

CLARE OUTLOOK FOR RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Clare County Council has established the country's first Local Authority Rural Development Directorate, in response to the Government's National Action Plan for Rural Ireland. Clare's Chief Executive Pat Dowling tells Grace Heneghan the plan is now to roll out the Rural Development Strategy in the Banner County in early September.

Clare County Council's Chief Executive Pat Dowling was at the forefront of developing a rural development strategy for the Banner County, following the launch earlier this year of the Government's National Action Plan for Rural Development.

This plan includes a number of key targets, including creating 135,000 jobs outside Dublin by 2020 and boosting rural tourism by 12 per cent

Shortly after his appointment as Clare's new Chief Executive last September, Dowling established the Clare Rural Development Forum, which has met on four separate occasions to guide Clare's response to the Government's Action Plan in the form of this Clare Rural Development Strategy.

Addressing this year's AILG Conference in Ennis, Dowling told councillors that the plan could only be achieved through partnership and collectively through the community and voluntary sector, by local authorities, by State and regional development agencies, and by city and county councillors.

According to Pat Dowling, if the east coast is the industrial and commercial heart of Ireland, then rural Ireland must be preserved and promoted as the lifeblood of our economy. "City and county councillors are the heartbeat of local government in this country and are uniquely placed to influence positive change at local level. Previously in my role as Director of Service in Limerick City and County Council, I had a 'healthy' relationship with elected



Minister for Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, Heather Humphreys TD, pictured with (l-r): Leonard Cleary, A/Director of Rural Development and West Clare Municipal District, Mayor of Clare Cllr Bill Chambers, and Clare County Council chief executive Pat Dowling, following her address to the Clare Rural Development Forum on 27 April. (Pic: Arthur Ellis)

members; 10 to 15 years ago Limerick found itself in a situation that is not dramatically different to where rural Ireland finds itself today," he noted at the conference on 7 April.

"Making Limerick an attractive location to invest in, live in and work in was the central goal. It was a daunting task but one that was met head on. From the outset, the regeneration plan and reimagining of Limerick's future was a countywide affair, involving both the city and county council. The regeneration of Limerick took hold slowly but surely, and today it is reaping the benefits of original and joined-up thinking."

With up to 300 city and county councillors in attendance at the AILG Conference in Ennis in April, according to Pat Dowling,



Members of the Clare Rural Development Forum following a meeting in the Buttermarket Building in Ennis.

feedback to his presentation on the Rural Development Forum was very positive overall.

LESSONS LEARNED

So, it's no surprise then that Dowling has somewhat indirectly applied the lessons learned from the regeneration of Limerick's city and county, when he set about restructuring the management team in Clare County Council, following his appointment as Chief Executive last September.

"I divided the council's management team into Social (Housing), Economic (Jobs and Tourism), Physical (Roads and Infrastructure) and Rural Development. An Acting Director of Rural Development (Leonard Cleary) and a Directorate team will now focus on the many rural parishes in the county. They will provide the operational support for this Forum and Strategy and will work with partner organisations, where additional government funding opportunities emerge."

On 27 April last, Minister Heather Humphreys met with Pat Dowling and Leonard Cleary, A/Director of Rural Development and West Clare Municipal District on 27 April. She also met with key staff members of the council, including the newly-established Culture Team, the Broadband Officer and members of the Clare Rural Development Forum.

"During our recent discussions with the Department of Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural & Gaeltacht Affairs, the importance of a strong Clare multi-department response to the

FACTFILE – Pat Dowling, Chief Executive

Pat Dowling was appointed Chief Executive of Clare County Council in September 2016. He previously worked with Limerick City and County Council with responsibility for Social Development.

With a wealth of experience in the local government, business and community sectors, he was assigned the task of managing the merger of the former Limerick City Council and Limerick County Council and in charting a new operating model in arriving at a unified authority for Limerick.

Prior to joining Limerick Corporation in 1999, Pat worked with Macra na Feirme and Kildare Leader Company.

He is keen to ensure that Clare County Council gives special attention to the numerous challenges and opportunities facing communities in rural Clare, and wants to regenerate rural communities and bring employment to the county.



CLARE ROAD AHEAD FOR RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Local community, business, tourism and farming groups as well as state and development agencies attended the inaugural meeting of the Clare Rural Development Forum in Ennis in mid-February, to develop Clare's Rural Development Strategy, which is due to be launched in early September.

Former All-Ireland winning footballer with Kerry and Government Ambassador for the National Action Plan for Rural Development, Pat Spillane made a presentation to members of the new Clare Rural Development Forum.

Spillane referred to his passion for rural Ireland, his chairmanship of the Commission for the Economic Development of Rural Areas (CEDRA) and the importance of interagency collaboration. He also acknowledged the council's role in convening the Rural Development Forum and establishing the country's first Local Authority Rural Development Directorate.

The Forum meeting was also addressed by Ciaran Lynch, LIT's Development Manager, who has a strong background in sustainable rural development and management, having been former head of the Sustainable Rural Development Department at Tipperary Institute.

The Government's Action Plan for Rural Ireland, launched in January, was outlined by Sinead Copeland, Principal Officer, Department of Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs.

