

**Submission to the Joint Committee on Arts Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs
on behalf of Fingal LEADER Partnership Co Ltd : - Phil Moore CEO (Acting)**

Company Profile:

Fingal LEADER Partnership Co Ltd. is a not for profit organisation with charitable status. The company was established in 2009 following the government cohesion process which saw Rural Dublin LEADER Co Ltd merge with Cooperation Fingal. FLP have extensive experience and expertise in regard to the delivery of the LEADER Programme across the Dublin rural sub-region which encompasses the three Local Authority regions of South Dublin County, Fingal and Dun Laoghaire/Rathdown. The company also delivers the TÚS Programme, the Jobs Club Initiative and Care & Repair programme.

Personal Profile:

I have a lifelong passion for community and local development and have volunteered since I was a teenager. It was therefore no surprise that as the Community & Voluntary Sector evolved I chose a career in Community & Rural Development. I graduated from UCD with a BSc (Hons) in Rural Development and have been employed on the LEADER Programme in the Dublin sub-region since 1997. I have worked as a Rural Development Officer in the past three LEADER Programmes and latterly as RDP Programme Manager for the 2007-2013 Programme. I am currently CEO (acting) with FLP and Dublin Rural LEADER working on implementing the Local Development Strategy for 2014-2020. I had a key role in the research and development of both the 2007-2013 programme strategy and the 2014-2020 strategy. As a development officer I have cemented strong links with the communities and businesses of the rural areas of Dublin and have achieved many excellent projects in both sectors. I also have a strong working relationship with the many key agencies and the local authorities who assist the rural areas in their efforts to achieve sustainability and address the many challenges these communities face.

Rural Dublin Area Description:

The Dublin Rural area comprises an area of **410 sq.km** (42,000 ha), which is approximately **51%** of the total area of the three relevant local authorities. However, the population within this area is **66,603**, only accounting for **13%** of the total for the

three local authorities (745,457). Compared with the urban areas of these local authorities, this reflects a relatively less densely populated area.

The Dublin Rural area is a peri-urban region, heavily influenced by the urban area within County Dublin, where the urban environment transitions into the rural environment. The physical landscapes are varied with the Dublin Mountains to the south, arable pasture to the north and west, rivers and streams throughout, nearly 34 km of coastline to the northeast, and interspersed with vibrant towns and villages. However, while this landscape remains predominantly rural, the relationships with the urban core are numerous and complex – influencing employment, demographics and household characteristics. Furthermore, population growth is resulting in urbanisation and the loss of rural and agriculture lands, as parts of the County are ceded to residential requirements.

For the residents of urban Dublin, its rural hinterland is an enviable location for recreation and amenity and an escape into nature. The peri-urban region is under expansionary residential and commercial pressures, resulting in rural towns and villages experiencing many challenges; not least the changing demographic in terms of population, with many diverse communities now residing in the Dublin Rural area.

The effect of these pressures is a factor in the reduction in farm numbers and size between 1991 and 2010. The number of farms in County Dublin fell by 47.2% to 798 during this 19-year period, resulting in a 22.9% reduction in the area of land farmed (37,963 ha). These changes and challenges are not unique to the Dublin rural area but the proximity to the City of Dublin brings additional pressures which heighten the issues in the Dublin rural towns and villages.

In summary, the issues faced in the Dublin peri-urban area differ slightly from those experienced in the more traditional rural areas and include:

- Loss of rural identity;
- Loss of cultural heritage;
- Loss of open space, threat to rural landscape;
- Threat to rural environment and biodiversity;
- Large growth in population with poor or no matching service provision;

- Growing youth population requiring early intervention to avoid problems later;
- Issues arising from increased in-migration of residents of diverse cultures without social interaction opportunities for old and new residents

Socio-Economic Comment:

In terms of Socio-Economic statistics the Dublin Rural region demonstrates similar needs and challenges as the rest of rural Ireland. High unemployment rates as high as 19% in some areas, poor or no public transport and poor broadband access for rural business. In terms of communities a huge lack of community infrastructure in some of the most rural towns and villages which prohibits interaction and access to services and supports. Another challenge facing rural communities across the board is the in-migration of new residents and the diversity of cultures and the lack of social integration opportunities between the old and new residents of these areas. With a huge growth in youth population rural Dublin is facing problems in anti-social behaviour difficulties as experienced in urban areas previously where there were no services or supports or recreational amenities for the young population. Rural areas need to lay the foundation now to ensure the young people living in rural areas have access to recreational activities in their own area including innovative and stimulating educational programmes in the area of science and technology and youth entrepreneurship. Investment now will prevent problems later. The rural environment is a huge asset to the population as a whole and it is vital it is conserved and preserved for future generations. Habitat conservation, protection of the natural biodiversity of rural areas and the raising of awareness at local and national level are all reasonable expectations in the interest of the protection and sustainable protection of rural Ireland

What it takes to sustain a viable rural community?

The primary **asset** of any community is the **people**; investment in the people is investment in the place. In my experience working closely with the communities of the rural Dublin region over the past 20 years I have found that in order to achieve any success at sustainability and viability there must be key drivers within the

community as a whole. It is the responsibility of those in charge of the provision of services, supports and capital investment in community infrastructure to harness the good will, commitment and passion of these key people and assist them to achieve what is best for their community when they deliver success. It will create enthusiasm in others and build a strong foundation for further growth and success.

This can be achieved by many means, through access to education and training, building the capacity of people at local level which in turn will filter down to others in the community. Involving community people in the decision making process for their area, and by this I mean **real and substantial** contributions not lip-service, which has often been the case in the past will deliver positive results. This has been proven over the years through the productivity and achievements of the EU LEADER Initiative which is the core ethos of community led local development which is the preferred methodology for delivery of all service provision under the control of the local authorities across the country at this time.

