

Opening Statement by South Kerry Development Partnership Ltd - To the Joint Committee on Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs - October 12th 2016 on the issue of what it takes to sustain a viable rural community

About South Kerry Development Partnership Ltd

South Kerry Development Partnership Ltd is a community led local development company. It was founded in 1991, and was one of the first area based partnership companies to be established by the Government under the auspices of the then programme for Economic & Social progress (PESP). The establishment of local development companies like South Kerry Development Partnership Ltd was to enable a localised community based response to tackle the economic and social problems of rural areas. The local community, working in partnership with statutory agencies, the social partners and local government, could take responsibility for addressing the economic and social problems within their communities. Strategies and related actions could be developed locally, with local ownership and in response to local needs. This 'bottom up' approach to Rural Development is a core ethos of South Kerry Development Partnership Ltd and it guides and informs the development and implementation of its rural development initiatives.

South Kerry Development Partnership Ltd is an experienced rural development organisation and has successfully implemented numerous state & EU funded rural development programmes since its foundation in 1991. It combines an economic development role, creating sustainable jobs and attracting investment with community, cultural and social development activities. South Kerry Development Partnership Ltd works with a very broad range of stakeholders, including individuals, communities, businesses, networks, cooperatives, government agencies and departments. It is a non-governmental organisation and is legally established as a Company limited by guarantee with registered charitable status with the Irish Revenue Commissioners. The operation of South Kerry Development Partnership Ltd is overseen by a voluntary board of directors consisting of 23 members representing four key pillars, The Community & Voluntary Sector, The Social Partners, Statutory Agencies and Local Government.

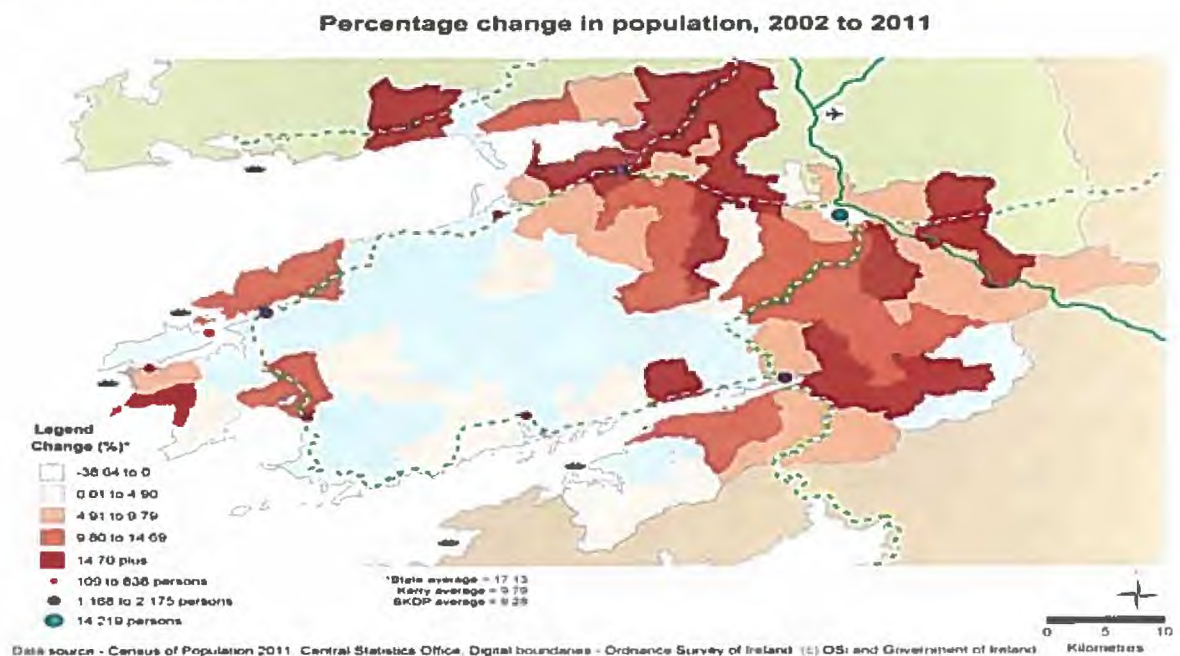
South Kerry Development Partnership (SKDP) works to promote and assist the development of sustainable, vibrant communities in South Kerry, and to improve the quality of life of people living there through the provision of social and economic opportunities. A snapshot of SKDP activity in 2015 is outlined below.

