

IRELAND

Local development

Location

Lismore

Programming period

2014 – 2020

Priority

P6 – Social inclusion & local development

Measure

M19 – LEADER / CLLD

Funding (EUR)

Total budget 2 800 000
EAFRD 502 400
National/Regional 297 600
Private 800 000
Other 1 200 000

Project duration

2015 – On-going

Project promoter

Waterford LEADER
Partnership CLG

Contact

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Website

www.wlp.ie/work-west-waterford-smart-working/

A collaboration between a LEADER Local Action Group and community, philanthropic and other developmental interests, to create and sustain ICT-enabled local employment.

Summary

The Blackwater Valley is a rural area of 567 km² which sustains a resident population of 12 952; the majority of which is dispersed throughout a rich and fertile agriculture hinterland. Its demography and diversity raises issues for its social and economic sustainability, and also in the capacity of the area to sustain and develop essential employment, social, recreation and retail services.



Waterford' is project animated and resourced by Waterford LEADER Local Action Group (LAG) in collaboration with community, philanthropic and other developmental interests. It is one element in a broader strategy to create a single economic zone, through which the many villages of the Blackwater Valley in West Waterford, form an economic union defined by a collective purpose and vision. Specifically, it seeks to create and sustain ICT-enabled employment locally through a smart working strategy which incorporates animation, research, training, network development, marketing and capital investment. It aligns with, and is complementary to, a range of other placemaking, amenity and environmental measures.

Results

The Rural Development Programme support has leveraged substantial additional capital resources of EUR 2 million, enabling all capital works to be concluded and open by early 2022. Of this amount, EUR 1.2 million is from philanthropic sources and EUR 800 000 comes from the communities themselves.

Brand identity and the competitive positioning and preliminary marketing content have been developed.

An actively managed database has been developed in order to quantify existing skills and identify gaps which can be addressed through training and competency development.

Relations have been established with national and international enterprise development and promotion agencies. Their marketing and development support will be pivotal in marketing the location to larger employers seeking satellite office facilities, as well as for inward investment seeking to establish or expand operations.

Lessons & Recommendations

- ❑ The animation and network support from the LEADER programme has been fundamental in shaping the development opportunity and the enabling strategy which was actioned and resourced through a continuum of programme measures.
- ❑ There has been extensive multi-party collaboration at all stages of the project planning and development; all of which has had the community and its key stakeholders at its core.

Context

Located in County Waterford in the south-east of Ireland, the Blackwater Valley is a rural area of 567 km² which sustains a resident population of 12 952; the majority of which is dispersed throughout a rich and fertile agriculture hinterland. Its principal settlements are Cappoquin, Lismore, Tallow and Villierstown, none of which exceed a population greater than 1 500. The resident population has shown modest growth in recent decades. However, its comparatively low level militates against demographic scale and diversity and raises issues for social and economic sustainability. Additionally, this affects the capacity of the area to sustain and develop essential employment, social, recreation and retail services.

Each of the settlements is linked by the 169 km long historic River Blackwater, which is a prime natural resource in a rich and fertile agricultural hinterland. Other notable strengths and assets include an exceptional quality of life; enviable natural and cultural assets; strong social capital and a long track record of institutional support for community development, which has contributed to strong community resilience and capability. In the wider immediate area, disposable incomes (EUR 19,416 per person) is relatively high, while lower housing and childcare costs contribute to a cost of living which is lower than the national average.

Professional services, commerce, trade, agriculture and forestry comprise the bulk of local employment, although a sizeable amount of this employment exists outside of the area. Almost 40% of those employed - approximately 2,000 - are outward commuters who reside in the area but work in larger urban settlements including the cities of Cork and Waterford; each a journey time of one hour. Local educational attainment is high with an 80% progression to 3rd level education. High speed fixed-line broadband is available and has the capacity to enable access to important social, education and employment services.

Objectives

The overall objective of this initiative is to achieve growth to ensure the sustainability of the resident population, as well as that of its vital social and economic services. Specifically, this is to be achieved through:

- Robust structures for community-led local development which represent and advocate a shared social, economic and environmental vision.
- Participative and collaborative approaches to the planning and the delivery of social, economic and

environmental initiatives.

- Development of a diversified, future-oriented local economy.
- SMART strategies and innovation in ICT adoption and use.
- Placemaking activities which enhance liveability, quality of life and quality of place.

Activities

The Work West Waterford initiative is an outcome of development actions set out in the Waterford Local Development Strategy (2014-2020). However, its origins can actually be found in the innovative inter-village collaboration that led to the introduction of the LEADER programme to the area in the 1990's. As such, the initiative now builds upon an impressive legacy of community capability and responsibility enabled by LEADER animation and development funding. Active community ambition and collaboration, as well as a track record of high quality social, economic and environmental project development is the bedrock upon which the project has been founded.

