the Public Participation Network. In broad terms, the responses suggest the continuing relevance of existing strategy objectives in the current Strategy 2026.

The above noted, the surveys indicate, as with the workshops, common issues and concerns which ideally should be addressed within the renewed strategy. These include: Broadband and Digital development across the County, Enhanced transport, Education and, in particular water services, and more sustained growth in employment and social enterprises.

The responses also note the positive impact of the Forum and the on-going success of the Council in accessing funds to underpin rural initiatives. Specifically, in regard to the Council members and staff the survey highlighted concerns around the Council's perceived focus on Ennis as the County Town while efforts to advance the clustering objective, a critical priority in the strategy, do not seem to be advancing with any speed or direction. The question of whether the lack of progress might be partially explained by the re-configuration of the County's Municipal Districts

could be considered. Perhaps it might be better to focus on migration of services into the Municipal Districts rather than into the clusters and partnered villages as originally outlined in the Strategy. Greater integration between Council headquarters with the role of the districts and smaller urban centres is being called for along with greater integration between the service offerings from the digital hubs.

In regard to the survey feedback from the members of the Public Participation Network, there was also a call for re-consideration of the move towards the clustered arrangements, in common with the Elected Members. In addition, while the strategy is seen as bringing some benefits, there remain gaps in the extent to which public agencies, including the Council, engage with the members of the Public Participation Network. As a result, the full potential of the Network is not being realised. There is a need, especially given Covid, to put in place a more consistent communications framework between the Forum, the PPN, Councillors and the public bodies and, it is suggested across the survey responses from those in the PPN, that this might become an action in a renewed strategy. It is critical to make sure that the members of the PPN are fully alert to the on-going implementation of the Strategy and agreeing a communication framework with the Executive as well as the wider network would provide greater opportunity to build upon the capacity and vitality of the membership, something so clearly demonstrated throughout the Covid pandemic experience where community engagement played such a significant part of sustaining the rural population generally.

In addition, the targeting of community development through open consultation and community planning arrangements could be looked at as a programme for delivery across towns villages and rural areas, as has been the case in other Counties like Tipperary and Kerry. This would provide the public bodies with a valuable snapshot of community expectations and needs which could then inform policy and operations delivery across the public arena.

Such an approach was an identified need as the original strategy was developed. This thinking also was proposed by the RCDO's at an early stage of their pilot programme with Clare County Council and it should be noted that the thinking in both Our Rural Future and Housing for All call for Community Master Plans. This need clearly remains and should be a feature of a renewed strategy.



3. OVERVIEW OF IMPLEMENTATION OF STRATEGIC ACTIONS

The strategy is centred around 8 key actions and following a desk top review of those actions and implementation to date this review finds that broadly speaking good progress is being made in regard to general implementation in several of the actions but there remains additional effort to deliver across all actions on a consistent and aligned basis. That noted, the original strategy had, given the innovative approach taken as the first such strategy in the State, a few broad indicators, which in general terms seem to largely have been achieved. However, in a future iteration of the strategy there might be a reasonable expectation, and one which is highlighted in the consultation undertaken for this report, that a more robust set of delivery indicators be attached to any strategic actions within the renewed strategy to 2030.

A horizontal action in the strategy was the intention to employ Rural and Community Development Officers. In a first for Local Government in Ireland this was approved by central government and the officers are now in place, with a recent review of same undertaken. That review highlights the positive effect of their employment which is endorsed in this overall review. The officers play and should continue to play a critical role working with communities and agencies across the County to sustain rural Clare. That they can now do so within a clearer policy environment to the

one existing on their appointment suggests there will be considerable opportunity for tangible actions with their support across rural Clare over the coming years. One possible action to further develop the current and extensive role played by these officers is to build the cross-county networking of good practices in local community development, providing the opportunity to learn and grow the County's capacity to further underpin rural vitality and potential.