- Provided advice, guidance and mentoring to over 300 unemployed individuals interested in self-employment and supported 150 of them to establish their own enterprise. Supported just under 30 enterprises with grant aid support
- Through its Local Employment Service - Assisted almost 1,400 unemployed individuals with a range of labour market activation supports - and progressed 883 individuals into employment, CE Schemes, Tus and further education and training
- Supported 857 individuals to access the range of services provided by its Jobs Club service and progressed 106 directly in employment

- Provided enterprise led training to over 100 enterprises across South Kerry through its Skillnets training network, providing well over 3,000 training days and funding almost 700 trainees
- Supported over 250 community projects with valuable labour resources through its Rural Social Scheme & Tus Schemes covering the following project categories Environmental Services, General Community Services, Heritage & Cultural Services, Social care and care of the elderly, Village & Country Side Enhancement Projects, Environmental maintenance work, Maintenance and care-taking of community and sporting facilities, Projects relating to not for profit cultural & heritage centres etc.
- Utilising Community Development approaches, targeted supports and interagency collaboration - SKDP worked with over 400 individuals and 30 community groups from marginalized target groups /disadvantaged areas on a one to one basis through the Social Inclusion & Community Activation Programme, to promote social inclusion and equality and improve the life chances of those who are marginalised, living in poverty or unemployment.
- Supported the development and maintenance of important recreational infrastructure through the administration of the Walks Scheme on the national waymarked Ways – Kerry-way and the Kerry sections of the Beara Way and on a number of community Looped walks.

Challenges - South Kerry

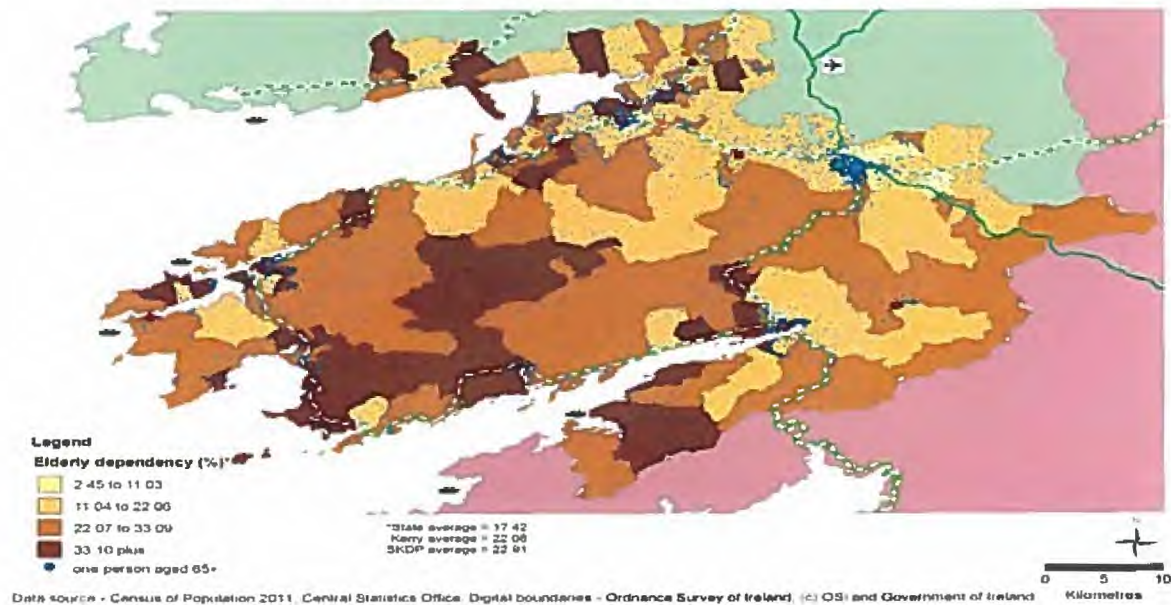
The following maps illustrate the challenges facing South Kerry



The 2002-2011 story of population change confirms that accessibility and connectivity remain strong indicators of population growth with above-average increases widespread across the north-eastern third of the territory. Conversely, population declines in much of the

