THE POTENTIAL OF SMART COMMUNITIES

The development of 'Smart' approaches to local and regional development in Ireland is outlined by Pat Kennedy, Chief Executive of eTownz. In the first of a three-part series of articles, he focuses on the roll-out of the 'Smart Village Curriculum' training programme across the country, in a bid to empower communities to take ownership of their own planning and management.

The term 'Smart' has done a lot of heavy lifting over recent years. 'Smart' devices initially defined things like smart phones, smart watches, smart cars etc. The term 'Smart' is also used to describe different approaches to local/regional development.

The concept of 'Smart Cities' has been enthusiastically adopted by all city councils in Ireland, and this development approach is led by the desire by councils to provide the best possible services to its region.

The concept of 'Smart Villages' has been developed in recent years through the European Network for Rural Development (ENRD), with the ENRD overseeing aspects of the LEADER programme across all EU states. Local development committees (LDCs) in the EU are required to include an explanation on how they plan to implement the 'Smart Village' concepts in their region.

Leading the way in Europe, last year Irish LDCs commissioned the preparation on 'Smart Village Curriculum', which was designed by eTownz who is now rolling out this training programme across the country. The curriculum is being driven by LDCs across Europe, but the focus is to empower communities to take ownership of their own planning and management.

'Smart Communities' – once agreed and rolled out – can have a transformative effect on how we develop a pragmatic approach to collaboration between public services and society. The article series aim to explore how eTownz envision the development of:

1. Smart Communities.
2. Smart Regions.
3. Smart Countries.

SMART COMMUNITY FRAMEWORK

The Smart Community Framework (closely aligned to 'Smart Village Curriculum') is a means for people who are involved in community development to create and maintain a community plan from the ground up.

Traditionally, a town may hire an external consultant every 5-10 years to run a series of community workshops and to write a 50–100-page technical report and leave this for the community to implement.

We studied and profiled over 120 such plans as part of a research project in association with NUI Galway to develop a standardised coherent structure that could be used everywhere. We developed the following concepts:

Record Types

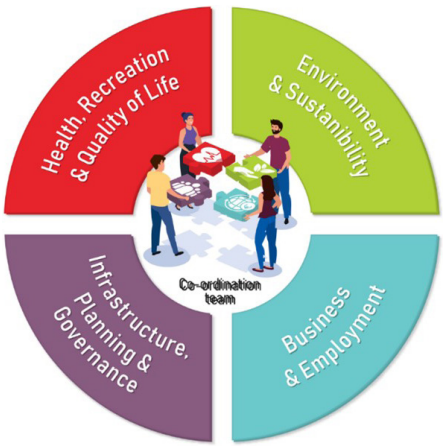
Community plans need to log and appraise the following:

- **Stakeholders:** including businesses, clubs and public services
- **Assets:** focusing on physical assets
- **Projects:** Acknowledging past, present and future project ideas
- **Metrics:** understanding what metrics are being used for better decision making
- **Goals:** what are the various aspirations of the community

Record Themes

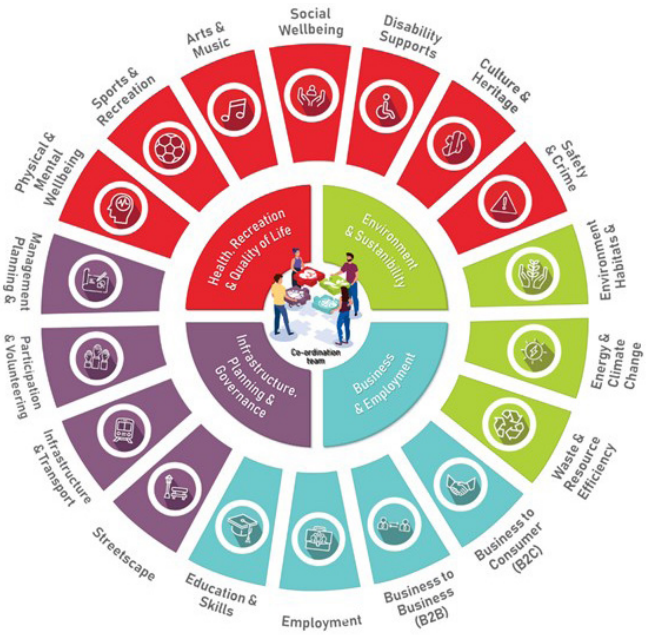
From the research, it became very evident that there was no consistency in the themes used in community plan, thereby making it impossible to compare and analyse different town plans.

In one plan it might refer to the economy and environment while the next town plan would refer to the business community and biodiversity. To address this issue, eTownz along with NUI Galway's Dr Maura Farrell developed a thematic structure to work for communities. This resulted in a three-tiered thematic structure (Tier 1 = 4, Tier 2 = 17, Tier 3 = 75).



TIER 1

The lower tiers then subdivide into issues such as mental health, cycling, retail, community energy etc.

