

**Minutes of the Rural Development Strategic Policy Committee (SPC) held on
Tuesday 18th May 2021 at 10.30 a.m. via Zoom**

In attendance:

Cllr. Pat Hayes
Cllr. Shane Talty
Cllr. Cillian Murphy
Cllr. Mary Howard
Cllr. Pat Burke
Ms. Jean Tierney O’Keeffe
Ms. Niamh O’Callaghan
Ms. Anny Wise
Mr. Denis Tuohy
Mr. Leonard Cleary
Ms. Bernadette Haugh
Ms. Deirdre O’Shea
Ms. Helen Moloney

Organisation:

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

No. 1 Minutes of Meeting held on 16th February:

The minutes of the meeting held on 16th February 2021 were proposed by Cllr. C. Murphy, seconded by Cllr. P. Burke and agreed.

No. 2 Matters Arising:

There were no matters arising from the minutes.

Cllr. P. Hayes had connection issues and Cllr. M. Howard stepped in as Chair.

No. 3 Implementation of the Tourism Strategy – next steps:

D. O’Shea addressed the meeting and advised the members that the Tourism Strategy was officially launched on 22nd April led out by Cathaoirleach Cllr. Mary Howard. Deirdre acknowledged the input of the Rural Development SPC, referred to the robustness of the Strategy and acknowledged Leonard and Pat Dowling’s vision. She thanked Cllr. Mary Howard for her involvement on the day and presented the launch video to the members.

Deirdre presented a summary and details of the implementation of the Tourism Strategy as follows:-

- The Vision for Clare is that by 2030 Clare will be a globally renowned sustainable and vibrant destination.
- The destination experiences are Holistic Landscapes, High Towers & High Powers, Adventure & Family Fun and Creative Vitality and there is a diverse need to balance it out to all of Clare.
- There is a very strong state agency relationship with Waterways Ireland.
- Covid19 has had devastating consequences and the industry will need help to get back.
- Every single word/photo was analysed to show that tourism is strong.

- There is a commitment to work in partnership with communities. This is a new style of collaborative relationship.
- The Burren and Cliffs of Moher Geopark is now on board, forms part of the Tourism Team and is committed to sustainable tourism. The Burren Ecotourism Network was named 'Best Community Tourism Project' by Lonely Planet. The global travel company unveiled the accolade in its prestigious Lonely Planet's Best in Travel 2021.
- Working together towards a vision will accelerate momentum.
- Colleagues have spoken on international forums. Markets are continuing to change post Covid.
- The Team will work very hard in the background to attract domestic demand.
- The Action Plan 2021-2023 sets out a series of countywide strategic priorities that will ensure sustainable tourism development and spread the benefit to communities.
- There will be a new form of dialogue with communities in addition to the new Tourism Advisory Forum.
- One of the actions will be to work towards positioning Clare as a destination to be recognised nationally and internationally for its commitment to responsible tourism and sustainability.
- National issues will be highlighted e.g. Shannon Airport.
- The Advisory and Oversight Group meet every 2 months and they all presented at the virtual launch.
- The Strategy was developed into a flipbook and copies can be made available to the SPC members.
- In terms of marketing plans, there will be weekly features in the Clare Echo, updating local people and encouraging others to spend extra days in Clare. Dáithi from the Today Show will be coming to Ennis on 26th May to do an outside broadcast in Clare. Today FM had a weeklong feature on Clare. In June, the RTE Guide will feature Clare and Classic Hits have also featured Clare. The Team will look to the American market in due course.
- The production of "Clare my Heart my Home" on the launch video showed the emotional side and it used imagery of Clare throughout.

Deirdre advised that Carol/Joan will work with the Rural Development SPC.

Cllr. P. Hayes returned to the meeting and stated that the launch of the Tourism Strategy was a wonderful production and thanked Deirdre for her wonderful presentation. He acknowledged the hard work of the Tourism Team. He advised that the Strategy is a step forward and acknowledged the great work behind the scenes. He advised that Clare has it all and that the video needs to get out there. He stated that the key is implementation of the plan and working with groups to involve the whole County. Cllr. Hayes invited the members to comment.