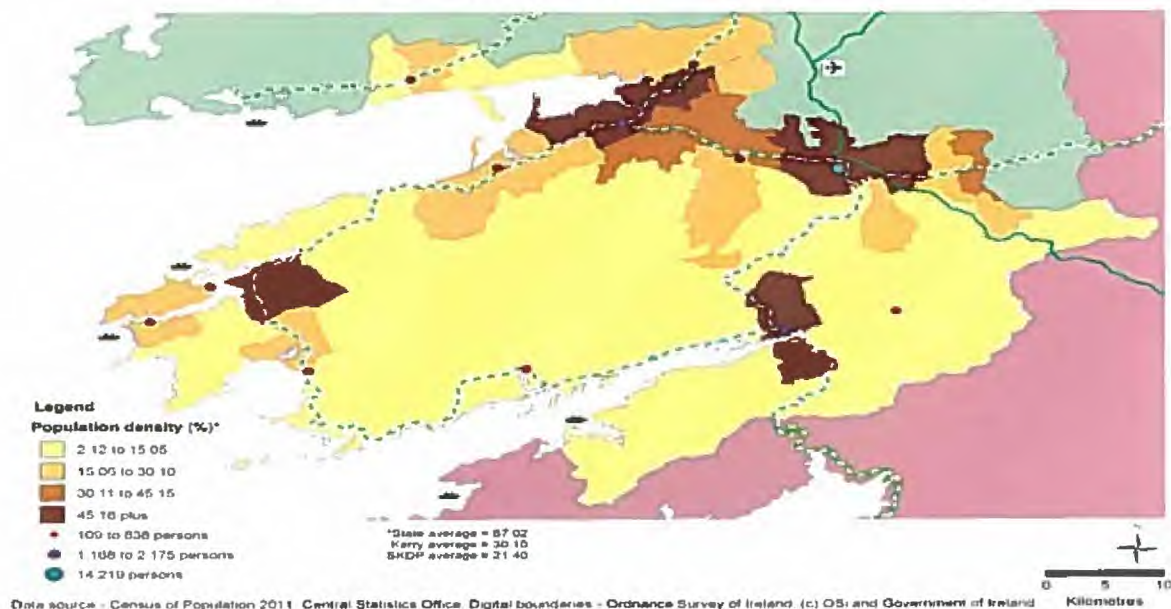
Iveragh peninsula are underpinned by such trends as rural restructuring and the withdrawal of public services.

Elderly dependency (65+ year olds as percentage of 15-64 year olds), 2011



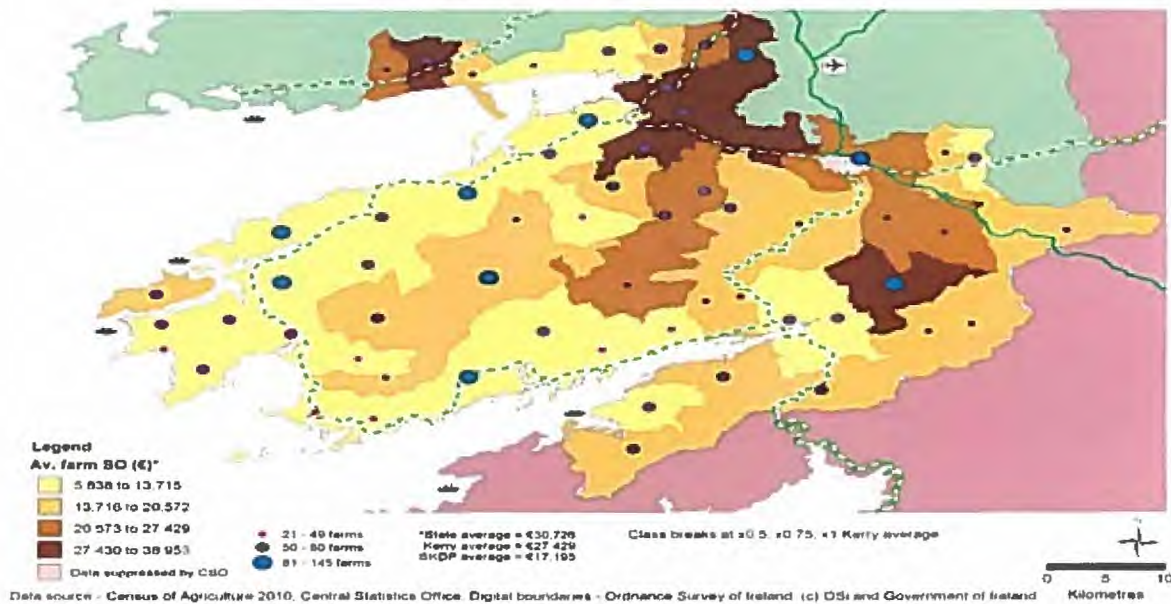
Vulnerable areas experiencing both an ageing resident population and population decline occur in parts of the Beara peninsula, from Sneem to Waterville and in inland Iveragh, flagging areas at risk of depopulation