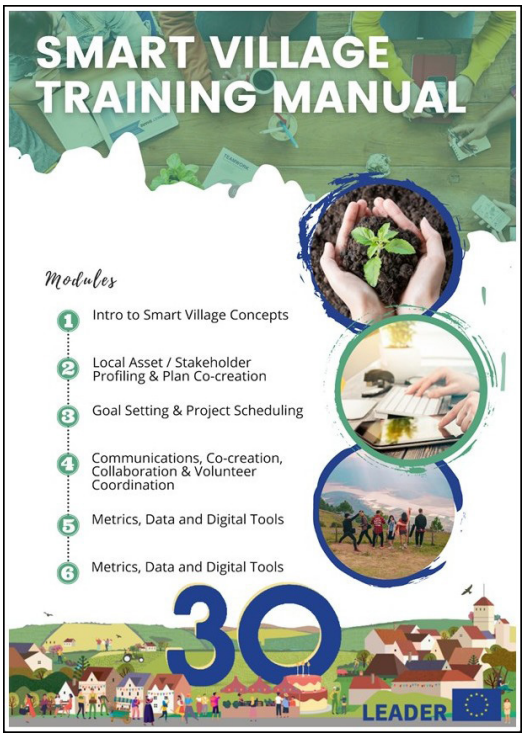


COMMUNITY PLANNING & MANAGEMENT

The Smart Community plan is then compiled by defining the 'Records' in each community and tagging them with the relevant 'Type' and 'Theme'. By approaching community planning with this new model, it has several advantages over the traditional model mentioned previously.

Advantages

- **Accessible Plans:** Plans are structured with bite sized information making it far more accessible to the volunteers who work in our communities.
- **Updating Plans:** Plans can be very simple to do, when a new asset or project idea is proposed, it is simply added to the plan
- **Personalised Plans:** Not everyone is interested in GAA or Tidy Towns, with this structured approach individuals within a community can have a personalised plan i.e. one the aligns to their thematic areas of interest
- **Digitisation of Plans:** With this clear structure to compiling community plans, it is therefore possible to digitise plans through an excel spreadsheet, a GIS package or through a tool eTownz have created called "Community Planning Dashboard".
- **Converging of Planning & Management:** Another key aspect of the format is that it allows for the convergence of "Planning" which can be considered long term view versus "Management" which can be the day-to-day activities
- **Public Service / Community Collaboration:** The format provides for clearer structure for relevant public services and non-profit bodies to engage and work in collaboration with community volunteers.
- **Community Collaboration:** The format also makes it easier to compare different communities and creates a model where they can identify where they may have projects that may be best working in partnership with other communities than on their own.



IMPLEMENTATION

How does this work in practice? We are rolling out the 'Smart Village' curriculum across nine regions in Ireland, working with 15 communities across the count on this 12-month training and facilitation programme.

Firstly, community champions from each community will be trained in the related concepts. Each community will also be given access to the eTownz community dashboard where they can compile and curate their plan i.e., log the stakeholders, assets, projects, goals and metrics.

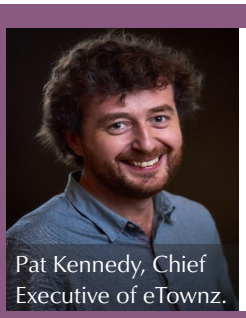
We will also undertake extensive desktop research using public or 'Open' (we add ~150 records to each plan from open data sources). The company also have a 'Knowledge Library' of 1,000+ community project ideas, 500+ Assets, 700+ stakeholders which can be reviewed by participants and added to their plan with the click of a button.

The training and facilitation programme will include:

- General Framework & Tools Training,
- Community specific training where we visit each community to provide 1 to 1 support.
- Collaborative Facilitation: Where we bring all participating communities together periodically to share ideas, develop synergies, and collaborative opportunities.

For more information on eTownz training and facilitation programme visit https://etownz.com/programs-training/

The Smart Communities approach can have a hugely positive impact on how communities take control in managing their own development, in a structured, simple and logical process. The next article will explore, in more depth, what 'Smart Communities' mean for regional level organisations such as councils, local partnerships and regional health and sports bodies.



Pat Kennedy, Chief Executive of eTownz.

ABOUT eTownz

eTowns has spent the past 10 years researching and developing digital tools for more effective approaches to community management, and during that time it has:

- Undertaken several related Irish and EU research collaborations, with UL's Dr. Maura Adshead and NUI Galway's Dr Maura Farrell.
- Irish national partners for 'SmartRural21' and 'SmartRural27' pan-European research projects.
- Last year we were commissioned to write the 'Smart Village' Training Curriculum for 20+ LDCs in Ireland.
- Currently delivered 'Smart Village' training in nine counties across Ireland.
- Recently launched a digital tool called 'eTownz Smart Community Dashboard' which enables bottom-up community planning and management.
- Trialled the 'Smart Community' approach in towns across Laois and Clare over the past three years, developing thematic plans for each.

For more information visit https://etownz.com

CASE STUDY – TESTIMONIAL

Abbeyleix in Co. Laois is one of the towns participating in the project. According to local volunteer Mark Clancy, they have undertaken the initial training and are now compiling plans. "We see this approach as having numerous benefits in increasing our volunteer base, helping with succession planning, helping to compile our annual Tidy Towns application, and helping local groups within the community to work together in a more coherent manner," he added.