Each of the current strategic actions of the Strategy is separately addressed as follows:

3.1 Social Enterprises

While there is evidence of the rollout of a number of social enterprises it is difficult to determine the impact of the strategy in providing the strategic pathway to underpinning social enterprise delivery. It is entirely plausible that such delivery would arguably have occurred regardless of the strategy. That noted, the fact that the Forum highlighted this as a key strategic action at the point in time where it was adopted was not uncritical to at least placing a focus on the potential of such enterprises to underpin regeneration of the local rural economy. In the context of the development of the circular economy, with new national policy in place, there is and will be considerable scope to build on what has been achieved, having regard to

the national policy expectation that local authorities and other local bodies will play a proactive role in advancing social enterprise development, particularly in regard to the circular economy. For that reason, continuation of this strategic action is merited but along with a more rigorous indicator which would capture the considerable potential of social enterprise and the local circular economy to bring greater benefit to Clare Communities, both Rural and Urban.

In relation to Social Enterprise, the RCDOs previously presented an outline of the national policy and have suggested joint actions with the LEO in relation to training, network creation etc. Based on their experience they recommend, and the thinking is clearly endorsed by both the Forum and the Council members, that audit and support of the social economy sector would be undertaken as a joint project between LEO and RCDO's. In addition, the suggestion that providing a mentoring pilot for existing social enterprises, to be led by LEO and the Rural Development Team should be examined, noting that this is likely to be a feature, in any event, of the forthcoming national circular economy strategy.

3.2 Multi-Service Centres

The building of multi-service centres in the County has largely been facilitated with the roll out of the digital hub facilities across the County. Indeed, it might reasonably be argued that the County is now a leader in Ireland in this regard with the development of the DigiClare Hubs the most tangible manifestation of the strategy to date. It is evident from the footfall created around the hubs, along with the capacity created to enable hybrid working and the community activities facilitated by the hubs, that the County has benefitted considerably from this welcome development which was foreshadowed in the strategy. It is also worth acknowledging that some of the DigiClare hub development was due in large part to local community groups. Such communities provided large scale supports to the project – including inter alia their own buildings and funds, successful funding applications, completing the tender process and engaging contractors. Given the success, to date, of the hubs, consideration of building on the capacity of the DigiClare rollout to facilitate further service provision at these centres should be explored, especially with the advent of a general rollout of the national broadband plan across the County.

3.3 Co-operating Towns and Parishes

Considerable focus on building up the level of service provision through clustered towns and parishes was identified in the original strategy as a means to

strengthening the public service offering in smaller urban centres across the County. This has occurred to a limited extent and in certain aspects, especially with the strengthening of the Municipal District structures. In light of the re-configuration of the Municipal Districts and the progress thereof in service decentralisation from Council Headquarters, there would be merit in a re-orientation of this strategic action to align with the municipal district-configuration now in place.. This also needs to be examined and the opportunity to provide a substantive platform for strengthening the County's villages, in particular, is now presented in the context of recent policy changes at national level. This is more fully developed in the next section of the policy environment to 2030.

It is, however, worth noting the significant progress that has been made on community led collaborative action with the development of several voluntary networks across the county. These are supported, and extensively engaged with, by Clare County Council. This has been underpinned by the RCDO's role alignment within the Municipal District umbrella. The potential of communities co-operating leads to pooling of resources such as funds, expertise, and other local assets. This is clearly occurring in the County, and this is increasing local capacity, organisation, and governance within community structures of County Clare. Ultimately better engagement between community stakeholders and the public sector can be expected on foot of the initiatives undertaken in this regard. This collaborative approach will be fundamental to our aspiration of the development of social enterprise /circular economy in these localities and meaningful and transformative community led progress in line with the thematic pillars of "Our Rural Future".

Also worth noting is the point made during the review process that cooperation should not be limited to towns and parishes but more generally across all of the rural communities of Clare and therefore the establishment of the Municipal structures provides an ideal platform for such engagement and cooperation.

3.4 Managing the Environment

On-going progress under this heading has been positive with the continuation of Council support for rural communities in maintaining the local environment. In developing the strategy, the Council has proven to be a leader across the local government system in Ireland. The Council, underpinned by the Rural and Community Development Officers, has extensive, tangible, relationships with local community groups across the County. There is a deeply embedded

political and staff commitment to this area which further underpins delivery on this strategic action. More detailed performance measurement in this area would contribute to a fuller appreciation of such commitment, especially on the part of staff working in both the Council Headquarters and most particularly, at Municipal District level. This would be possible given the indicators already in place through Team Development Plans within the Council's Performance Management System. Additional scope will also come into place with the advance of the circular economy noted above.