Population density (inhabitants per square kilometre), 2011



Above-average population densities extend along the road network across the northern part of the territory from Killorglin to Killarney, an area demonstrating strong connectivity, as well as around Kenmare and Cahersiveen. This lies in stark contrast with the rest of the Iveragh and Beara peninsulas, most of which have population densities of no more than 15 persons per km², emphasising their rurality.

Average farm standard output (€), 2010



Turning to farm output, areas with standard output less than half the county average extend throughout coastal areas, in particular, from Annascaul to Beara. In other words, farms in these areas produce the lowest returns on average.

Weaknesses- Synopsis

- Rural peripheral area with a declining Population – Out Migration & Emigration
- Weak Demographic Structure - Older Age Profile
- Low population density
- Economic Opportunities – Dependent on Tourism & Farming
- Low input/output farming predominates in South Kerry
- Infrastructural Deficits – Broadband/Mobile phone coverage
- Loss of public services

Rural Vibrancy in South Kerry

South Kerry Development Partnership Ltd, as part of an EU Interreg Project called Rural Alliances, teamed up with Mary Immaculate College, University of Limerick (Dr. Brendan O'Keeffe) to undertake comprehensive research on the issue of rural vibrancy in South Kerry. The survey work, undertaken independently by the Dept. of Geography, Mary Immaculate College, University of Limerick, included

1. The activities, vibrancy and perspectives of Community & Voluntary organisations, as ascertained from a survey of (via written questionnaire and complemented by facilitated individual & group discussions) over 100 Community & Voluntary groups across South Kerry.
2. An examination of the distribution and accessibility of public services (e.g. Post Offices, Libraries, Garda Stations & Schools) across South Kerry and a

benchmarking against the minimum standards as set out by the Irish Government in the National Spatial Strategy 2002

3. South Kerry citizen's perspectives on the vibrancy of their communities as ascertained from a survey of 1,000 South Kerry Citizens from all walks of life. This citizen's survey is the largest of its kind ever undertaken in Ireland, and South Kerry is leading the way.

The report – 'Rural Vibrancy in North-West Europe – The Case of South Kerry' - was published in October 2015 and makes a series of recommendations as to how rural vibrancy and sustainable development can be enhanced and better promoted.

