

IRELAND

Improving competitiveness

Location

LAG Offaly LCDC. Banagher.

Programming period

2014 – 2020

Priority

P6 – Social inclusion & local development

Measure

M19 – LEADER/CLLD

Funding (EUR)

Total budget 20 957
EAFRD 6 580
National/Regional 3 898
Private 10 478

Project duration

2017 – 2018

Project promoter

Mid Ireland Adventure

Contact

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Website

www.midirelandadventure.ie

A start-up company specialising in outdoor sports activities, used RDP support to purchase equipment and respond to increasing demand for adventure tourism.

Summary

Tourism is a sector of major importance to the rural economy, especially given the increasing demand for rural/outdoors adventure sports activities. However, many rural areas have not yet harnessed the sector's full potential.



Mid Ireland Adventure is a start-up company which aims to address the growing demand for this type of tourism. It provides a wide range of activities, including mountain bike tours, guided walks, summer camps, stand up paddle board safaris, etc. After its initial start up phase, LEADER funding was used to grow the business through the purchase of equipment, including mountain bikes, paddle boards and wetsuits.

Results

The project created one full-time job and one seasonal position. As the company grows, future job creation is expected.

The company attracts increasing visitor numbers to the Mid Ireland area, including local, national and international customers.

The increasing numbers of visitors bring spin-off benefits to the local economy. For example, visitors use local retail, hospitality and accommodation services.

Environmental education is provided to inform and inspire greater appreciation of the environment in which the activities take place.

The company promotes water safety awareness, in addition to highlighting aspects of local culture and heritage through the inclusion of an educational element in its tours.

Lessons & Recommendations

- A combination of natural, human and RDP resources are important to adventure tourism development in rural areas. Mid Ireland Adventure is driven by the specialist skill of its founder and harnesses value from local natural assets.
- In relation to developing a start-up enterprise, lessons learned included being realistic about goals, having patience and perseverance.
- Maintaining a digital profile for an adventure tourism business (e.g. using Instagram and Facebook) is important to communicate the adventure sport experience to potential and return clients.

Context

Alongside agriculture and forestry, tourism is a sector of major importance to the rural economy of Ireland. However, many Irish rural areas have yet to harness their full tourism potential. This was the case for the Offaly county, which has a range of natural and historical heritage assets (such as the Grand Canal, River Shannon, Slieve Bloom Mountains, Clonmacnoise and Durrow Abbey).

The Offaly Local Development Strategy (LDS) highlighted the reliance of the local economy on limited sources of employment such as the building and construction sector, agriculture and non-construction related manufacturing sectors. To support more diversified job creation, the LDS identified tourism and entrepreneurship as necessary areas for further development.

Entrepreneur Jonathan O'Meara set up a micro-enterprise to enable the development of a tourism product that taps into the demand for adventure sports in a rural context. His company 'Mid Ireland Adventure' is based in Banagher and at Kinnitty Castle. It provides a wide range of land and water-based adventure sports activities, including mountain bike tours, guided walks, summer camps, stand up paddle board safaris and adventure races. After its initial start up phase, LEADER funding was sought to expand the capacity of the business to cater for an increasing and diverse, local and international client base.

Objectives

This LEADER-funded project aimed to help the business to move beyond its initial development phase, expand its offer and tailor its activities to a diverse audience.

Activities

Since its launch, Jonathan O'Meara has worked to develop his business idea. Drawing on the marketing, PR, design and IT skills he gained through his career in journalism, he started his endeavour by creating a website and the company's logo.

Central to his business strategy was the establishment of a reputable, trusted and respected brand that offers high-quality adventure sport activities with very high safety standards. Jonathan invested heavily in up-skilling and gained a number of instructor certificates in adventure sports and water safety. He is now a qualified Cycling Ireland MBLA Trail Cycle Leader and Academy of Surfing Instructors (ASI) Level One Stand Up Paddle Board

Instructor. He is a certified Remote Energy Care First Aid Responder and certified Water Safety Rescue Instructor. Risk assessments at the adventure sport activity locations are also an essential part of Jonathan's goal to deliver a top-quality, trustworthy tourism offer.

