

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM FHORBAIRT TUAITHE AGUS POBAIL

JOINT COMMITTEE ON RURAL AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Déardaoin, 27 Meán Fómhair 2018

Thursday, 27 September 2018

The Joint Committee met at 10.30 a.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT:

Deputy Peter Burke,	Senator Paudie Coffey
Deputy Seán Canney,	Senator Maura Hopkins,
Deputy Michael Collins,	Senator Grace O'Sullivan.
Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice,	
Deputy Martin Kenny,	
Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív,	

In attendance: Deputies John Brassil, Mary Butler and Eugene Murphy.

DEPUTY JOE CAREY IN THE CHAIR.

Sustaining Small Rural Businesses: Irish Local Development Network

Chairman: No apologies have been received from members. I remind members, staff, delegates and those in the Visitors Gallery to turn off their mobile phones which, as they are aware, interfere with the sound system. The public session will be followed by a short private session.

The two main delegates will be requested to speak for between five and ten minutes. Their contributions will be followed by a question and answer session. I suggest members limit their questions to between three and five minutes, but they may contribute a second time. I will work and co-operate with them, but I suggest this arrangement in the interests of fairness. Is that agreed? Agreed. The submissions, opening statements and any other document supplied by the delegates to the committee in advance will be published on its website after the meeting.

By virtue of section 17(2)(l) of the Defamation Act 2009, witnesses are protected by absolute privilege in respect of their evidence to the joint committee. However, if they are directed by it to cease giving evidence on a particular matter and continue to do so, they are entitled thereafter only to qualified privilege in respect of their evidence. They are directed that only evidence connected with the subject matter of these proceedings is to be given and asked to respect the parliamentary practice to the effect that, where possible, they should not criticise or make charges against any person or entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable.

Members are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against a person outside the Houses or an official, either by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable.

This is the first of a series of meetings on the topic of sustainable small rural businesses, which is a priority in our work programme. I welcome Dr. Senan Cooke who is the author of a very fine publication, *The Enterprising Community: A Bottom up Perspective on the Capacity within Communities to Regenerate*, which was published recently and launched by the Minister, Deputy Michael Ring. Dr. Cooke has a very interesting CV which includes being a master glass cutter in Waterford Crystal and a lecturer at Dublin City University. He was involved in setting up the Copper Coast UNESCO geopark in Waterford, an example from which other parts of rural Ireland could benefit. I also welcome Mr. Eamonn O'Reilly, vice chairman of the Irish Local Development Network, ILDN, and CEO of North East-West Kerry Development, and his colleagues, Mr. Declan Rice, CEO of Kilkenny LEADER partnership; Ms Martina Earley, CEO of Roscommon LEADER partnership; Mr. Jim Finn, chairperson of North Tipperary LEADER partnership; and Mr. Joe Saunders, manager of the ILDN.

I invite Dr. Cooke to make his opening statement.

Dr. Senan Cooke: I thank the joint committee for inviting us and giving me the opportunity to make a few comments on what we consider to be an enterprising community. We have hundreds, if not thousands, of enterprising communities throughout the country. There is a different picture in the country distinct from what the media state. Much of what is said is true. Communities have suffered grievous damage, but most of the communities I have visited are very strong in their determination to recover and become even more prosperous than before.

The enterprising community is a socio-cultural economic ecosystem which is very important. I have evidence from all of the statements which I will go through quickly, but I do not have time to present it. Our understanding is the enterprising community is a problem solver,

a wealth creator and an organiser that shapes values, character, attitude and respect. It is the most fundamental institution in the country. It shares responsibility for services and facilities. Families, schools and clubs want the best for themselves and their children and are prepared to work for it. Problems are solved or prevented at source. Social enterprises address many needs and opportunities.

I will use Dunhill Fenor Boatstrand Annewtown, DFBA, Community Enterprises as a case study. It is only one of thousands and I acknowledge that there are others better than ours. I have been to them and spoken to the people involved. I am using our community enterprise as an example because it is the one I know best.