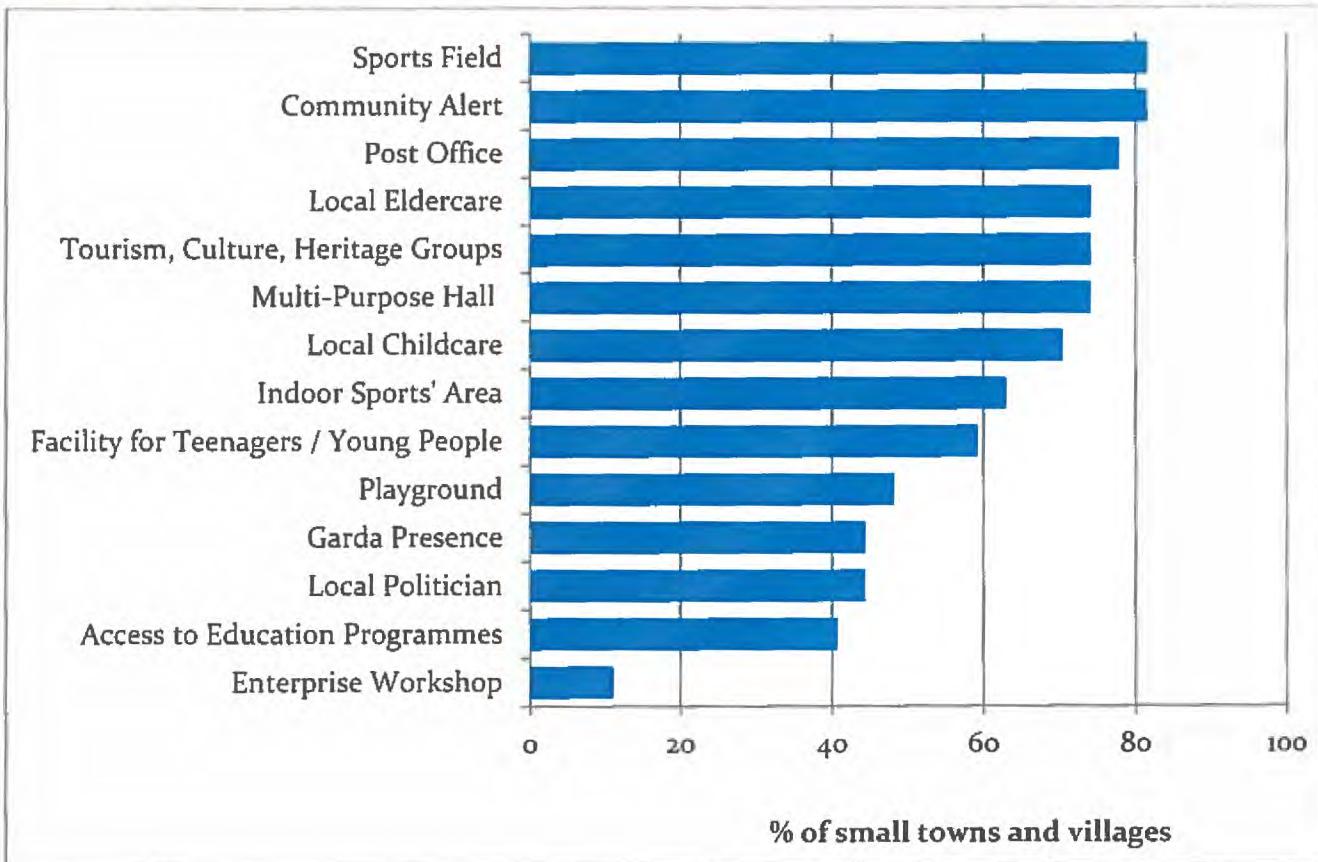
Rural Vibrancy is important. Why? Writing in the Irish Examiner (August 13th 2015 – Professor Cathal O'Donoghue (Then Head of Teagasc's Rural Economy and Development Programme noted that *'Vibrant Communities can, with local leadership, do a lot for themselves to make their areas better places to live in. This vibrancy is a really critical building bloc of rural economic development. Without it, it will be hard to attract businesses and visitors'*

Some findings from the Research

Word cloud depicting main Issues facing local Communities in South Kerry



Percentage of Small Towns and Villages in South Kerry that have the Services specified in the NSS



Word cloud depicting how Community Leaders describe their local communities



Summary and an analysis of the research findings

Listed below are a summary of the research findings and these in the view of SKDP provide pointers to Community & Voluntary groups, Local Development Companies, service providers, all tiers of Government and policy makers on what it takes to sustain viable rural communities

- Civil Society is increasingly active in the provision of local services, particularly social services.
- Community and voluntary groups are generally well-organised and have increasing levels of skills and the proven ability to deliver projects efficiently and effectively. Investment in community development delivers public goods, and needs to be prioritised. The animation, capacity-building and funding provided by SKDP have been, and are integral to the development of communities and the promotion of rural vibrancy.
- Community groups are under increased pressures as they endeavour to fill gaps caused by the retrenchant and centralising State. Such pressures are increasingly unsustainable and have been exacerbated by funding cut-backs, not least the cuts that led to the loss of key personnel from SKDP. These cuts need to be reversed and the surrounding supports need to be re-instated and strengthened.
- The increased bureaucratization of the way in which publicly-funded programmes (including LEADER • and SICAP) operate is perceived by civil society as a barrier to innovation and the attainment of vibrant community development. Programmes need to be administered in a more 'common sense' manner, with an appropriate balance between the need for public accountability and efficient delivery.
- In order to maintain and increase their levels of dynamism and their capacity to 'do development and democracy,' community and voluntary groups need to become more inclusive and representative of younger people and those who have moved to South Kerry, especially those who have come here from Poland and Lithuania, and Central Europe generally.
- Public service provision in most of South Kerry falls below the 2002 target levels specified in the National Spatial Strategy and it is essential that rural service provision be underpinned by specific measures in the forthcoming National Planning Framework. Areas with the weakest levels of public service provision, most notably Iveragh, need to be prioritised in the safeguarding of existing services and in the roll-out of new services, particularly broadband.
- By virtue of its local base and inter-sectoral composition, SKDP has proven to be a significant lever and broker of resources and investments that have created jobs and spawned other developments. Thus, the Partnership needs to calibrate itself both as a delivery body for specific programmes and as a promotive agent with the agility and flexibility that are required to identify new opportunities and potential for communities and businesses across South Kerry.
- While levels of social capital and socio-cultural vibrancy are high in most communities, voluntary groups and the delivery of local services are under pressure from the contraction of the local economy, particularly outside of Killarney. Thus, there is a need for renewed and on-going investment in economic diversification, the provision of more public service jobs and the development of the SME sector.
- Rural communities are the main economic base of the towns of Kenmare and Killorglin, and the development of these towns is best achieved and sustained by rural-urban collaboration and the building-up of vibrant rural communities.