3.5 Age Friendly

Considerable progress is being made in moving the County towards being "Age Friendly" with the adoption of a County Strategy and the roll out of the Older Person's Council and underpinning actions such as the



undertaking of walking audits, cooperation with other public bodies and contribution to national initiatives on generally supporting older people. This was generally acknowledged in the consultation undertaken for this report and is clearly underpinned in the on-going reporting on delivery to the Council and Forum.

3.6 Our Rural Way Of Life

This particular action is relatively intangible, but important, supporting as it is intended, the rural identity of the County. That noted, it was difficult to identify the extent of delivery given the lack of immediate actions that could be examined in either qualitative or quantitative terms. Therefore, while there is merit, to say the least, about looking to build up an understanding of the impact of this action on

the rural identity of the County, consideration should be given to applying more tangible measures which will help to provide a more practical sense of what 'our rural way of life' means. It is worth noting that as part of the consultation for this review the RCDO's suggested that there is clear learning to be gleaned from the community response to Covid-19. The ability of communities across the county to respond in an agile and focused manner to the needs of the most vulnerable did make a substantive difference to many in and across the rural communities of Clare. The pandemic also highlighted already extant significant challenges to the rural way of life – depopulation, social isolation, access to services, food, and fuel poverty. There is an opportunity to build upon these learnings and experiences and the pro-active collaborative response between the local authority, other agencies and service providers and rural communities to the challenges presented by Covid-19.

In addition, it is clearly evident that agriculture and marine activities remain as a central feature of the local economy as well as a critical aspect in supporting social, and environmental aspects of the rural County. A trend of unequal development persists notwithstanding the success of the existing strategy. Therefore, there remains a clear need to focus on issues such as rural depopulation, concentration of land ownership, increased isolation, the non-replacement of retiring farmers, land abandonment and the ageing farming population. Given these critical aspects of rural Clare this particular heading could be re-configured to have a more direct focus on these issues in the renewed strategy to 2030, having regard to the shifts in national and EU policy as well as the pressures now being faced in the County.

3.7 Broadband & Digital

Progress, as highlighted earlier, is being made as a consequence of the development of the hubs. This has been a clear strong aspect of the Strategy. However, with the delivery over the next number of years of the



National Broadband Plan in the County, the question of the continuing role as digital hubs will need to be considered. Advancing remote/hybrid working models

under the umbrella of the DigiClare Network will provide opportunity but the development of a different role for the existing hubs will need consideration, almost immediately as the National Broadband Plan will largely be completed over the course of the renewed strategy. The delivery of the Council's Digital Strategy and work on building innovation in the County is also notable.

3.8 Transport, Education & Water

Limited, if important, progress has been made in regard to delivery of infrastructure in a number of towns and villages, most notably the advance of waste treatment for Broadford, an announcement of which is expected in the near future. Such progress should be further underpinned with recent policy developments especially in regard to town and village renewal as well as the continuation of the rural regeneration fund, among others.

Transport in rural areas remains an on-going challenge with some progress, but arguably not at the pace expected when the strategy was agreed. Significant work was undertaken by a pilot community location and the Rural Directorate in progressing the Clare Local Lift community transport programme, including investment and community engagement. There are also significant gains to be made in relation to climate action and supporting sustainable rural transport. Community transport initiatives are a policy action in Our Rural Future and such initiatives can be expected to be put in place within the remaining life of the strategy.

Significant progress has been made in bringing tertiary education into the County while continued investment in further education, primary and secondary education is also evident, if arguably not hugely influenced by the fact that this area is a strategic action within the strategy. There has been some Council involvement in education programmes at community level, this has significant potential to grow now that steps have been taken to develop working relationships, especially with the Limerick Clare Education and Training Board (LCETB). These programmes so far have involved partnering with LCETB's community education outreach and community voluntary groups specifically in the areas of climate action education programmes and age-friendly education programmes.

One of the standout achievements of the Strategy is the ETB engagement with the Council and local communities in the local delivery of services. Also of note is that other state agencies are increasingly cooperating with the staff resources of the Rural Dev Department of the Council, recognising the impact of the close community connection that The Rural Community Development Officers have with their client communities and how that benefits their work with communities through collaborating and local connections.

