

Minutes of the Rural Development Strategic Policy Committee (SPC) held on Tuesday 16th February 2021 at 10.30 a.m. in the Council Chamber and via Zoom

In attendance:

Cllr. Pat Hayes
Cllr. Bill Chambers
Cllr. Shane Talty
Cllr. Cillian Murphy
Cllr. Joe Killeen
Cllr. Mary Howard
Cllr. Pat Burke
Mr. Eugene Crimmins
Ms. Jean Tierney O'Keefe
Ms. Niamh O'Callaghan
Ms. Anny Wise
Mr. Denis Tuohy
Mr. Leonard Cleary
Ms. Bernadette Haugh
Mr. Urban McMahon
Ms. Helen Moloney

Organisation:

Chair
Elected Member
Elected Member
Elected Member
Elected Member
Elected Member
Elected Member
Community/Voluntary
Social Inclusion
Business/Commercial
Environment/Conservation
Agriculture/Farming
Director of Service, Rural Development
A/Senior Executive Officer
Head of Information Systems
Assistant Staff Officer

No. 1 Minutes of Meeting held on 17th November 2020:-

The minutes of the meeting held on 17th November 2020 were proposed by Cllr. C. Murphy, seconded by Cllr. P. Burke and agreed.

No. 2 Matters Arising:-

L. Cleary advised that the Burren Eco Tourism Lonely Planet Award was acknowledged and featured on Nationwide. The development of the Digital Hub in Ennistymon was also featured. Leonard stated that this was great exposure for Co. Clare and it was good to note that projects featured had been promoted by the Rural SPC. He took the opportunity to congratulate everyone involved in Burren Eco Tourism and the development of the Digital Hub.

No. 3 Rural & Community Department's support of the Covid-19 Community Response Forum, Helpline and general trends.

B. Haugh updated the members as follows in terms of the Helpline and assistance from volunteers:-

1. The Helpline came into operation at the end of March 2020 and operates 12 hours per day, 7 days per week. Up to 14th February last, the Helpline received 1,277 calls relating to:- medical/health needs, collection and delivery of food/fuel, meals and their delivery, social isolation, garda related queries and other requests. The greatest volume of calls related to "other requests" i.e. general information and information on Council services. The largest volume of calls are received from 9am to 5pm. There has been a significant decrease in calls due to the volunteers assisting in the communities. The helpline established the links with the volunteers and there are over 30 community volunteers available.

Those established links within communities are continuing to respond to those in need, without the requirement to reengage with the Helpline, following the initial contact. The volunteers are available to deliver shopping, prescriptions and fuel, as well as to make phone calls and maintain contact with people.

2. Local farmers are providing support services to other farmers who may be cocooning/isolating.
3. The Doolin Motorcycle Club supports the helpline by providing a collection/delivery service countywide at the weekends.
4. The Civil Defense provide a similar collection/delivery service out of hours (5pm to 8pm).

Food and Fuel Poverty

B. Haugh advised that at a recent Community Response Forum meeting, food and fuel poverty was raised as it is a long term socio-economic challenge and is reflective of the issues coming into particular focus during Covid-19. She stated that a Food and Fuel Sub Committee was set up which comprised of the four Family Resource Centres, Clarecare, St. Vincent de Paul, Mid-West Simon Community, CLDC and Obair and is supported by Rural Development Department.

She advised that heating, lighting & food costs have increased due to remote working and schools being closed. Older people are also struggling to meet these costs and it is having a direct impact on them. The group identified 375 families/individuals in need of emergency food and fuel as a direct result of Covid-19 across the County. It was agreed that a collaborative funding application would be advanced through the LCDC structure and other interim funding will also be explored.

Bernie acknowledged the very generous and immediate response of the Elected Members, who have contributed €10K from their GMA to establish a central fund in response to the emergency need while waiting on the outcome of the funding application.

These issues have been raised at National Level and will be reviewed as the year progresses. As people are vaccinated and the Country emerges from the challenges of Covid-19 there should be a reduction in those requiring this emergency food/fuel response.

Cllr. P. Hayes thanked Bernie and took the opportunity to acknowledge the work that is being carried out in communities. Cllr. Hayes stated that with 375 families in need it poses a challenge.

A. Wise stated that there is a general feeling that people are pulling behind neighbours and close friends are helping without people knowing, and it is very heartwarming to see people helping older people and those in need.