It was established in 1993 when there were four communities in the parish. There was a Church of Ireland village, a fishing harbour and two internal agricultural communities. There were three reasons for the start-up, one being that each of the two parts of the parish - Dunhill and Fenor - had lost a teacher. The school in Dunhill went from having four teachers to three, while the school in Fenor went from having three teachers to two. After the 1980s there was a declining population. Emigration had reached a high in 1989, the year the Berlin Wall fell. There was a lot of uncertainty at the time, much like it is today. A key factor was the setting up of the LEADER partnerships, the county enterprise boards and community employment schemes. That was fundamental. It is coincidental that I am sitting here with three people involved in the LEADER partnerships. The LEADER partnership was fundamental to us because it was the most prominent group to assist us in setting up in 1993.

Another key aspect was that in 1989 the local GAA club had built an indoor complex for IR£350,000. It cleared all of the debt within a few years by voluntary fundraising. Looking at what had happened, within the parish a realisation dawned that there was a new capacity within it and the question was asked whether it could be used to deal with other important aspects such as job creation and schools. Even though I am an avowed GAA person, I make the point that GAA clubs are representative, competitive, fearless and caring, as one can see at funerals or when there is a crisis in a parish. The GAA is much more than a sports organisation. I hope that after a number of things that happened recently, including the event at Páirc Uí Chaoimh, people who have a different view understand what they are dealing with and how precious it is to the country.

As a result of the initiatives taken, the school in Dunhill has gone from having three staff members to nine, while the school in Fenor has gone from having two staff members to 17. There was a special reason for this, but I was advised not to go into too much detail in this part of my presentation and that members could ask questions later.

The population of the area has grown by 25% since 1993. Some 250 jobs were created in the Dunhill Enterprise Centre since it was set up in 2000. Currently there are 36 enterprises, with 75 jobs, in the centre. We have achieved international recognition through Copper Coast, the only voluntary European Union and UNESCO global geopark in the world. There are integrated constructed wetlands. RTÉ's "Ear to the Ground" programme is spending all of today in the Dunhill wetlands. There are also Fenor Bog and Dunhill Castle, the home of the Power clan. The first Baron of Dunhill was Robert Le Poher in 1174. There are also connections between Ireland and Newfoundland. There is a special relationship between the south east - Waterford, Kilkenny, Wexford and south Tipperary - and Newfoundland and last August 80 Newfoundlanders visited the area.

All of the results outlined have been achieved mainly against the odds, for example, during

the financial crisis. There is no broadband in the area. We are expecting it to be provided within weeks, but we have been expecting it for the last year. Currently we are within the blue area and hopeful and praying it will come our way.

The available supports are fragmented all over the place. Nobody in this world can tell us or explain what supports are available for social enterprise because they are many and so varied. Social enterprise has not yet captured the recognition of the Government, but we are hopeful it will shortly. In my understanding of communities there has always been huge emphasis on tackling disadvantage. I have no issue with this at all, but I do have a big issue when the provision of resources is ignored for communities that want to contribute. We set up a social enterprise, of which I was chairman, in a most difficult part of County Waterford in Ballybeg. I do not make any point about the allocation of resources other than it tends to be consumed by people trying to make up stories to claim disadvantage. It was a disastrous approach to it.

I shall turn to Communities Creating Jobs which we set up in 2011. We held three conferences in Dunhill, which were packed out. People came from everywhere to them. We said they would have to work together and it is now a national voluntary shared learning network. It shares ideas, problems, solutions and resources. It also helps communities to avoid mistakes, waste, duplication and displacement. It identifies better ways and activates dormant resources. It provides scaffolding and tools for communities that are starting off and gives them examples. It simplifies complex documents and criteria and tries to help in removing barriers, difficult though that may be. We also try to develop new pathways to success. While we have been successful, we have not received support or recognition, which is a pity when one sees so many communities throughout the State that are working together and prepared to work together but cannot receive support.