Members of the public and interested parties had until Friday 31 March to make written submissions and observations on the proposed the strategy to the Rural Development Directorate, Clare County Council.

Pat Dowling, Chief Executive of Clare County Council, outlined the requirement for a strategic rural development intervention through a range of actions to address the "terminal population decline" experienced in some parts of the county, particularly in West Clare. He also referred to the capacity of Clare's towns and villages to act as growth centres for the surrounding hinterland and wider county.



Pat Spillane, former All-Ireland winning footballer with Kerry and Government Ambassador for the National Action Plan for Rural Development, is pictured with Clare County Council's Chief Executive Pat Dowling, Chairman Cllr Bill Chambers, Leonard Cleary, Director of Services, and Tusla's Aine Mellett. (Pic: Eamon Ward).

Action Plan was welcomed."

The Minister also visited a number of successful rural development projects in Feakle, County Clare, including a community transport initiative, a derelict property which has been refurbished as an enterprise and a local digital project.

PRIME LOCATION

On outlining to 'Council Review' his main reasons for setting up a specific Rural Development Department in Clare County Council, Dowling said: "Clare is an amazing county and is in a prime location on the west coast of the country. We have the Wild Atlantic Way with great scenery and great tourist numbers visiting the county every year. However, the fabric of the community is changing.

"So, I looked at what we were doing in a strategic way of trying to sustain rural communities; this means there are jobs, a school, a community centre, a shop, a means for the elderly to travel around the parish, and you have access to health services etc.

"The local authority is the obvious organisation to lead other agencies towards a retargeting of rural Clare, which is mostly West Clare and parts of East Clare. So, to do that we needed to dedicate a part of our management structure to develop a rural plan for the county.

"It will take 10, 12 or 20 years to see real effect because we have known the issues but have not focussed on them, just as the government is now focusing on the housing agenda. The feedback from the 35 agencies we're working with has been very positive to date. We issued our call and have already organised a number of workshops."

Agencies currently on board include all the public bodies, climate agencies, the health groups, the universities and colleges, health, education and training bodies, economic and tourism agencies. "But most importantly the communities themselves are on board, and this level of engagement will continue with these communities," he added.

RURAL-URBAN DIVIDE

With the recent census in Ireland showing that 63 per cent of the population live in urban regions while the other 33 per cent live in rural areas, the chief executive said it's obvious that society is becoming urbanised.

"There has been a major shift from rural to urban areas. However, we need to positively discriminate in favour of rural areas because we must have a rural element to our economy, and so maybe we can shift activity back into rural communities."

He is using this wealth of experience he has built up in the local government, business and community sectors. Starting out as a youth worker in East Clare before moving to Macra na Ferme, from there he ran the LEADER company in Kildare, before returning to Limerick in 1999 as Director of Services with Limerick Corporation.

"I was involved in the regeneration programmes in



Pat Dowling pictured in the Burren with Christy Sinclair, chairperson of the Burren Eco Tourism Network (BEN).

celebrating what's unique about rural living. Having spent plenty of time living in cities, I now enjoy going home to the countryside where I know I can unwind and relax, and enjoy the fresh air. It would be great if I could do my job in West Clare!"

MERITS OF HOME-WORKING

Which brings the discussion to the next and final element of the council's rural development plans. "Today's jobs are changing and this is something we can exploit in getting more people to work from home. We will be doing a lot of work around the concept of e-working.

"When I drive to work in Ennis from West Clare every morning I estimate there are roughly 1,000 cars on the road going to Ennis, Shannon and Limerick. So, if I could get even 10% of those commuters to work from home or in their local area, this would have a huge impact."

With Clare County Council due to open an enterprise hub in Kilrush Town Hall in late summer, Dowling said this will provide broadband connection for up to 11 local businesses who want to transact their business from there, due to a lack of connectivity in the region. He believes there will be a lot of local interest in this initiative.

"Improving the lives of those living and working in our rural communities underpins the aims of all organisations involved in rural development. Whether we work on a voluntary basis, or as part of an organisation, we need to have an understanding of a range of socio-economic factors that shape our rural county."

the city, in addition to my involvement in the merger of Limerick City and County Council. I have been involved in a lot of projects in Limerick over the last 17 to 18 years. I lived in the city but I'm originally from the county."

When he took over as Clare's Chief Executive last September he moved to West Clare, which he says has been one of the "highlights of my life" and says he has the best of both worlds – "having just ten miles to travel from my home to the council's offices in Ennis".

COMMUNITY CAPACITY

The one key aspect which Pat Dowling wishes to stress is "that producing great plans and getting a couple of million here and there, or getting a company to open up a small business or whatever, is all fine. However, a key strategy is around community capacity; setting up a community unit within the local authority to help communities to help themselves.

"A number of parishes and small towns in Clare have come together to organise sports facilities in the communities, and to provide housing for the elderly, all on a voluntary basis. You may say it's about scale, economics, being efficient and doing things right, but I want to do the right thing.

"It's about places and people, and



City and County Councillors can influence positive change at local level, Dowling told delegates at the AILG Conference.