Similarly, good progress in education provision is being made across the County with on-going physical investment in all levels of education. That noted, the potential to address the welcome initiative to establish the Technical University of the Shannon provides a new platform for enhanced education delivery in the County.





4. REVISED POLICY ENVIRONMENT TO 2030

The policy environment for rural development is much improved since the advent of the strategy adoption. Indeed, it would be reasonable to suggest that the broad success of the Clare Strategy has been a very important platform on which national policy has developed in the meantime. Clare is seen now as a template on how to advance local rural development initiatives, under a Forum and with the support of the Council in particular, as well as other local public and local development bodies. This achievement alone, impacting as it has national policy thinking, is probably reason enough to suggest that the strategy to date has been a success. The County, as a consequence, has benefitted to a significant degree with considerable resources coming into the County at much higher levels than is the case for similarly sized Counties in Ireland.

Noting the above, the policy context is now much more positive with clear direction now in place under specific rural policy, 'Our Rural Future, Ireland's Rural Development Policy 2021-2025' - at national level, along with a recently adopted National Development Plan, the 'Climate Action Plan 2021' and 'Housing for All' which has the largest ever investment envelope for rural communities across the State.

"Our Rural Future – Rural Development Policy 2021-2025", envisages a much-revitalised rural Ireland and underpins this vision with clear actions supporting

rural regeneration. In regard to the specific aspects of rural policy it sets out high-level outcomes to increase:

- the number of people living in rural areas (in settlements with populations of under 10,000).
- the number of people, in rural areas, in employment / self-employment.
- rural transport services and passenger numbers.
- the number of town regeneration projects funded.
- the number of hubs in the national remote working hub network; and
- broadband coverage in rural areas

National policy is to be delivered through a series of thematic pillars as follows:

- Optimising digital connectivity.
- Supporting employment and careers in rural areas.
- Revitalising rural towns and villages.
- Enhancing participation, leadership, and resilience in rural communities.
- Enhancing public services in rural areas.
- Transitioning to a climate-neutral society.
- Supporting the sustainability of agriculture, the marine and forestry; and
- Supporting the sustainability of our islands and coastal communities.

Clearly a Renewed Clare Rural Development Strategy must be fully aligned to the above and consequently these outcomes and themes will be embedded into the renewed strategy.

The National Development Plan envisages a spend of some 165 billion Euro over the next decade and will effectively support investment in the above areas to a level not previously attempted in Ireland or indeed anywhere else in the World. On-going investment in rural regeneration, town and village renewal, digitalisation, and tourism through existing programmes such as the rural regeneration fund are to be expanded. The support of local road development, especially in regard to maintenance will be advanced albeit that there is a serious question over some road plans for the County. The commitment to attach Shannon to the national rail system is also envisaged.

There is a welcome re-focusing on water and wastewater treatment in the smaller towns and villages, most notably for towns and villages which do not have water/wastewater treatment available. Transport connectivity, through Connecting Ireland, should see a marked improvement in local links and delivery of the National Broadband Plan is gathering pace, as noted earlier, with sectoral planning in agriculture, tourism and marine are also highlighted. Investment in rural cultural and sporting infrastructure is to be sustained, albeit that there seems to be a ratcheting back on proposed spending on major sporting infrastructure. Also critically, for Clare will be the transition from a fossil fuelled economy into a carbon neutral economy which will see huge re-configuration of the energy sector in Ireland with potential major benefits for the County given the developing plans for offshore generation and the possibility of hydrogen production centred around Moneypoint.

As is evident from the above the national policy context is therefore now aligning to much of what was in the original Clare Rural Strategy, and it might be noted, there is no coincidence that this is the case. The County is therefore among the best placed to take advantage of the above policies and others forthcoming over the next year, especially those relating to roll out of the circular economy and climate action.