Cumasú 22 is a jobs model we have developed. The word “Cumasú” means empowerment. The year 2022 will mark the centenary of the first Government. We would like all of our communities to be able to look back over that 100 years and state, “We had ups and downs but look at where we are now.” We believe that can happen. Cumasú 22 is made up of Communities Creating Jobs, the GAA and the third level education consortium. Our starting point is a target of creating ten jobs in every community. We have a local task group and a facilitator who has been given a six-month timeline to come up with all of the assets, enterprises and opportunities in the location. That work is not to be interfered with by any agency. They must be left alone to figure it out for themselves and say things to themselves that cannot be said when there is anyone else there and that includes Communities Creating Jobs. We set the framework for them. We have completed the first stage of an assets and opportunities audit report and it was all done voluntarily. When we went to the GAA, it told us that there were three things it wanted from us. That suited us down to the ground. It wanted this initiative to be voluntary and community based. It did not want any of the current officers to be involved because it wanted to leave them working for their clubs. We were told that we could accept help from all previous officers, other business supporters and so on. The second stage involves engaging with the relevant agencies to create jobs. It is about three things - job creation, empowerment and the capacity building process. I hope I have got that point across.

Above anything else, families are concerned. It is a democratic imperative that the State be seen to partner with communities in regeneration projects, including in the areas of education, employment creation and housing. In a parish local to me but in another county the postman has helped to identify 80 empty houses. Nobody can understand why something is not being done. The idea is to empower communities to use their social capital to build capacity, pros-

perity from ground up and engage people. People believe they are the helpless victims of the recession and austerity measures when they should be active participants in changing the whole thing. The idea is to solve and prevent problems at source and rebalance the population and the economy with the assistance of IDA Ireland, Enterprise Ireland and social enterprise. To ensure we will not repeat what has happened in the United Kingdom or the United States of America, the process also aims to build respect between the institutions of the State, the political system and the communities in which people live. It can be done this way.

I have ten recommendations that I will outline for the committee. I recommend that the new social enterprise policy and implementation plan be facilitated from January 2019. I ask all parties to back the plan. Surely there can be no division between any party on it. I suggest State, community and private supports be identified through the Department of Community and Rural Development. If the Department looks to identify and describe all of the different resources available, it will know the extent of what is possible in communities.

I recommend a Cúmasú 22 pilot project in the south east. We had a pilot project in County Galway and it was a great success, but, unfortunately, Mr. Drew McDonagh died. He had been leading the initiative. We want to have a second pilot project in the south east where we could have some influence over it to make sure it would work.

Another recommendation is alleviating community enterprise centre debt. I have spoken to Enterprise Ireland and the National Association of Community Enterprise Centres as a number of community enterprise centres ran into difficulty during the financial crisis, but unlike private companies, they refused to give up and leave the debt unpaid. Ours is one of them. To this day we have never not paid our way. However, we have a debt problem. While it is not too serious and we are able to handle it, to give us a chance, we need support, as do other centres throughout the country. I recommend that all parties include a reference to social enterprise in their manifesto or programme for Government for the next election.

Another recommendation is access to fibre broadband countrywide. I cannot tell members how many jobs and businesses we have lost because of the lack of it. Our education centre wants to become a digital education centre and those involved in it are crying on my shoulder every day. When I go there tomorrow, they will be after me again and want to know if there is any news on the provision of fibre broadband. We are in the blue area and have been told that we will have it within a few weeks.

I recommend that EU funds for social enterprise be maximised. Mr. Barroso and Mr. Bar-nier established the business initiative in 2011. They established a €100 million fund for social enterprise. We have heard nothing about it since but they are big people in the EU and they are completely in favour of social enterprise. We ask the Government to get onto committees. We know it is thinking of getting onto some of the committees it is not on, or it is willing to get on them.