Cllr. P. Burke welcomed the presentation and acknowledged the hard work carried out by Deirdre and her team. He stated that the roads are starting to fill with camper vans and a number have arrived in Dromaan Harbour. He advised that these visitors are welcome but they need to respect the area. They are flying drones and sharing videos which is promoting Clare. However, the caravan parks and camp sites are closed and Cllr. Burke questioned the policing of these camper vans in non-designated areas. Cllr. Burke requested Cllr. Murphy's opinion on this in his area.

Cllr. C. Murphy advised that he had put forward a motion to the full Council regarding a management policy to deal with this. He acknowledged that there is resourcing involved but the cost of management far outweighs the cost of putting in a policy. He referred to an

exemplary example in Cobh in Cork. They have very tight guidelines. They pay to take a pitch and keep within the boundaries of the pitch. There is no limit to the number of nights they can stay and it costs €30 for two nights. He advised that Clare County Council could learn from their experience. People are very welcome to stay in Clare and he proposed that Clare could limit it to one night and advise them that parking elsewhere is illegal and they could face prosecution. Spanish Point and Fanore have been impacted as there is no policing. Cllr. Murphy stated that there is a need for a set of management rules. He referred to documents produced in New Zealand and that Clare could take the broad strokes of them and tailor to their requirements. He stated that the visitors have amazing drone footage and when this is shared these sites will become busier. He advised that he is not convinced about the economic value and could not get information on spend per head per night. He referred to a video being shared by a UK blogger on how to camp out without paying a penny.

Cllr. M. Howard thanked Deirdre for her presentation and stated that she was very proud to be part of the launch and that the video was very nostalgic. She advised that it looked amazing and that everyone has huge pride in Co. Clare. She advised that Clare is the first county to have one of these strategies produced post Covid and that advertising is very important as people book in advance. Camper vans and motor homes are more popular this year and last year as normally people travel to France/Spain. Cllr. Howard stated that Cobh have a fabulous park near the town centre and referred to the economic bounce there. She advised that there is a need to identify and work with private enterprises and identify parks where it can be controlled. She referred to the traffic problems in the Burren. She referred to the different forums available where people can get advice on what is open. It is a work in progress the way people can change habits.

L. Cleary addressed the members and stated that the Tourism Strategy primarily sets out how to bring tourism together, job creation and reinvestment of funds into further visitor attractions. The strategy focuses on investing in capital projects to get the tourism product up to a high spec. and get the anchors right. This year emphasis will be placed on beaches and developing a model to ensure that facilities are in place e.g. beach ambassadors, traffic wardens etc. Leonard stated that the issue with camping is a priority and an acute issue and needs cross party support at the full Council. He recommended that a model be put in place and the key is research.

Cllr. P. Hayes wished everyone well in the Advisory Group and advised that the Rural SPC could look at a model in relation to camper vans. He took the opportunity to thank Deirdre and her colleagues and advised that the SPC would be delighted to help and be part of it.

N. O'Callaghan addressed the meeting and congratulated Deirdre and everyone involved in creating the Tourism Strategy. She enquired who the stakeholders were. She recommended looking very strongly at walkways/cycling routes and referred to the EuroVelo cycling trek on the Wild Atlantic Way. She advised that there is a lot of work to be done in terms of grounds that cyclists are meant to cycle on. She enquired about the Ennis to Clarecastle and the Shannon to Bunratty Greenways.

Cllr. C. Murphy complemented the Tourism Team and looks forward to working with the team on the strategy. He recommended not to focus on motor homes but to look at free camping and appreciates the resource issues. He stated that he has a number of strategies from other places and can share them.

D. O'Shea addressed the issues raised and listed out the various stakeholders. She advised that 18 public consultations took place with 250 attendees. 10 steering group meetings took place, five presentations to members and SPCs and there were extensive reviews of the Draft Strategy. The Clare Tourism Advisory Forum included the various stakeholders and has great representation from elected members, with 2 representatives from each Municipal District. Deirdre asked for specific details/issues in relation to the EuroVelo Trek.

L. Cleary advised that the Project Managers were dealing with flooding at Clare Abbey when the project was being developed and it came at an ideal opportunity after capital funding was secured. Leonard advised that he would ask Sean Lenihan, Senior Engineer to present to a future SPC meeting on the 10-year work plan. In relation to the Shannon to Bunratty Greenway Leonard advised that it is at a pre-development stage. He stated that the Tourism Department will work with the Road Design Team on the EuroVelo cycling route. He advised that it will take up to 10 years for some of these projects to be designed and built.