Cllr. J. Killeen stated that it is wonderful to see such support and he acknowledged the coordination role played by Clare County Council. Cllr. Killeen acknowledged the work of Michael Neylon in coordinating the volunteers and stated that as the necessity continues there is a need to encourage people to ring those in need and provide support.

Cllr. C. Murphy referred to the food and fuel poverty and advised that there is a growing amount of people who were relying on weekend/seasonal casual employment and are now falling behind on rent and HAP payments. Cllr. Murphy stated that there is a need to flag this up the chain with the relevant Ministers. He also advised that while food/fuel is a very immediate problem, there are more problems coming down the track and there is a need to raise awareness.

Bernie advised that this issue was raised at a recent Community Response Forum meeting. Mary Moloney from the Department of Social Protection was in attendance and referred to the Supplementary Welfare Allowance Scheme that is available to those in need of financial assistance.

D. Tuohy addressed the meeting and stated that it is great to see the work carried out in the community. Denis advised that the IFA now have a confidential debt support service and stated that mental health will be a big problem in the future. He stated that Macra groups have a campaign up and running whereby farmers ring each other. He thanked Bernie and her colleagues. Bernie requested details of this scheme which could be added as a link on the website.

N. O'Callaghan echoed Denis' thoughts on mental health and stated that the situation is urgent. She stated that more people than ever are suffering, and it is not any one socio economic group. People are suffering from being alone, not getting outside, no respite from day to day and that mental health support is needed.

Cllr. P. Hayes thanked the members for their input and agreed that people are suffering right across all categories/groups and recommended that the Forum continue post Covid. Some of the challenges will not go away after the vaccination programme and recommended an expansion of the mental health supports.

B. Haugh stated that the "Keep Well" campaign was launched last October and is headed up by Karen Fennessy and the Communications Officer. Virtual forums are up and running targeting themes for physical and mental health. The current campaign has been extended to June 2021.

Cllr. J. Killeen referred to the many supports in the community and advised that the IFA have provided great supports e.g. Men on the Move. Cllr. Killeen suggested that a segment on "wellbeing" be introduced on Morning Focus on Clare FM to try and reach those who do not have laptops or access to the internet, as their social contact is greatly reduced.

B. Haugh advised that the "Keep Well" campaign was launched on Clare FM with a six week campaign in conjunction with the Library Service, Heritage Officer, Healthy Ireland and the H.S.E. This campaign ran up to Christmas and articles were published in the Clare Champion. She advised that the Council are planning further initiatives on traditional media resources such as local newspapers to reach those who may not have access to digital supports.

It was recommended that the Council write to the national broadcasters as there has been no change in scheduling to respond to their captive audiences. Bernie stated that this issue was raised recently at an Age Friendly Working Group meeting. The decision has since been taken that the Older People's Council will write to the national broadcasters to review this.

N. O'Callaghan addressed the meeting and stated that it was fantastic to have all these programmes/initiatives. She advised that parents are trying to work from home and trying to keep a grip on day to day activities and there is no outlet for these people. She stated that there is nowhere for children to go and no supports for parents. It is not just people on their own, it is people overwhelmed with work. Niamh enquired as to how these people can be reached.

Cllr. P. Hayes advised that there will be challenges for the local authority as there will be long term issues in relation to mental health and poverty. Cllr. Hayes took this opportunity to thank the elected members for their contribution from the GMA to the food and fuel scheme.

Cllr. P. Burke stated that so many different categories of people are suffering and are stressed e.g. farmers, parents, older people. He advised that the pressures are enormous with no light at the end of the tunnel and there is no social outlet e.g. matches, mass, marts.

B. Haugh stated that these issues continue to be raised at the Clare Community Response Forum meetings and nationally under the Keep Well campaign.

Cllr. P. Hayes took the opportunity to thank Michael Neylon for his continued work with community groups and recommended bringing the points raised to the next Forum meeting.

4. DigiClare and National Broadband roll-out

Urban McMahon updated the members on DigiClare and the National Broadband roll out. He advise that there are three strands of work:-

1. Wifi roll out
2. Development of Hubs/DigiClare
3. National Broadband Plan

Wifi roll out:

18 months ago the Council applied for European Union funding to fund the roll out of wifi in each Municipal District and were successful. €15,000 was granted for each municipal district plus €15,000 matched funding to be provided per district from the Department of Rural and Community Development (i.e. €30K per Municipal District).