In regard to 'Housing for All', there are 4 broad objectives, all of which should have application to Clare as follows:

- Supporting Homeownership and Increasing Affordability
- Eradicating Homelessness, Increasing Social Housing Delivery and Supporting Social Inclusion
- Increasing New Housing Supply; and
- Addressing Vacancy and Efficient Use of Existing Stock

In addition, and critically, the Policy has a renewed focus on town and village renewal through combining Local Authority leadership, Urban Regeneration Funding / Rural Regeneration funding, Retrofit and Heritage funding. An additional new funding platform called "Croí Cónaithe Towns" will be supported to provide serviced sites for new homes and to support refurbishment of vacant homes in regional towns and villages. Central to these initiatives will be the renewal of water infrastructure with a commitment to invest some €4.5bn in water infrastructure to 2025, including projects to support new housing development.

The proposed Renewed Strategy reflects this perspective in full and is set out as a stand alone document accompanying this review for ease of reference.





5. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR RENEWED CLARE RURAL DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY 2030

5.1 Need To Ensure Consistency Around Key Themes

Broadly speaking, the current strategic actions of the strategy remain valid. That noted, it is evident that the Council, in particular, has taken the lead in most of the areas covered by the strategy. There is, therefore, a need for greater non-council action under the umbrella of the Forum. Providing direction to other public bodies with the support of the Council may well become a feature of the implementation of the Climate Action Plans to 2030. In that context, applying a wider delivery environment would underpin the progress of the past number of years as well as allowing the Council to continue its focus on areas covered by the Strategy and which underpin the general socio-economic environment. The advent of climate action led by the Council, but applicable to all public bodies, at local to national level with responsibilities in Clare will provide the opportunity to build up on the inter-agency capacity in the County. Broadly therefore more consistency in service delivery across all public bodies should be a priority in delivery of a renewed Strategy. The Council, consequently, needs to proactively engage in relationship development with forum partners and other public bodies to foster collaboration and creation of shared actions which broaden the delivery base of the strategy's aims

5.2 Position Clare To Take Advantage Of New Policies From The Government

There remains, notwithstanding the above, an ongoing need for a more agile and proactive response across and within Council directorates. Delivery of council wide responses to local community needs must remain a central platform for local public service delivery, which supports ground up delivery, e.g., engaging all partners at an early stage to prevent issues arising locally as a result of poor planning and communication.

As noted earlier, the Council has been very successful accessing funds for investment in critical local infrastructure, most notably tourism and digitalisation. The continuing commitment to such funding will remain a central objective but given the much-expanded commitment of central exchequer and EU Funding to digitalisation, climate change, rural regeneration etc., funding remains a positive opportunity for the County. In that regard the Council and others under the umbrella of the Forum should be looking to gain great benefit from town and village renewal, water and wastewater treatment and village/town centre renewal as foreshadowed in the NDP and HFA.

Therefore, the forum should consider taking five additional specific actions including:

1. Adoption of a specific water/wastewater and town/village renewal objective to provide focus on these opportunities alongside an amended strategic action which currently addresses clustering/joint parishes. This action should apply focus on service reconfiguration placed upon the Municipal Structures rather than retaining dual pillars.
2. Adoption of a specific strategic action on tourism across the County, building on the considerable progress to date.
3. Delivery of a specific strategic action for agriculture and marine sectors to ensure the maximum possible benefits from transition are achieved while the negative consequences for both sectors are mitigated as far as possible, having regard to the County Action Plan on Climate and the forthcoming Local Economic and Community Plan.
4. Delivery of a just transition framework for the county with a particular focus on Moneypoint as an energy hub. This strategic action will need to be fully aligned to the strategic action on agriculture and marine sectors transition of agriculture towards a sustainable carbon neutral position underpinned by sustainable agriculture incomes and family farms as envisaged under action 4.
5. Introduction of the above amendments should include adoption of evaluation/performance criteria based upon the added investment value coming into the county for the schemes covered by the national policy initiatives mentioned earlier.

5.3 Renewed Strategic Focus

5.3.1 Greater Capitalisation From The Many Unique Features Of The Clare Economic, Social, And Cultural Environment

Gaining greater value from investment is at the heart of the current strategy and remains at the heart of the future renewed strategy. Implementation of the changes under 5.2 above will provide the necessary focus required to sustain the unique features of a vibrant County Clare. No new strategic action therefore if 5.2 is fully implemented, is required in this particular instance.

