Smart Community Initiative

Meeting with the Joint Committee on Rural and Community Development

6 February 2019

Statement by Minister Seán Canney

I would like to thank the Chair and members of the Committee for the invitation to meet with you and discuss the Smart Community Initiative.

**Background**

The internet and digital technologies are transforming the way people live and work today yet figures from the Central Statistics Office (CSO) show that 1 in 7 people living in Ireland have never used the internet. They cite lack of skills and the belief that they don't need it as the key barrier to using it.

At a foundation level, minimising the digital divide is firstly about broadband connectivity for the population, and as 5G technology advances to provide wider geographic coverage of places.  Next comes basic foundation skills and literacy to enable people to discover the constructive applications of digital technology and content.

Addressing the foundations of the digital divide means, in the main, reaching out to the most marginalised in society and helping them participate in a digital society.  The Department of Communication Climate Action and Environment's Digital Skills for Citizens Scheme is providing basic digital skills classes for people to help them take their first step online.

However, classroom training alone will not reach the scale of the effort defined by the CSO which suggests about 16 – 18% of the population.  Any new interventions must be sustainable in order to provide the ongoing supports required to address and maintain inclusion in a digital world.

**Community development**

Communities are at the heart of everything we do, be it digital or otherwise. We are working across both Departments to provide communities with a better chance of making choices for themselves. To succeed in developing communities where connectivity and digitisation are a seamless part of everyday life, partnerships between Government Departments, private industry and communities are needed. By working together and combining existing assets and resources under a shared vision, communities can maximise the reach and impact of schemes and programmes.

**Smart Community Initiative**

The Smart Community initiative is a new approach that will bring exposure to digital content and technology out into the community and support the discovery of the value of digital in the daily lives of people.

With this in mind the Department of Communications Climate Action and Environment together with the Department of Rural and Community Development engaged with senior representatives from organisations who had expressed an interest in this approach such as, the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection, Bank of Ireland, Musgraves, An Post, HSE, the Library Services and the Local Government Management Agency (LGMA).

All of these organisations demonstrated their willingness to be an active partner and a Smart Community Action Group was established. The group agreed that every community faces different challenges and identified four key pillars to be considered:

- Basic skills
- Economic Wellbeing
- Physical and Mental Wellbeing
- History, Culture and Heritage

The Action Group agreed to pilot the Smart Community initiative in Tubbercurry, Co Sligo. Factors taken into account in selecting Tubbercurry included the presence of strong active community groups, a local presence by all of the Stakeholders in the Action Group, the availability of high speed broadband, co-location of a Post Office and a Supervalu, and the existence of an open library which has been funded by the Department of Rural and Community Development under the libraries capital programme.

A Tubbercurry Smart Community committee was established to test the feasibility of the initiative and develop a number of local activities. The committee organised a launch event for Tubbercurry Smart Community on 18th January (a copy of the itinerary is attached at Tab A) which highlighted some of the supports available locally and the opportunities provided by embracing technology.

One of these opportunities is the chance to promote Tubbercurry as a remote working location.  Ireland like all other countries, is being increasingly impacted by digital content and technology.  6% of Ireland's GDP and 116,000 jobs are accounted for by digital in the economy.

The opportunities digital represent for Ireland are significant.  Ireland has the raw materials needed for success, including; the presence of leading digital businesses, a young educated English speaking work force and high levels of international connectivity.

The Tubbercurry Smart Community committee is working with a volunteer movement called Grow Remote to host a conference in Tubbercurry on the 16<sup>th</sup> April.  Grow Remote is about connecting jobs to the people and creating a remote community.  It is about choice, when jobs are mobile it provides opportunities for communities to compete.

**Next Steps**

We will, over the coming months assess where possible what the impact of becoming a Smart Community is having on Tubbercurry.  Record lessons learned and develop criteria to identify key elements required to become a Smart Community and a set of metrics to be used to measure success.

One pilot is not sufficient to test and build a robust, sustainable initiative, and we are hoping to trial this initiative in a further 3 locations.  The locations chosen will include at least one urban location to ensure that the model used for establishing a Smart Community can be adapted to meet the different needs of communities nationwide.  We will examine existing infrastructure, connectivity and explore new ways of delivering government services to enhance the user experience.

**Local Authority Broadband Officers**

To this end, the Department of Rural and Community Development, which co-funds the employment of a Broadband Officer in each local authority to the tune of €42,000 per local authority this year, will be key to rolling out further trials.

I recently met with Broadband officers and senior officials from each local authority and impressed upon them that they will have a vital role in promoting the Smart Community initiative and the work of grow remote going forward.

**Conclusion**

In summary, a Smart Community can be described as a community working together supported by local and central government, to bring people and technology together in time to capture and exploit the opportunities that new applications afford and broadband-based services can deliver.  Such focused and united community efforts create synergy, which allows individual projects to build upon each other and provide a coherence to Government supports and funding opportunities  Digital is not an end in itself it is an enabler and each community has a different story to tell.

In order to develop as a Smart Community activities must be community driven and supported by industry and Government.


Thank you

# Tab A Smart Communities itinerary 18 January 2019

| Time | Agenda Item | Location |
|------|-------------|----------|
| 10.00 – 10.20 | Holy Family School to meet children in the Smart Classroom. The visit will include:<br>• 10 at 10, Operation Transformation with national leader and local business person Paul Murphy via Online OT App<br>• Smart enterprise demonstration<br>• Discussion with kids on the usage of smart technology in the school and home | Holy Family National School Tubbercurry |
| 10.25 – 10.45 | Teach Laighne. The visit will include:<br>• Discussion with Active Age doing digital training<br>• Discussion with staff in one of Ireland's first open libraries.<br>• Presentation of 'Right to Read' Certificate to library staff in recognition of their work in providing literacy support services to the Community<br>• Meet kids from local Lollipop Lane creche for a digital storytelling session | Teach Laighne |
| 10.50 – 11.05 | Post Office - digital assist booth - Minister Canney, Postmaster Gearoid Surlis and Chamber representatives | Post Office |
| 11.10 - 12.40 | An Chroi. The visit will include:<br>• Meeting with farmers who are completing digital skills training<br>• Met local Smart Community committee<br>• Meet and greet with local education bodies<br>  • North Connaught College launching new online content<br>  • Sligo IT /local man Edmund Gray - debrief on digital app prototype that helps communities reduce waste food<br>  • St Attracta's secondary school who are working on a history and heritage project with tech company Story Tracks<br>  • South Sligo Coder dojo club who will launch their new website<br>• Meet and greet local digital businesses<br>• Welcome address from Mrs Geraldine Brennan, Chairperson of Tubbercurry Chamber of Commerce<br>• Address from An Leas Cathaoirleach of Sligo County Council Clr Paul Taylor<br>• Address from CEO of Sligo County Council Ciaran Hayes<br>• Launch of Grow Remote Conference by Louise Kilbane Chairperson of Tubbercurry Development Company and Tracy Keogh Bank of Ireland<br>• Ministerial address to invited guests<br>• Photo shoot and close Geraldine Brennan | An Chroi Enterprise Centre |
| 12.40 – 12.50 | Visit to local business Tool & Gauge who will demonstrate Smart technology used in precision tool-making industry | Tool & Gauge Ballina Road |