N. O'Callaghan thanked Deirdre and Leonard and advised that she would send on further details regarding the EuroVelo project.

No. 4 Review of the Rural Development Strategy – Update:

B. Haugh addressed the members on the Review of the Rural Development Strategy as follows:-

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 and to prepare a set of recommendations on possible options for the Council to further advance what is already acknowledged as a very successful strategy.

Members of the Rural Development Forum were briefed on the Review process on 21st April last. The Rural Development Strategy covers the years 2016 to 2026 and has set out 8 strategic actions that are seeking to grow employment in rural Clare along with improvement of local public services and bettering the rural communities' quality of life. The Strategy provides for on-going evaluation of its implementation and consequently the Council is now looking to undertake a high-level review of progress to date and to look at new opportunities for the County as a result of recent government efforts to underpin rural development, most notably through the recently published National Rural Development Plan.

The Review will cover:

- 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 working 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 the Clare Rural Development Strategy in the context of the National Government Rural Development Plan, and any other recent/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.

The review process will largely be based upon a desk-based review of the various reports and minutes of the Clare Rural Development Forum alongside a small number of workshops with members of the Forum and other relevant stakeholders. As part of the stakeholder engagement a short questionnaire on Survey Monkey will be circulated initially to the Clare Rural Development Forum Members this week and thereafter to other key stakeholders including Rural SPC, Elected Members, senior staff, PPN etc. to identify feedback and consultation on the review. It is intended that a draft of the review document will be available in the Autumn.

Bernie advised that she would welcome the member's engagement in the survey.

Cllr. P. Hayes stressed the importance of departments linking together in terms of infrastructure and in terms of the Rural Development Strategy.

D. Tuohy requested a summary of the update and Bernie agreed to email same to the SPC members following the meeting.

Cllr. S. Talty enquired when the update will be finalised. Bernie advised that the process of engagement has commenced with the forum members and the survey will be tailored in the next couple of weeks and a draft should issue by September.

L. Cleary addressed the meeting and advised that following the Draft Review they will work towards a final report at the end of the year. He advised that there are a lot of positives in the strategy but there is a gap in some of the pillars and there is a need to work on this e.g. wastewater infrastructure and the lack of funding that is impeding growth. Irish Water are dealing with this and are awaiting funding. He advised that Clare is still the only County to have a Rural Development Strategy and will be working towards a second one.

Cllr. P. Hayes stated that Rural Development has many elements including agriculture, infrastructure and tourism. Working remotely has brought a lot of challenges in relation to broadband issues and he stated that this will be really important going forward and that there will be a lot of issues to address in the review.

D. Tuohy referred to the Strategic Plan for the new rural development programme and stated that public consultation may come up before the next meeting and would like the members to contribute to same.

No. 5 Climate Change Adaptation Strategy and Biodiversity

Presentation by SEAI followed by Q&A Session

L. Cleary acknowledged the work, leadership shown and engagement with the communities carried out by CLDC in the area of climate change. B. Haugh introduced Gearoid, SEAI, who is a Sustainable Energy Mentor and specialist in Community Development, Social Enterprise and Community Energy working with communities in relation to sustainable energy. Gearoid would provide a short 10 minute presentation on climate change, touching on areas such as retrofitting and renewable energy in Communities etc.

Gearoid introduced himself to the members and advised that he has been looking at communities and rural development for the last 15 years and will present on SEAI supports, policy development and implications for the Council.