Cahersiveen also performs some important service functions, but needs to become more of a focal point, and less of a 'pass-through' town.

How can Rural Vibrancy and sustainable development be enhanced and better promoted?

From the SKDP experience and the findings of the Rural Vibrancy research work undertaken – SKDP believes the following actions are required to enhance rural vibrancy and sustainable development and ensure the viability of rural communities

1. *Greater acknowledgement of volunteerism, promotion of community development and active citizenship*

Volunteers are the backbone of many communities and perform important service-provision functions and are significant generators of local economic development. However, they face challenges in filling gaps, particularly as State services are scaled back and re-organised. Meanwhile, the wider economic re-structuring of rural territories is delimiting their abilities to meet some new and emerging challenges. These observations on civil society, as supported by data presented in Dr Brendan O'Keeffe's report, can also be made in respect of many communes and municipalities in other regions throughout rural NW Europe. Community-led development works and local leadership and citizen participation need to be supported and facilitated. In continental NW Europe, local level bodies (e.g. French Communes – average population 1,700) enjoy constitutional protection and legal guarantees. In Ireland, in contrast, the work of civil society often goes under the radar of the public consciousness and the national media, and policy-makers can be inclined to take volunteers for granted. This needs to change.

2. *Tailored Approaches to Local Conditions, Needs and Potential.*

'Rural areas are increasingly diverse and there are distinct spatial patterns and differing capacities evident throughout rural Ireland' – (CEDRA). Whilst there is a certain commonality to the challenges faced by Rural Ireland as the CEDRA report noted rural areas are increasingly diverse and these patterns reflect the variation in the endowment and scale of human, physical, natural and capital resources available within each rural area. As a consequence rural areas will differ in their capacity to respond to both external and internal stimuli and consideration of this diversity is critical when planning to support the realisation of the vision for rural Ireland as presented in the CEDRA report. The geographical variations in respect of the many issues covered in the South Kerry Rural Vibrancy report underscore the importance of dealing with communities and parishes at the most local level possible and of avoiding a 'one size fits all' approach. Public policy needs to be tailored for specific geographies. The delineation of municipal districts at sub-county level represents a positive element of the Local Government (Reform) Act, 2014, as it brings local government closer to the citizen, thereby opening the potential for greater transparency and subsidiarity. In South Kerry's case however, the South and West Municipal District is one of the largest and most diverse in Ireland (has limited internal public transport services), and its boundaries were drawn without due consultation with local citizens.

3. *Rural Development as a Public Good*

Several OECD studies and indeed the CEDRA report itself present considerable evidence in favour of strategic investments in rural areas.