Strategic locations throughout the County are being identified and provision of open Wifi will be implemented in the coming months.

This will involve the creation of wifi zones providing free connectivity within towns and Urban advised that market squares and public spaces are being looked at. The towns of Kilrush, Ennistymon, Shannon, Scariff and Sixmilebridge are some of the locations being considered at present.

Urban stated that it will take 6 months to complete the projects and will update the members when they are finalised.

Development of Hubs/DigiClare

To date there are 8 hubs established with varying facilities and sizes. There are a substantial amount of people working in each hub e.g. individual businesses, students, programmers, web designers. Other hubs in the pipeline include: Cross National School (the model there will be a "community hub"), Ennis Hub, Sixmilebridge, Newmarket-on-Fergus, Kilfenora. There should be 15/16 hubs up and running by the end of the year. The hubs cater for the needs of most individuals looking to work remotely. Urban advised that it is difficult to find suitable locations to turn into a suitable workplace for remote working.

Clare County Council manage the bookings on line and communities are responsible for maintenance/cleaning with some monies going back into the community. It is €10 per day with a reduced rate for student and group bookings. However, due to Covid group bookings are not facilitated at present. An example of the Michael Cusack Centre hub was given where 3/4 people are working there at the moment.

Urban advised that they are in the process of launching a marketing campaign (social media and local/national campaign) to encourage people to relocate to Clare and enhance their quality of life.

National Broadband Plan

Urban advised that following on from the presentation to the full Council they have had contact with NBI and are in the process of rolling out broadband in Clare, beginning with Parteen and East Clare. Urban will forward the details of the exact locations when they are received from the NBI. Broadband will be installed utilising existing eircom infrastructure and NBI will be embarking on a marketing programme before the end of the month to advise communities. Urban advised that he expects to see a lot of activity in this area going forward due to requirement to install poles and lay cables etc.

Cllr. P. Burke thanked Urban for the presentation and referred to the first house connected under the National Broadband Plan in Carrigaline, Co. Cork. He stated that the quality of this morning's zoom call was very good and everybody can be heard. He advised that it has improved over the last few months. He stated that there are people in trouble with broadband but not as much as last year. He stated that he had received an email from NBI regarding Kilkishen.

Cllr. C. Murphy addressed the meeting and referred to people relocating to Clare. He stated that housing will be an issue. There are only 15 properties available in Kilkee and 8 are sites that will have issues with planning permission. He stated that Clare has common land that can be zoned and referred to the model in Tipperary. Cllr. Murphy advised that the Rural SPC will need to feed into this as the local authority will have to provide accommodation.

N. O'Callaghan stated that Shannon were in the same position as Kilkee and referred to the high cost of renting properties in Shannon with some properties very run down. She stated that housing is a priority for remote working and applauded the digital hubs that accommodate remote working but housing is needed to go with it.

Cllr. J. Killeen congratulated Urban on the projects at Ennistymon, Corofin and the Michael Cusack Centre in Carron. He referred to an architect who is working out of Ennistymon and has stated that the broadband is very good and enjoys working in the West of Ireland and he would encourage people to relocate to the West of Ireland.

D. Tuohy thanked Urban for the presentation and enquired about the status this year and can the programme be expanded?

Cllr. P. Hayes also took the opportunity to thank Urban for the update and stated that the Wifi zones are very beneficial in towns. He referred to signs in East Clare which states "Welcome to Limerick Broadband" and recommended that these be changed. He stated that people have connectivity problems and this poses a lot of challenges.

U. McMahon addressed the queries as follows:-

- Survey poles use existing structures and once the surveys are complete the work plan is produced. This work plan is submitted to the Council for road opening licenses etc. The NBI work with the local engineer and planners to get the necessary licenses in place.
- It is proposed to commence East Clare immediately and details will be sent out to the members.
- Wifi funding is not part of a multi annual programme. The total European union funding received was €60K (€15K per district) plus matched funding from the Department of Rural and Community Development.
- Creating the zones where there is footfall will be looked at. Open spaces e.g. town squares, town parks to be considered.
- Once somebody logs on to the wifi, these wifi networks can be used by communities to provide access to local information.
- Eir is one of the main broadband service providers and the majority of queries from members of the public is from people looking to connect to the Eir service. To date the Council have had limited success and the Council are looking at alternative carriers e.g. Imagine, Vodafone to provide a service.