I refer to a pilot social enterprise project in the North of Ireland where six communities in Waterford were involved with six communities in Antrim. We spent three years with them. The most telling statement came from a very strong woman, Angela Hayden, a nationalist and a superb person. She said what she most got out of the project was the capacity to talk with her Protestant neighbours in a collaborative session. The focus was not that she could talk to us down in Waterford, albeit she appreciated that, or that she could talk to other nationalists in the North of Ireland, but that she could talk to people she had never spoken to before in that setting. The other thing we want is the opportunity to export to the North of Ireland.

I refer to credit unions. We know our own credit unions. Our own money is all tied up. There is lots of money available. While there are difficulties with the Central Bank and on the policy side, we ask if they would do something for the Irish League of Credit Unions.

I hope people will purchase and promote the *The Enterprising Community* everywhere they can. The book will open eyes. There will be European elections next year and the members of the committee will be down around the south east. I invite every member to come to Dunhill and I will spend two hours showing them around until I have persuaded them of the huge potential of social enterprise. It is a billion euro business or sector. It is not a small thing where great volunteers are doing great work. This is a billion euro business which includes universities, credit unions and a lot of things people do not associate with it.

Chairman: I thank Dr. Cooke for a very well presented contribution. I call on Mr. Eamonn O'Reilly, vice chairperson of the ILDN. If he is minded, he may bring in some of his colleagues as part of his opening statement or at some other stage.

Mr. Eamonn O'Reilly: I thank the Chairman and committee for the invitation to attend today. We welcome the opportunity in circumstances in which the work of the Irish Local Development Network, or ILDN, is deeply entwined with the committee's objective of promoting viable rural communities. The ILDN is the representative body for the country's 49 local development companies, 35 of which operate in rural areas. We cover the whole country. Last year, local development companies supported between them more than 15,000 communities and community groups and 173,000 individuals by delivering approximately €330 million worth of programmes on behalf of the State. Of these, over 11,000 community groups and more than 83,000 individuals were in rural areas. Almost 6,000 rural dwellers found employment through the local employment service, of whom 3,116 moved to self-employment. More than 5,000 people moved onto Tús community workplace schemes and almost 3,000 provided valuable services on the rural social scheme. A further 1,500 plus are employed in social enterprises, which is what Dr. Cooke was discussing a couple of minutes ago, and these have been supported by local development companies.

The range of programmes delivered by local development companies allows for an integrated approach to rural development. Examples include LEADER, the social inclusion and community activation programme, or SICAP, the local employment service, RSS, rural recreation and walks schemes, social enterprise supports, social farming, Tús, education and child care and public health programmes. In addressing rural development, we will focus today on five key principles before inviting questions and discussion from the members. Some of my colleagues might come in at that point.

The first key principle involves the one-stop shop approach and innovative brokerage. Rural communities are increasingly confused and frustrated by the plethora of fragmented funding schemes which often have contradictory qualifying criteria and are released in an unplanned, *ad hoc* manner. Given their working methodology, local links and reputation, local development companies, or LDCs, are well-placed to signpost and co-ordinate rural and community development funding on a one-stop shop basis, similar to what LEOs do with enterprise funding. LDCs bring the added value of 25 years' experience of animating rural communities to participate and lead their own development. As a result of their work on the LEADER and other programmes, LDCs have a recognised experience of supporting, transferring and leading innovation in their regions. The ILDN proposes to formalise that innovation brokerage as part of its range of animation services and recommends that there should be one integrated rural development strategy for an area for a five-year period which covers LEADER and other national rural development

programmes.

The second key principle involves community-led local development, or CLLD. The community-based, bottom-up methodology of LDCs is key to their effectiveness. This includes an emphasis on pre-development work, community animation, building the capacity of individuals and communities, as Dr. Cooke, again, mentioned earlier, accepting the individual's starting point and customising appropriate local solutions. The positive impact of LDCs in independent reviews of SICAP, LEADER, local enterprise schemes and the back-to-work area enterprise allowance testifies to the effectiveness of the approach. CLLD aims to promote integrated approaches of territorial development and offers potential savings and increased effectiveness in rural policy. The added-value of CLLD manifests itself in improved social capital and governance and enhanced social impacts. We welcome the fact that the EU is seeking to broaden the uptake by member states of the CLLD approach and hope that the Irish Government will incorporate CLLD across all EU programmes from the next round in 2020. Doing so would provide the kind of bottom-up enabling environment needed for meaningful social and economic development.