Such investments need to be targeted towards the most vulnerable areas, so as to redress the growing gap between core and peripheral regions and territories. As Dr Brendan O'Keeffe notes in his rural vibrancy study *'Experiences from Germany, Scandinavia, and indeed the CLÁR initiative in Ireland, point to the merits that can arise from prioritising key strategic investments in peripheral locations, rather than 'waiting' for a trickle-down' effect from urban centres. Specifically, within South Kerry, towns demonstrate a reliance on the purchasing power of those who live in the surrounding rural communities and on the environmental goods, services and economic activities associated with South Kerry's outstanding landscape. Thus, instead of expecting rural South Kerry to benefit from some kind of urban spill-over, it is recommended instead, that initiatives such as REDZ (Rural Economic Development Zones) take a holistic approach that enables parallel investments in both town and countryside. In addition, the roll-out of key infrastructure, including broadband ought to extend to rural communities in tandem with adjoining urban areas'*

4. Promoting Public Service Provision

International literature on the issue of Rural Vibrancy demonstrates the link between vibrancy and public service provision. As the Study on Rural Vibrancy in South Kerry shows across South Kerry as a whole, the towns and villages offer 75 percent of the recommended range of services for settlements of their size and this is much lower for parts of Iveragh. Whilst the centralisation and cutback of public services may save the government in the short term, considerable damage done as a result of inter-regional imbalances, growing income inequality, increased levels of isolation, mental ill health will prove very costly in the medium to long term. Dr Brendan O'Keeffe noted in the South Kerry rural vibrancy report – *'the message from this report is clear: now that the economy is beginning to show signs of recovery at national level, service provision must be restored to pre-recession levels, and investment needs to be accelerated so that all communities in South Kerry attain the service provision targets specified for them in the National Spatial Strategy'*

5. Reducing Bureaucratic Burdens

The South Kerry Rural Vibrancy report reveals strong support by local communities for South Kerry Development Partnership Ltd and the LEADER and partnership approaches to development. Given the important role that local development companies play in stimulating local economic development and leading community development, these companies should allocated increased funding and given greater autonomy to make decisions about the allocation and distribution of rural and local development funds. Recent Local Government reforms have limited the autonomy of Local Development Companies and in some instances have resulted in their removal from the delivery of LEADER in their areas. These decisions need to be reversed. Cuts to LEADER and to community development are having a disabling effect on the capacity of the community & voluntary sector and are exacerbating the gap between the core and a growing rural periphery, whilst also compounding social exclusion. These cuts need to be reversed. As an example the previous round of LEADER funding 2007-2013 – the final spend on the programme was circa €370 million nationally – this during the worst economic crises in the history of the state. The budget allocation for the current round of LEADER funding is €220 - €250 million a reduction in the order of 40%. In Kerry the budget reduction for LEADER is greater than 50%. The Rural Social Scheme which has done so much to support service delivery in rural communities has not seen an increase in the national allocation of 2600 places in the last ten years.

Dr Brendan O'Keeffe's findings from the South Kerry Rural Vibrancy report are noteworthy here *'The need for more streamlined and less onerous bureaucratic control rings loudly from the findings presented in this report. However, the roll-out of alignment and the establishment of structures associated with the implementation of the Local Government (Reform) Act, 2014 have added an additional layer of bureaucracy to the funding application process. Project promoters are facing a scenario in which they will have to work with one agency (a LAG e.g. SKDP) to develop their project, but may have to have their application for funding approved by a separate entity i.e. the LCDC (Local Community Development Committee) of the County Council. The survey results show that such a scenario lacks any support amongst citizens and/or project promoters. Previous experiences in Wales and in some Anglo-Saxon countries show that where rural development is directed by local authorities, with LAGs functioning as subordinate implementing bodies, programmes are much less effective than those that operate through the community-led approach that has pertained in states such as Ireland, Spain, Portugal, Finland and Austria, amongst others'*

6. Economic Diversification

'The work of CEDRA and many of the experts cited in literature review (Chapter Two) demonstrates that the current recession and austerity agenda have had a more adverse effect on rural communities than on most urban areas. The data presented show that rural economic development is integral to the ability of civil society organisations to grow their membership and foster social, knowledge and cultural capital. Therefore, there is a symbiotic relationship between the economic and the social. Investment in the rural economy is necessary for community development, while communities that are socially vibrant and have a high-quality natural environment are more likely to attract and sustain investment and generate prosperity. Therefore, it is recommended that the upcoming LEADER Programme be delivered in concert with all area-based initiatives including SICAP, TÚS, the Rural Social Scheme, the National Walks Scheme, EU LIFE, INTERREG projects and all social inclusion programmes, using community-led approaches, so as to enable South Kerry to capitalise on the complementarity between the dimensions of sustainable development – economic, socio-cultural and environmental' – (Rural Vibrancy in North-West Europe – The Case of South Kerry – Brendan O'Keeffe 2015)