In early 2018, a training programme was initiated with LEADER programme support. This sought to identify community-led development opportunities through which the four settlements could collaborate and from which they could mutually benefit. A management group drawn from the training programme participants was formed and with the active support of Waterford LEADER LAG, Waterford City and County Council and the Tomar Trust (a philanthropic organisation), the initiative was scoped out and actioned. The pooling of ambition and resources between the respective project partners delivered 'added value', allowing a scale and impact that lay beyond conventional LEADER programme support.

This successful partnership between community, developmental and philanthropic interests allowed the initiative to proceed at pace and for key actions, milestones and timelines to be established for 2019 and thereafter. Central to this was the development of high-quality office facilities; the primary target market for which was distributed teams working remotely from multinational and indigenous ICT-enabled employers. To accommodate this, a total of nearly 1 000 m² of purpose-built office facilities was proposed in the each of the settlements: Tallow (276m²), Lismore (318m²), Cappoquin (195m²) and Villierstown (167m²). Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) to measure the project's socio-economic impact included the attraction of 88 new residents; 44 of whom would fill half of the 85 new ICT-enabled jobs created with a gross salary cost of EUR 3.6m per annum.

Throughout 2019 and 2020, the partnership continued to develop the initiative. Key tasks included the completion of final site identification, repurpose and design of buildings; securing the necessary consents and permits; project management and procurement; capacity building, stakeholder engagement and liaison; financial and budget planning and the securing of the necessary development and capital funding from the LEADER programme, the Rural Regeneration and Development Fund, the Tomar Trust and from the local communities themselves to enable capital works to commence.

By mid-year 2020, although capital works were delayed by the restrictions imposed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, other planned developments to support the initiative continued remotely. A smart working strategy was commissioned which provided a comprehensive analysis of, and alignment with, the enabling policy and developmental context. A competitive analysis and market positioning of other locations and initiatives along with the identification of prospective clients and an assessment of the relevant demographic, societal and behavioural trends and opportunities were undertaken. The marketing strategy also placed an emphasis on the integration with complementary local developments in climate adaptation, mitigation, decarbonisation, recreation and amenity development and in the wider realm of community development. A marketing plan was completed. It set out proposals for brand development, stakeholder and network connectivity, marketing communications, including messaging, copy and content, data visualisation and infographics.

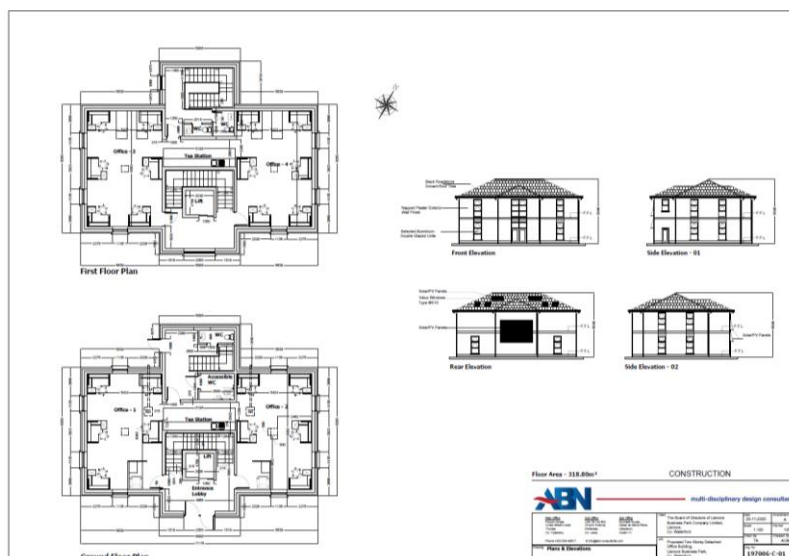
Additional animation, training and network support was provided by Waterford LEADER LAG to build capacity, capability and collaboration within and between the community organisations in the four settlements. This allowed momentum to be maintained at key points in the planning, development and management of the initiative.

Main results

While the capital works to develop 1 000 m² of office accommodation remain ongoing, the project has already achieved a number of key outcomes. Of particular note is the development of a common vision and shared purpose between stakeholders in each of the different settlements. By collaborating in this way, a scale and a potential impact - beyond the capacities of each settlement individually - has been created. This has been fundamental in securing LEADER development funding of EUR 800 000 in total (EUR 200 000 for each village). This support has leveraged substantial additional capital resources of EUR2 million enabling all capital works to be concluded and open by early 2022. Of this amount, EUR1.2 million from philanthropic sources and EUR 800 000 from the communities themselves.

Brand identity and the competitive positioning and preliminary marketing content have been developed. Furthermore, work has been undertaken and remains ongoing to align the local skills, talent, qualifications and experience with prospective employer needs. An actively managed database has been developed in order to quantify existing skills and identify gaps which can be addressed through training and competency development. Relations have been established with national and international enterprise development and promotion agencies whose marketing and development support will be pivotal in marketing the location to larger employers seeking satellite office facilities as well as for inward investment seeking to establish or expand operations.

