



Letterfrack,
Connemara,
Co. Galway

14/11/16

Written Submission to the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs: "The challenges facing rural communities and how these can be met through the various social schemes and otherwise."

Fís Straitéiseach - FORUM Connemara Ltd

'Aithníodh Conamara na féidireachtaí atá aici, chun deiseanna a sholáthar do chách a bheith páirteach i saol eacnamaíocht, sóisialta agus sibhialta an réigiún agus leas a bhaint as na láidreachtaí agus a chuid tréithe eisceachtúil chun eacnamaíocht áitiúil a fhorbairt agus 'tírdheach beo' a chinntiú le pobal bríomhar chuimsitheach.'

FORUM Connemara Ltd - Strategic Vision

'Connemara will realise its potential, providing opportunities for all to grow and participate in the economic, social and civic life of the region and use its unique strengths and attributes to develop the local economy, ensure a 'living landscape' with a strong and inclusive community.'

Background

FORUM originated as a community development organisation, whose main aim was to tackle disadvantage and assist the rural economy by building the capacity of groups, enterprises and individuals within the project

area. This work has continued over the last **twenty five years and is firmly based on utilising community development principles to tackle social exclusion and disadvantage.**

The catchment area has a population of 39,238 and covers a 2050 km². It is an area of outstanding natural beauty with the population dispersed throughout the rural area, though small concentrations can be found with Clifden on the Atlantic, and Oughterard on Lough Corrib. The area faces many challenges and opportunities in terms of realising sustainable development objectives. Much of the territory is structurally weak, with poor connectivity, a low level of demographic vitality, poor digital infrastructure, inadequate transport systems and a narrow economic base. Structural weaknesses are most profound in the north, west and centre of the territory, where there is a high level of dependence on small-scale marginal farming/fishing and seasonal employment.

Guiding Principles

The cornerstone of these principles has been the participation of all relevant actors including statutory bodies, voluntary groups, enterprise and representatives of the target groups in the identification of needs and the formulation of responses. The ethos of the work of FORUM has always been to promote access, openness, equality and participation in the supports and services provided through the organisation.

Structure

The Board of FORUM has strong community, business and statutory representation along with experienced staff that have vast expertise and experience in working with voluntary groups and individuals who are experiencing disadvantage/marginalisation and enterprise promoters to identify needs, mobilise responses, evaluate progress and assist in further progression.

FORUM is governed by a Board of 23 voluntary directors representing community and voluntary groups, state agencies, local government and national social partners. FORUM administers a range of programmes (Community employment, TUS, RSS, JI, Adolescent support, Rural Recreation Scheme) on behalf of the government and various state agencies, aimed at improving the overall economic and social well-being of stakeholders and the physical and institutional environments in which they live. For the last three years, FORUM had an average annual turnover of c. €3.4 million.

FORUM Connemara Ltd adheres to the Guidelines for Governance set out by the Department of Environment, Community and Local Government. A company procedures manual is in place; inspected annually by Duffy and Company auditors and by external auditors of the LEADER programme, and contain all the policies necessary to ensure the smooth and transparent running of the company.

For many people living in the catchment area, the lack of, or withdrawal of, services together with the decline of farming/fishing (both marine and freshwater) and a consistent economic downturn, have contributed to an increasing sense of isolation and deprivation. To counteract Forum support a wide range of target groups, including:

- *Family Support/Disadvantaged families*
- *Older people and Carers*
- *People with disability*
- *Under and Unemployed*
- *Youth*
- *Community Groups, and*

- *Enterprise developers.*

Description of FORUM Supports

In recent years, FORUM has undertaken an extensive plan of work with its target groups. This has included:

- Assisting community groups to increase their ability to undertake local development through the provision of meeting rooms, office and community facilities, on-going management assistance and advice, capacity building, seminars and education programmes and support with planning and funding projects.
- Work with older people and people with disability has involved supporting resource centres, expanding a social care programme, establishing and supporting carers groups.
- Assisting individuals with housing difficulties, implementing an essential housing repairs service, organising a variety of special projects including the Intergenerational Programme.
- Supporting women's groups and families by the organisation of special events and workshops,
- Expanding counselling services,
- Ongoing support for the Clifden Citizens Information Service,
- Providing a transport service to Clifden Day Hospital, ,
- Developing catering and reception skills courses with Failte Ireland.
- Delivering a joint initiative between LCDP and LEADER programmes resulting in the establishment of a therapeutic riding service for Connemara.