Gearoid advised as follows:-

- Climate change is a standard item on each SPC Meeting and the remit of each SPC will be looked at as energy comes in right across the sector.
- Ireland's policy is to move away from fossil fuels to low carbon fuels. It is mainstream state policy and commitment is needed. Ireland is playing catch up going back to 1975, compared to Denmark and Nordic countries.
- Climate Change is almost a Rural Development Strategy on its own.
- Over €5bn per year is spent on imported fossil fuels and there is a need to keep this in Clare. This is an opportunity as well as a challenge in terms of climate change and where our energy comes from.
- Ireland's energy sector emits 40 million tonnes of CO2 emissions every year.
- There are 22 Sustainable Energy Communities (SECs) in Clare and Gearoid provides mentoring to them. An SEC is a community that works together to develop a sustainable energy system for the benefit of the community. A number of SECs have commenced local energy plans and some have commenced renewable projects but these projects are at an early stage.
- It is predominantly communities and voluntary groups that are involved and there are some local authorities that have established SECs e.g. Tipperary.
- There is funding of €25,000 available for local energy plans. The grants are for community actions as well as mentoring supports and technical mentors and is easily available funding. There is also funding available for a one stop shop in Clare.
- In relation to Drombane in Tipperary, the community group had been looking to generate activities after the last recession and worked on a local development strategy. They had the idea of a first community energy plan in the Country and insulated more than half of the houses in the community.
- There are new opportunities for renewable energy and the state is helping to build community renewable energy.
- The Community Benefit Fund will represent the largest transfer of wealth in the state to communities over the lifetime. Quantifiable funding will be made available annually for the benefit of communities enabling them to create positive impacts. Under the new scenario there will be a defined amount and minimum amount to invest in. This will need significant funds to be spent in the County.
- There are a whole raft of policies kicking in at present whereby there will be a move from 80% fossil fuels to only 30% and most from renewables.
- Two not for profit organisations working in this area in Tipperary secured funding for energy upgrades and have invested €20m in the County. This happened with the support of the Local Authority and funding was mostly received from SEAI together with Leader funding and contributions from householders.
- A "Sustainable Energy Action Plan" was produced. The County Council works with the energy agency as lead and there is an opportunity for Clare County Council to support drawdowns of retrofit funding.

Cllr. P. Hayes thanked Gearoid for his presentation and advised that some members are involved in community plans and he invited member's comments.

Cllr. S. Talty thanked Gearoid and stated that a number of members have led out very strongly in their communities on this. He advised that if these opportunities are so vast then there is an incredible volume of opportunity but Clare County Council would need to look at resources critically and see if there is capacity available.

Cllr. C. Murphy thanked Gearoid and advised that he is involved in Kilkee's sustainable energy community. He referred to a piece of work carried out in Loop Head under the Loop Head Together initiative. An assessment of the amount of money that was estimated to leave Loop Head for fossil fuels was very significant and if this was reduced by 10% it would leave a significant amount of money for the community. He stated that part of the Rural Development Strategy is job creation and Cllr. Murphy enquired how this will be delivered and if it was included in the strategy. If it was not included, he recommended that it form part of the mid-term review. A lot of job opportunities would be available for decarbonising Clare and reducing the use of energy for heating homes.

N. O'Callaghan congratulated Gearoid on the fantastic presentation and stated that there is an opportunity for Clare to lead the way.

Gearoid addressed the members and advised as follows:-

- In relation to Tipperary, they are a long way off in terms of population of Tipperary versus homes upgraded. The journey is only starting as there is so much happening in policy. Making it a priority is critical and it integrates across all activities in the Council.
- An energy survey was carried out on 450 householders' spend on home heating in Drombane. Leaking of money out of communities is an economic strategy on its own. The amount of €25K available from SEAI could potentially be a quick way of making it a priority and would be a catalyst to change it up a gear.

Gearoid advised that he attended a presentation recently regarding upskilling and there are job creation opportunities in relation to home heating and pumps, as well as training up a new cohort of contractors. Any funding coming down from SEAI includes management fees, provided there is a match with skilled people.

Cllr. P. Hayes proposed that an energy agency for the County be set up and link in with the Limerick agency.

Gearoid advised that about 20 years ago, some Seed funding was made available to energy agencies. Three counties came forward but it has not developed as a bigger entity. The scale of work in this area requires entrepreneurs and a stand-alone agency that can meet the challenges. This energy agency should give independent advice as it is really important that there is an independent and trusted body to advise the Council. The energy of the future will be solar energy i.e. off/onshore solar where it is suitable. Already in Clare a number of communities are breaking ground in this area e.g. Cratloe and it all depends on the support received from the Local Authorities or Leader. It will only move forward if it is given a priority focus.

L. Cleary thanked Gearoid for his insightful presentation and advised that it will involve a huge body of work for Clare County Council. He advised that he would need to liaise with Carmel Kirby who has the energy remit and suggested contacting Pat Steevens to get advice on how the Council can work with Gearoid and the team. He stated that engagement with communities who want to move into this area will be required. The Council has been promoting projects trying to capitalise in this area and Leonard suggested developing a

demo project. He advised that he will look forward to working with Gearoid and Pat Steevens on this.