The next step for Mid Ireland Adventure was to invest in a range of adventure sports equipment. LEADER funding supported the acquisition of equipment, such as mountain bikes, paddle boards and wetsuits. Jonathan's knowledge of safety features and standards, gained through his extensive training, informed the choice of equipment.

The first season for Mid Ireland Adventure kicked off in 2017. The focus on both water and land-based activities provides a good balance for the business to sustain activity all year round. Water-based activities are more popular in summer months and mountain hikes and bike tours are more popular in the winter.

During activities around the river Shannon instructors provide information to participants on the history of the river, its wildlife and the wider ecosystem. Mountain bike tours commence at Kinnitty Castle, move through the Slieve Bloom Mountains and finish in Kinnitty village. The tour includes information about the history of Kinnitty Castle, allows time to appreciate the landscape and nature of the mountains, and finishes at a replica statue of the Pyramids of Giza in Kinnitty village. The educational content of activities also extends to other subjects such as improved water safety awareness.



"...Offaly Local Development was always on hand to assist and offer excellent support and advice throughout the process... The LEADER grant was a huge help in the early stages, it allowed the business some breathing space in the first couple of years of operation".

Jonathan O'Meara, Mid Ireland Adventure

Main Results

Economic benefits:

- One full-time job (Jonathan is the main employee of the company) and one seasonal position have been created. As the company grows, future job creation is expected.
- The company is attracting increasing visitor numbers to the Midlands area, including local, national and international clients. International clients come from Europe, the US and South America.
- The company tailors its activities to extend the tourist season and to meet the needs of specific client groups and occasions, e.g. birthday celebrations, bachelor/ette parties.
- The increasing numbers of visitors bring benefits to the local economy. For example, visitors use local retail, hospitality and accommodation services.

Environmental / Climate action benefits:

- The business has a negligible impact on the environment.
- Environmental education is part of the ethos of Mid Ireland Adventures. It aims to inform and inspire greater appreciation of the Offaly environment by providing information on local history and nature.

Social benefits:

- The company promotes increased water safety, as well as local cultural and historical awareness by including an educational element in its tours.
- The influx of tourists due to the company's activity has brought new vigour to Banagher town.

Networking value:

A collaborative economy is important to local rural tourism. A strong, supportive local business network exists in the area and Mid Ireland Adventure is part of it. For example, tourist service providers promote each other's services helping build the local tourist economy.

Digital networking is vital for tapping into the trends of active lifestyle and weekend adventure sports. Mid Ireland Adventure has a strong digital profile, for example, through Instagram and Facebook. This helps communicate the adventure sport experience to potential and return clients.



Jonathan is a Banagher native who has always participated in water sports on the river Shannon. He is a long-serving member of the Shannonside Sub Aqua Club of which, his father is a founding member. This shows how the presence of local sports community groups and the networks they build have a potential to contribute to the local economy.

Mid Ireland Adventure is connected to international networks in the field of adventure sports. The business is working towards becoming an accredited school of surfing instructors under the Academy of Surfing Instructors (ASI). ASI is considered to be among the world's leading surf and paddle board education and accreditation organisations.

The company is now well connected to LEADER Offaly Local Development Company which has a good understanding of the business and its objectives. This has opened a communication channel with potential access to new networks, information and business promotion opportunities.

Transferability:

Other European rural areas with strong natural amenities and local human capital can build new tourist experiences similar to Mid Ireland Adventure.

Synergies with other EU policies:

This project supports and is strongly linked to the EU Policy Framework on Tourism. The European Commission Communication *'Europe, the world's No. 1 tourist destination – a new political framework for tourism in Europe'* sets out a strategy and action plan for EU tourism. One of its priorities is to stimulate competitiveness in the European tourism sector. To achieve this, it is noted that innovation in tourism must be developed by improving professional skills, working to overcome the seasonal nature of demand and diversifying the supply of tourist services. Mid Ireland Adventure links to all of these needs and provides a unique tourism service in the Offaly region.

Additional sources of information

www.facebook.com/MidIrelandAdventure/

www.instagram.com/mid_ireland_adventure/

*This project has been categorised under 'Improving Competitiveness' by the nominating National Rural Network