Youth and Childhood Supports

Through its actions with youth and educational interests, FORUM has tackled the problems of exclusion experienced by the most marginalised children and young people by the provision of a programme of actions in primary and post primary schools, with youth clubs after school programmes and summer camps. FORUM supports parenting programmes that look at drug issues and cyber safety in the community and possible interventions. Work is carried out with a youth representative group, a Youth Café, and Coder Dojo club with sixty children participating.

Employment Supports

In its efforts to tackle under and unemployment FORUM has supported new enterprises, shellfish groups and individual producers and Farm Families through its Employment Mediation Service which has included 80+ people annually placed on a back to work scheme. Many of these participants have set up their own enterprises as sole traders. Training programmes in alternative enterprises such as organic farming and beekeeping have been provided. A Green Cert programme (FETAC level 5 & 6) for young farmers is currently underway with 70 farmers participating.

National and EU Socio-Economic Programmes

FORUM has comprehensive experience in implementing a variety of socio economic programmes in line with national and EU priorities. Funding for both the Local Community Development Programme (now SICAP) and LEADER provides the infrastructure and management basis for the following programmes:

Rural Development Programme (Leader) 2007 – 2013 and contract signed for 2014-2020.
Local Community Development Programme (LCDP)

Adolescent Support Programme

FAS Community Employment Schemes x 3

FAS Job Initiative Scheme x 1

Rural Social Scheme x 1

TUS Scheme x 4

Rural Recreation Scheme x 1

The Rural Social Scheme is an important income support for qualifying farm and fishing families who undertake important work on behalf of local community organisations. Forum welcomes the recent announcement to increase the numbers nationally and have applied for an increase in numbers and schemes (current allocation (14) in non-Gaeltacht Connemara).

FORUM is one of the three companies nationally who have retained LAG status and is now commencing implementation of the new LEADER strategy with a budget of €4.54m. This strategy was compiled following widespread public consultation through Connemara. It has extended its territory to include Gaeltacht and non-Gaeltacht Connemara and its off shore islands.

However, the LEADER programme 2014-2020 sees its financial resources significantly reduced from its previous level. €220m has been pre-allocated to 28 pre-defined sub regions. In County Galway the budget has been reduced by in excess of 50%. A clear commitment is required to address the funding deficit immediately with consideration given to restoring the resources to the level of the previous programme 2007-2013.

Key Challenges Arising from Change in Policy Focus

The new operating policy context, introduced in 2012 as set out in the 'Putting People First' document which resulted in the setting up of Local Community Development Committees (LCDC) has brought about fundamental changes in the way local development and social inclusion programmes are managed and delivered into the future. This top down approach to rural development means that decisions will no longer be made by the local community but instead control and decision making powers is being given to the Co Council led local community development committees (LCDC).

From the outset FORUM has resisted this top down approach to rural development and has instead emulated the European Community Led Local Development (CLLD) approach - **'bottom up' approach which has worked well in Ireland over the past 20 years**. This has always been central to Forum's approach to development since it was established to implement the Poverty 3 programme over 26 years ago.

For FORUM to continue its work in service delivery and, more importantly, continue to empower and enable local community groups and individuals in making decisions and bring about positive change for themselves, it is essential that its Board retain decision making powers in all aspects of company policy and in the management, focus and administration of the company's programmes and activities to reflect local priorities and needs.

Road Map to Change – Proposed Solutions

Rural Ireland was 'forgotten about' in the past five years, the sense of equity and promise of rural proofing of policies was side lined in favour of policies which favoured urban areas. It is now critical that these policies are reversed and equality and rural proofing policies are mandatory for all relevant government departments. Aligned to this is the urgency in restoring full decision making powers to board of directors of local

development companies in the management and administration of LEADER, social inclusion, and other socio economic programmes previously managed by these companies.

During the recent election campaign, FORUM Connemara and other rural based LAG's raised awareness of the urgent need to fight the trend which has led to the erosion of services in rural areas, with rural towns and villages being left without vital services or living under the threat of losing GP services, schools, Garda Stations, ambulance, health services and post offices.

Government policies in relation to preschool childcare services have left small community based services struggling to remain open as payments are directly linked to numbers attending, as opposed to the more equitable staffing grant which was paid to preschools in the past.

Poor quality broadband, mobile phone coverage, and a very poor road network impede the development of rural enterprise and the quality of life to people living so far from services.