The three main contributing factors to a viable and sustainable rural community are **Economic Viability, Community Participation** and **Environmental Sustainability**.

Economic Viability:

One of the recurring comments by rural dwellers is the lack of access to employment within their local area or in close proximity of their area of residence. This fact puts a huge strain on individuals and families as the cost of travelling to work is high, and often there is no alternative as there is poor or no access to public transport available. Young families in particular who have both parents working in order to meet their financial commitments are particularly vulnerable.

Assistance in addressing the lack of employment in local rural areas could be achieved through targeted initiatives to small and medium sized businesses establishing in rural towns and creating employment locally. These may include tax incentives or a rates amnesty for a start-up indigenous company. An apprenticeship scheme encouraging local trade's people and local artisan craft workers to engage local young people in interesting and career focused work in their own area would contribute to retaining the local youth population and growing the local economy.

These two small interventions across rural Ireland could have a huge positive impact on a rural town or village from both an economic and social perspective.

Community Participation:

As stated previously the greatest asset of a rural area is the people and the participation of the community in their local area is a major factor in creating and maintaining a sustainable rural area. In the rural Dublin context the encroachment of both commercial and residential into what was small rural heritage villages has seen the disengagement and disillusionment of previously committed and vibrant community participants and activists in a number of areas. These areas now rate high on the disadvantage demographic due to increased population, diverse communities, lack of engagement and disillusionment and lack of investment in community infrastructure and support services. These difficulties could have been avoided if the community voice had been respected and their concerns noted as they predicted the problems they would face as the plan for their area was presented. These communities were interested, were keen to participate and engage but lost faith as their input was ignored. There is now a huge piece of work to get these communities back to engaging and building a community where they can enjoy a quality of life where they can access services and supports in a facility they can value and protect.

Community Participation should mean just that, Public consultation for the sake of it is no longer good enough. The voice of those most affected by changes in their area particularly residential development without parallel community infrastructure should be heard. This can create a spirit of partnership and goodwill and will deliver a place to be proud of and where a good life can be had. Not all areas where development has occurred experienced negative outcomes, but the key difference is that the infrastructure was in place, the people had ownership and their opinion was valued and this proves the point that community participation is vital.

Key community activists are the backbone of community development and they bring their enthusiasm and commitment to initiatives to improve service provision and

access to supports within their local area and these people are entitled to support from those in control of service provision and budgets.

The outcome of supporting community development at local level sees the initiation of activities such as men's sheds, women's groups, active retired, senior citizen groups, youth cafes and youth activity groups. All of these initiatives offer an opportunity for social interaction in a safe environment and contribute to the well-being of the relevant sectors of the community they support. It is not too long ago one of the huge problems of rural areas was the isolation suffered and experiences by rural men. The launch of the men's shed initiative now sees this issue slowly but surely being dealt with and the experience and skills of these men can be utilised to encourage young people in the area of arts and crafts and traditional trades. Every positive action or initiative launched in a rural community has multiple impacts and outputs, offers learning and gives hope and commitment where there was none; All of this in turn contributes to the sustainability of the rural community as a whole. This is the feel good factor of rural community development.

Rural Environment:

The sustainable management and protection of the rural environment is vital not least for the value of the natural environment to all. The protection of native habitats and species for future generations is of paramount importance and is the responsibility of all. But the rural environment offers a unique opportunity for economic activity and the creation of employment across rural Ireland. As the natural amenities and landscapes provides a backdrop for unique and innovative tourism product development and destination tourism development. Each rural area can contribute a tourism attraction that is unique to that area; this can be in the area of heritage, culture local traditions or a local site or visual aspect. Rural tourism is a major economic resource and here again the local community have a part to play as the inspiration and drive for the development of these local rural tourism initiatives are very often initiated and delivered through the actions of a local community group in partnership with the Local Authority, Failte Ireland and others key stakeholders.

The tourism sector has been identified both nationally and locally as a key economic driver and stimulant for enhanced quality of life and sustained rural economic performance. Utilizing key natural assets such as the landscape, history and heritage, culture and human resources, rural tourism can continue as one of Ireland's most important economic sectors.

However, in order to realise this potential, targeted research, innovation, capacity building, cross sectoral organisational supports and capital investment is required if it is to contribute to the rural economy.

To summarise:

The people, the place and the investment of all stakeholders are key ingredients to achieving a viable rural community. Without each part there is a tendency towards weakness and ultimately failure to achieve a viable community.

A healthy economic element will offer the basis for stability, will enable young people to remain in their home area and this in turn brings back the old tradition of the extended family which in turn creates for a happier community. The issues of isolation of older residents and the need for support for young families will be minimised and the regeneration of towns and villages will occur.

This in turn will see the need for additional services and the re-instatement of others like the rural post office, the retention of schools and the re-opening of Garda stations, all of which has been a huge loss to many rural areas in recent years.

The recognition of the role a community can and will play in achieving viability is vital. The decision makers at local and national level can achieve positive results by working with the local community right from the outset to achieve the changes that may be required be they infrastructural development or national initiatives. By allowing the communities to have a true role they will achieve more.

However, the true influence on the viability of rural Ireland and the communities who live there remains with the decision makers at local and national level; those who

control the budget and the allocation of investment in rural areas. Unless they have an open mind and can see the value of true consultation at local level. The need for economic incentives to allow for indigenous small and medium business to establish in rural areas; the need to deliver on the national broadband strategy to allow for innovative business practices in rural areas and to invest in rural tourism product development to maximise the natural resources available in abundance in the rural areas there will be no progress.