L. Cleary acknowledged the programme, particularly in relation to DigiClare. He commended Urban and his team who have endeavoured to make Clare a working capital and the turnaround of hubs was very swift. He stated that he is looking forward to seeing the prospectus over the coming weeks.

Cllr. P. Hayes thanked Urban and requested that the workplan from the NBI be circulated. He acknowledged that it is challenging and wished the team the best of luck.

Cllr. M. Howard enquired about Section 254 licenses for poles and if the members have grounds to make submissions or observations on these. Cllr. Howard recommended that Councillors be made aware of Section 254s being submitted and stated that people only become aware of them when the poles have gone up. She also enquired if there was a date for when the centre in Ennis will be developed.

U. McMahon advised that the Section 254s go through the same process as applying for planning permission, therefore observations can be made. Urban agreed to bring Mary's comments to the attention of the engineers. In relation to the Ennis hub, Urban advised that it was on target and was due to open mid March but since the last lock down they have not been on site and cannot commit to a date. It could possibly be the beginning/mid May.

5. Climate Change Adaptation Strategy and Biodiversity.

L. Cleary advised that Climate Change Adaptation Strategy and Biodiversity is a standing item on the SPC Agenda and it is the responsibility of each SPC to implement climate change in their work programmes. Leonard invited members to highlight issues or submit items for the next meeting.

A. Wise addressed the members and advised that they had a zoom meeting with Minister of State, Malcolm Noonan and the issue regarding the wind farm policy was brought up and it is in the pipeline. Anny referred to the last minutes and stated that she did not recommend that trees be cut down. She stated that only branches should be cut down if the tree is old and its branches are very brittle. She advised that the reason for this is that mature oak trees will put enough oxygen into the atmosphere to keep a family of four alive for one year. Anny invited members to make suggestions that can be brought up at the next SPC meeting and suggested that home heating be discussed at the next meeting.

Cllr. P. Hayes thanked Anny for her update and agreed that home heating and fossil fuels be included on the next Agenda.

6. Review of Rural Development Strategy

In relation to a review of the Rural Development Strategy, L. Cleary advised that they are working with Sean O'Riordain, Facilitator and are in the process of working out a brief, by taking the pulse of each of the pillars and see where progress has been made, where gaps are and how it can now be delivered. Waste water infrastructure will be an issue. In order to have housing there is a need for adequate waste water infrastructure. Irish Water Investment Programme would need a concerted effort to pilot waste water infrastructure schemes. These issues will be coming up as part of the review and there will be an opportunity for members to input into this and a review report will then be developed. Leonard advised that the amount of funding in rural development has grown since 2016 but there are some gaps in the strategy that are challenging. He stated that it will be a participatory process for the public and SPCs.

Cllr. P. Hayes stated that there is a lot of challenges going forward and asked that the Rural SPC have a key role in housing and infrastructure.

Cllr. P. Burke recommended that in preparing the County Development Plan there is a need to engage more with the Rural Development Strategy and how it ties into the County Development Plan. He advised that this County Development Plan will be crucial.

L. Cleary took the opportunity to acknowledge the Department of Rural and Community Development and the significant amount of funding that they have made available. Leonard also acknowledged local and statutory groups working hard on the ground making projects happen. Leonard agreed to update the members at the next meeting.

Cllr. P. Hayes thanked Leonard for the update and stated that it was great to see that there is a review of the County Development Plan as they do not want two strategies conflicting.

Any other business

J. Tierney O’Keeffe addressed the meeting and referred to information received from Clare PPN on the Extension of the National Water Resources Plan. Jean advised that an information and consultation event will take place via Zoom on 22nd February and is open to everyone. Anybody interested in attending can email info@clareppn.ie. Bernie agreed to forward details to the SPC members.

N. O’Callaghan stated that she has a colleague who is studying tourism and is in the process of doing a tourism thesis. They have asked if they can send in a questionnaire to all the members of the SPC. Leonard agreed to facilitate this and requested Niamh to email him the details of same.

With no other business the meeting concluded.

Signed: _____
Cllr. P. Hayes
Cathaoirleach

Leonard Cleary
Director of Rural Development and
West Clare Municipal District