

# TIME TO 'THINK SMART' ABOUT THE FUTURE!

Kilkenny LEADER Partnership has funding available for planning, training, capital and marketing to make rural communities smarter and more sustainable for generations to come. Minister of State for Heritage and Electoral Reform Malcolm Noonan told a 'Smart Villages' workshop that KLP's initiative could be duplicated elsewhere to help communities in rural Ireland face the challenges.



*Kilkenny LEADER Partnership (KLP) held the first of six 'Smart Villages' workshops at Ballykeeffe Amphitheatre recently.*

**T**owns and villages across Kilkenny are very different places to live and work post-Covid and we now need more places to meet and there is already increased demand for more shared working spaces.

The pandemic has highlighted the need for better broadband as well as integrated rural transport and alternative uses for the many pubs that will never reopen, according to community leaders.

Their comments came as Kilkenny LEADER Partnership (KLP) held the first of six 'Smart Villages' workshops at Ballykeeffe Amphitheatre, at the start of the community-focused initiative designed to help small businesses, community activists and groups to 'Think Smart' about the future options for rural communities.

Kilkenny LEADER Partnership (KLP) wants to help towns and villages think in new and dynamic ways about their future, to work together, be innovative and think laterally and look at how they protect and use their waterways; how culture, heritage and arts can help. And to also look at how transport energy and broadband can be developed and how to make the county's towns and villages sustainable.

Guest of honour, former LEADER board member and Minister of State for Heritage and Electoral Reform, Malcolm Noonan, said Ireland faces a unique set of challenges because of its rural make-up and its dispersed population and he commended KLP on the initiative, which he said could well be duplicated elsewhere.

## CONNECTING REGIONAL WITH RURAL

"There is some very exciting work going on here in Kilkenny and it could be replicated elsewhere and we could make a very concerted effort to connect our regional towns with our rural hinterland and try to get people out to tourism projects, school, appointments, education, training and more and I'm very excited about the work that is going on here."

Minister Noonan said we need to replace lots of values which have brought us to where we are in this post COVID world. "We need to take the good from COVID. Huge innovation is going on and there's been a huge amount of learning. I'm really impressed by the response and what we have been able to do so much in a short space of time.

"We were all plodding along and suddenly we're reconfiguring our town centres. We're looking at how people

move about. We're taking cars out of our town centres. We're looking more at Greenways and Blueways and bringing people around and looking at public transport. We hope we will embrace this and not lose the learning that has taken place in such a short space of time."

Project leader, Rosie Lynch of the Workhouse Union, said the event starts a process that will continue over the next year and a half and will examine the concept of a smart villages and focus on the assets, resources and incredibly smart initiatives in communities and business and help these meet the expectations of policy and funding over the coming years.

She introduced the community-focused panel which included transport expert, Brendan Finn; Padraic O'Flaherty of Ballykeeffe Amphitheatre; Brian Doyle from Piltown Broadband; Ann-Maire McSorley of Nore Vision, Frank Walsh from the Linguan Valley and KLP Chairman, Denis Drennan.

KLP CEO, Declan Rice, commended the expert panel and MC, Helen Carroll, for their input and thanked Ballykeeffe Amphitheatre and their main sponsor and supporter, Ballykeeffe Distillery, for their contributions towards the inaugural Smart Villages event.

### SMART THINKING ON COMMUNITY CONNECTIVITY

He said the workshop is the first of a series of five further such events to take place



*Malcolm Noonan TD, Minister of State for Heritage and Electoral Reform, pictured with Martin Rafter, Assistant CEO & Social Inclusion Programmes Manager at Kilkenny LEADER Partnership*

in different venues around the county between now and the end of next year. LEADER will be seeking more detail on what the communities can practically do to secure the future of their villages. Digital, mobility and cultural connections will be focused on in more detail for each community, he explained.

"Smart Thinking is about connectivity in its higher sense. Connectivity in broadband. Connectivity in mobility, connectivity in sharing ideas and in partnerships. This is going to be something which matters an awful lot in the near future because Smart Villages probably

won't be a separate funding scheme.

"It will be something more important than that. It will be something that influences the shape of how all funding is given. Smart Villages, Smart Towns and Smart Parishes is the future way and that is why we are starting on this voyage of discovery. All the information we gather will be fed back at EU level," Mr Rice said.

KLP Chairman, Denis Drennan, said other countries tend to use their rivers more and said while the River Nore is one of the fastest-flowing rivers in Europe, we have very few canoe clubs and we don't maximise its potential. "If the Nore was in any other country, it would be dotted with canoe clubs every few kilometres. Ballykeeffe realised there was an asset in their community and they had the vision to develop it.

"Smart Villages is about recognising what is in front of us. We want to help communities realise what they have within and what they can turn into an attraction or a tourist attraction or both."

Interested participants are being urged to keep a close eye on Kilkenny LEADER Partnership's social media accounts for details of the next Smart Villages event which is likely to take place in autumn.

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*Helen Carroll (MC for the event) interviews Padraic Flaherty, one of the many volunteers who now helps run the amphitheatre in Ballykeeffe.*