Cllr. P. Burke referred to Drombane and stated that there has been a lot of resistance in relation to the cost but people have no choice. He commended the members that are taking on these projects and the community in Drombane.

Gearoid advised that people should not be worried about the price of briquettes as they will have changed to heat pumps and will use less fuel than before. Local households are direct beneficiaries of this by putting in stoves, insulating houses, eliminating fossil fuels and using a heat pump which is airtight with proper ventilation. Drombane is very much looking at energy projects as a local economic development. Out of 450 households, 200 have had an energy upgrade.

A. Wise addressed the meeting and thanked Gearoid for the presentation. She advised that Gloria Cunningham has signed a contract with Gearoid for Clare. She advised that the County Council can get involved in relation to public awareness. She stated that people have no idea what is available and why. Anny advised that she had intended giving a talk on heating the homes and she is very much aware the public are uneducated on the problems that fossil fuels can cause. She stated that she would like to start with this SPC to help the public understand why the briquettes are so expensive and she would like the Council and the SPC to make people aware why fossil fuels are damaging. She outlined the 3 main reasons as follows:-

1. Carbon dioxide
2. Particulates
3. Transport

Anny stated that she would like the Council to keep in contact with Gearoid and Gloria and suggested that they give another talk on the subject to the members of this committee.

Cllr. P. Hayes acknowledged Anny's contribution and work and suggested that this be brought to the full Council as the full Council need to embrace it.

D. Tuohy thanked Gearoid and gave credit to Gloria in the CLDC. Denis advised that he would like to see co-ordination between SEAI, CLDC and Clare County Council and recommended touching base with Tipperary. In relation to the rural development update and the County Development Plan, Denis advised that the IFA have made submissions in relation to renewable energy and planning exemptions. He referred to the micro generation support scheme and requested that the Council encourage the farming community to apply.

Cllr. P. Hayes stated that the topic merits a lot of input from members and suggested that a workshop be set up instead of bringing it to a full Council meeting. He stated that some people do not know about the issues and a lot of communities need to embrace this alternative energy. He suggested working together to get a clear policy going forward.

L. Cleary stated that he would discuss it with Management Team so that all Directors and Finance will be aware, as it is a cross directorate issue and discussions should take place with the CLDC in relation to the community element. It is an area that the Council needs to progress and Leonard suggested linking in with Pat Steevens.

Gearoid thanked the members for the opportunity to present on this topic. He advised that a lot of mistakes have been made and Clare County Council can learn from the various other Councils. He suggested that a stand-alone office be set up and give them the remit with a level of entrepreneurship. If it can be made a priority and score on delivery and investment into the County, then that can be made a critical element. He invited Clare County Council to link in with SEAI.

Gearoid agreed to circulate the presentation after the meeting.

Any other Business

Burial Ground Review Policy:

B. Haugh advised the members that last September the Burial Ground Review was launched, headed up by Ollie O'Loughlin who was appointed to independently oversee the process. A review of the operation of 160 burial grounds took place, over 30 of which are managed by Clare County Council. A number of internal workshops took place but the process of engagement was delayed due to Covid. Bernie stated that she met Mr. O'Loughlin last week and he advised that he has sought additional information to further inform the review process. She advised that Burial Grounds staff are working on collating the additional information sought and it is intended that a draft document will be finalised in July.

County Development Plan/Notice on Web

D. Tuohy enquired about an update on the County Development Plan Review. He also drew the member's attention to a notice on the web in relation to Public consultation re. bathing waters. It states that it is closed for submissions but further on in the notice it says the closing date is June. He advised that this needs clarification. Bernie agreed to follow up with Environment on the issue of the conflicting closing dates for submission on the web.

L. Cleary stated that the County Development Plan Review is a work in progress and the various submissions are being looked at. Leonard advised that he will link in with Liam Conneally for an update and suggested dedicating a time slot to it as Rural Development has an important role in this.

Cllr. P. Hayes thanked everyone for attending and stated that the meeting was very enlightening and is looking forward to updates on the energy element.

With no other business the meeting concluded.

Signed: _____
Cllr. P. Hayes
Cathaoirleach

Leonard Cleary
Director of Rural Development and
West Clare Municipal District