As the initiative has progressed, it has continued to align strongly with new EU and national enterprise, community development, placemaking and climate change policy initiatives; themselves adapting to new post-COVID-19 realities and opportunities.



Chief amongst these are remote working, smart village and climate mitigation/decarbonisation initiatives. In 2020, the four settlements secured the status of a Sustainable Energy Community. Media coverage by RTE, the Irish national broadcaster, has been favourable and has added impetus to the initiative.

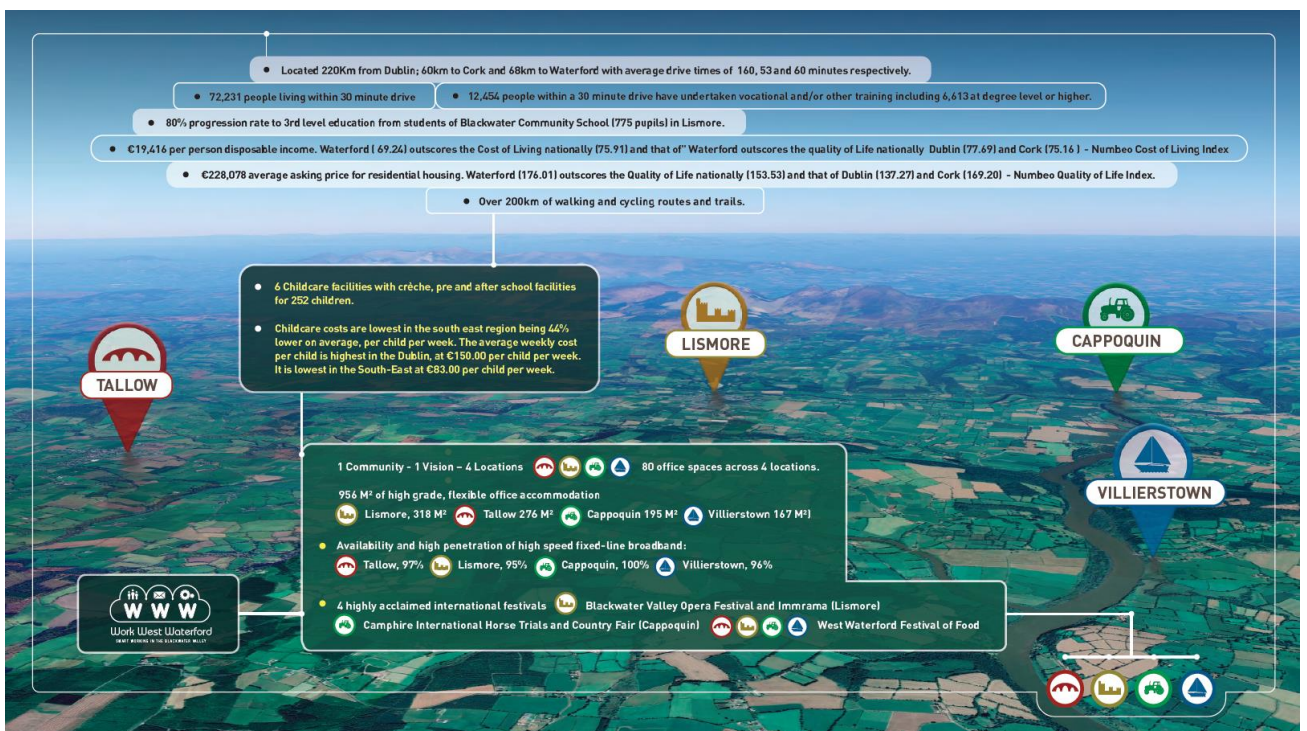
Key lessons

There are a number of specific elements in the planning and the development of the initiative which might be considered noteworthy. These include:

- The animation and network support from the LEADER programme has been fundamental in shaping the development opportunity and the enabling strategy which was actioned and resourced through a continuum of programme measures.
- There has been extensive multi-party collaboration at all stages of the project planning and development; all of which has had the community and its key stakeholders at its core.
- A critical assessment of competitive positioning, market offer and commercial opportunity was

undertaken. This allowed a clear understanding of the competitive landscape and the actions required in order to meet the outcomes and key performance indicators set for the project.

- A holistic approach was adopted. This viewed the economic development dimension of the project within a wider context, most specifically placemaking, environmental management and community development. Scale and impact were also generated through alignment with a Local Authority-led village regeneration initiative. This delivered momentum, interest and community engagement at critical points in planning and development.
- Though unforeseen, the COVID-19 pandemic may well have had a longer-term positive effect on the initiative, particularly its effect in reshaping EU and national development policy and supports. Resilience, agility and innovation have combined to create a post-COVID-19 opportunity for economic diversification, in particular through increased digitalisation and remote working.



Additional sources of information

- www.rte.ie/news/2020/1106/1176350-waterford-smart-jobs/
www.facebook.com/wwriverblackwater/