Recent movements to amalgamate smaller Credit Unions in under larger, urban based Credit Unions will leave rural areas without the traditionally accessible, locally based service which they have come to rely on. Decisions on applications will not be made in the local community if these amalgamations go ahead.

The farming community are facing many obstacles and impediments. Much of Connemara is under various European designations which place severe restrictions on farmer's activities and on rural dwellers.

Developing Future Employment and Enterprise

An approach to rural development that embraces a core focus on innovative and sustainable employment and enterprise development to ensure there are alternatives to traditional forms of income/marginal existent or over dependency on social protection measures are long overdue. There persists a lack of focus on behalf of Government on real, impactful and sustainable thinking on employment and entrepreneurship in rural areas. This needs to be addressed through investment in research, future planning and supports that support the local population to create and determine their own economic futures that can benefit the broader region.

Appointment of a Full Ministry for Rural Affairs

FORUM Connemara welcomes the setting up of a Department of rural affair as part of the programme for government. This department must be given a central role in all aspects of rural development including LEADER, social inclusion programmes, RSS, and other programmes which impacts on farming /fishing families and rural dwellers.

Alongside this the original role of the Local Development Companies (LDC) need to be fully restored to that which has full decision making management and administrative powers. The current position where most of these companies are relegated to implementer status severely impedes their role and influence in their local communities and in rural development in general. This needs to change and full decision making powers restored.

WHAT CAN YOU DO TO HELP THE DEVELOPMENT OF RURAL IRELAND?

As Connemara continues to build upon its natural advantages of environment, tourism and export industries (mussels, oysters, shell fish, agricultural produce) and to tackle its natural disadvantages of over-dependence on small-scale farming/fishing, seasonal employment and peripherality, there is so much that you can do to make a real positive difference.

First - Cherish all the children of Ireland equally and put aside any notion that those outside of urban districts are somehow less important. Value the people.

Second - Encourage the people themselves to be wholly involved in their futures. Put aside failed attempts to impose ideas from above but, rather, embrace the European model of '**BOTTOM UP**' community development. Listen to the people – give them a voice.

Third - Give us the tools. We need first-class Broadband; we need first-class mobile phone coverage; we need good road access, and encourage IBEC, WDC and the IDA to investigate the establishment of small businesses in rural Ireland – publishing, for example.

Fourth - Give us high-quality educational facilities which not only achieve academic standards but which place huge emphasis on music (with particular emphasis on traditional music, song and dance), the arts, culture and sport etc., so that our young people are given the very best opportunity to become good, accomplished, all-round citizens.

Fifth - Examine the potential to use the Tax Code judiciously. For example, one job in Connemara is probably equivalent to ten jobs in Dublin. Perhaps the disadvantage of the Employer contribution in designated rural areas should be looked at.

Sixth - Get the Department of Environment to allow Dementia Units to qualify for Capital Assistance Scheme aid. It is preposterous that the growing demand for specialist dementia units is ignored. These clients must be looked after close to their own environment.

Seventh - Encourage universities, colleges and government departments to actively investigate strategic de-centralisation. For example, with access to one of the largest stretches of the Atlantic seaboard, Connemara could offer collaborative scientific research bases.

Eight - Reverse the threat to amalgamate rural credit unions with larger urban credit unions. Access to locally managed microfinance needs to be maintained.

Ninth - Strengthen the composition of the Local Development Companies (LDCs) and enable them to take on the management and delivery of a full range of rural development programmes.

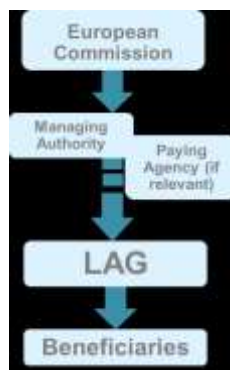
Tenth – Implement regular opening times for rural Garda stations.

Eleventh – Investigate the feasibility of the development of ‘local hubs’ in community/public buildings in the smaller villages and towns where the public can access State services.

Twelfth - Reverse the trend of Departments creating buffer zones between themselves and the public, where they subcontract work to private companies’ e.g. DSP with Seetec.

Thirteenth - Let County Councils do what they do best: - streets, footpaths, lighting, water and sewage, basic infrastructures **BUT** keep them away from administering social schemes.

Fourteenth – Implement the principles of CLLD as outlined in the chart below.



An increased EU co-financing rate can be obtained if the State were to implement fully the principles of CLLD across a variety of EU programmes...