5.3.2 Focus On Facilitating People To Live, Recreate And Work Locally

The current strategy has enabled considerable development of local opportunity, most notably with the roll out of the DigiClare initiative as well as advancing tourism and town/village renewal. In order to advance development in the County a quantum leap in critical utilities is required, again as noted in 5.2 above. Critical infrastructure needs must be addressed to meet this long-term challenge to socio-economic development in the county.

5.3.3 Strengthening Community Engagement And Capacity

The introduction of the Rural and Community Development Officers has been critical to the development of the County. Their role remains necessary to underpin continued rollout of the strategy and therefore no change is recommended here with the exception of building the cross-county networking of good practice in local community development, providing the opportunity to learn and grow the County's capacity to further underpin rural vitality and potential. It is worth noting that local community development requires on ground up empowerment, creating local solutions and engaging with partners to create viable community owned solutions that are community led. The lack of an overarching framework/ council approach to community engagement and its associated merits is a challenge, which must be overcome to meet the requirements for future funding e.g. Our Rural Future's emphasis on community stakeholders and local authority created solutions.

5.3.4 Support For The Ageing Population

Continuation of the existing priority is recommended in line with the Age Friendly Plan for Clare.

5.3.5 Housing And Affordability

As noted above, the opportunity to push significant development into the County's smaller towns villages and rural areas is now a very real option given the roll out of DigiClare and the on-going delivery of the National Broadband Plan. Of considerable interest are the provisions of the new national policy arena, highlighted earlier, which should underpin the progress gained under the existing strategy, through delivery of more housing capacity in the County's towns and villages. This therefore can be addressed in the context of 5.2 above, underpinning further, the development of the Municipal Districts.

5.3.6 Improvement In Local Public Service Access

Again, as noted above, re-configuration of Council services can now take place against the environment of added mobility and hybrid working in the County thanks to DigiClare and the mobilisation of the municipal structures under the umbrella of the County. This will be given added impetus from climate action, rural policy, and renewed transport policy. Consequently, rather than building up the original strategic actions on clustered towns and shared parishes the focus should now be on exploring opportunities for migration of services under the municipal structures as noted above.

The use of arm's length, community-based, bodies, already a feature of local service delivery in the county, could become a platform for the renewal of communities at local level.

5.3.7 Focus On Higher Value Employment/Incomes

While opportunities to enhance local income and economic value will always be at the core of a vibrant rural community, the reality is that attempting to measure higher value is notably difficult given the lack of real time data in this area on a county basis. Therefore, the level of public investment and creation of employment might provide some degree of understanding of bettering incomes and adding value. That noted it is recommended that discussions with the national policy bodies responsible for data such as the CSO might be approached to undertake a pilot study on the nature of incomes in the County, providing a possible template for replication at county level across the State. In the meantime, the local focus should be on the indicators suggested in 5.2 above.

5.3.8 Future For Rural Children

The Council has a remit in the provision of recreation and amenity spaces for all citizens. A commitment to the continuation of the supports given to community owned and managed playgrounds is acknowledged above, however, this does not go far enough to dealing with the many challenges younger people are having to confront in rural areas of the county. There

is a space where the Rural Forum can have significant input and play a role in delivery and future roll out of actions. Consequently, an action plan for children, ideally prepared through active engagement with the County's young population, should be considered in the context of rural Clare 2030. This would be of great help in explicitly understanding what can support young people to continue/return to Clare to live and work.

5.3.9 Preparing Population For Transition And Change

Again, as noted earlier, the Council will be advancing climate transition under a forthcoming climate action plan covering both adaptation and mitigation. The Forum should be pro-actively engaged in this process, having regard to 5.2 above. This would mean putting in place, as required, a County wide Carbon Action Plan, including adaptation and mitigation actions and more specifically actions for a just transition across the County taking account of the re-development of Moneypoint and the re-orientation of agriculture and rural development.

The Way Forward

The review of the Clare Rural Development Strategy 2026 provided an opportunity for the Clare Rural Development Forum to reflect on progress to date and to ensure local agencies and stakeholders have a clear focus on the delivery of the objectives and actions in the years ahead. Extending the Strategy to 2030 to align with other important local plans / policies was an important consideration and will ensure the actions rising from the Strategy can satisfactorily address and respond to the rural objectives and challenges identified in the Clare Renewed Strategy 2030 over its' lifetime.







COMHAIRLE CONTAE AN CHLÁIR
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