The third key principle involves recognising the specific features of rural areas. Rural social structures are changing and we must recognise the features of rurality that require specific solutions and be prepared to act on them. For many rural dwellers, the choice is to migrate, remain unemployed or underemployed or create his or her own job. That is why the impact of supporting more than 3,000 people into self-employment last year is so significant. I ask the members to imagine the headlines if one employer created over 3,000 jobs in rural Ireland. In addition, the local employment services run by LDCs placed 5,700 people in employment last year. As that service is operated in just a handful of rural counties, what is needed now is a national community-based, not-for-profit employment service which encompasses and recognises the nature of rural unemployment, underemployment and seasonal employment.

I move to a subject which Dr. Cooke covered in detail, namely, social enterprise. The 2013 Forfás report on social enterprise estimated that just 1.25% of the labour force worked for social enterprises in Ireland. The report stated that if Ireland's social enterprise sector were to approach average or mean EU levels of output or the goal set by the EU under the Europe 2020 strategy, at least 65,000 jobs could exist in the social enterprise sector here. With Dr. Cooke, the ILDN welcomes the forthcoming publication of a national strategy on social enterprise. The strategy must ensure that the appropriate resources and supports are made available to the potential social entrepreneurs in order that the potential identified by Forfás can be realised. I echo in that regard Dr. Cooke's call for the Government to seek greater EU resources for this area of investment.

I turn to social inclusion. The Department of Rural and Community Development has responsibility for SICAP, the national social inclusion programme. This is a key programme to enable local development companies to employ staff and operate many of the other State programmes for which they receive no management fees. SICAP has suffered very deep cuts in the past eight years and requires a significant restoration of funding if it is to retain professional staff who have build up 25 years' experience.

The fourth key principle involves the current LEADER programme processes. All parties to the current LEADER programme have acknowledged the severe difficulties in its effective delivery. Notwithstanding the ILDN's anticipation of the problems introduced at design stage, member companies have worked closely with DRCD and LCDCs to ensure accelerated roll-out. Credit must be given to the Minister and officials for realising in 2017 that the programme

was in crisis and implementing changes to the operating rules. While these changes were the minimum needed for the programme to function, more radical reforms are necessary to truly liberate the programme and should be considered in the context of the next programme. These reforms should include securing block exemptions for LEADER from state aid regulations, the facilitation of LAGs and LDCs to have full access to all the priorities of rural development programme funds, and a more facilitative approach to the inspection and monitoring regime which recognises that LEADER is about innovation and area planning and which acknowledges the risk element to that work. My colleague, Mr. Rice, can address the issue of the autonomy of LDCs as local action groups delivering LEADER and how the change from the previous programme has elongated the supply chain of LEADER funding to the detriment of rural communities and businesses.

It is imperative that all parties learn from the current programme. The new RDP should provide greater flexibility for LEADER to be implemented as a genuine bottom-up approach to rural development. We also encourage the Government, the Department and this committee to ensure that the maximum LEADER funding is availed of through the Common Agricultural Policy, CAP. Overall, we will seek to secure a minimum of €400 million for the next LEADER programme.

My final point relates to smart villages. The Cork declaration in 2016 emphasised new approaches to overcoming the digital divide between rural and urban areas and to develop the potential offered by connectivity and digitisation of rural areas. Emphasis was given to the need for integrated approaches and the interaction between different policy fields in view of increasing complementarity and coherence. The concept of smart villages relates not just to being technology smart but finding ways from the bottom-up to avail of opportunities and address challenges across the whole range of rural life, including service provision, enterprise development and culture. There is much more potential in this approach and with local development companies implementing it, my colleagues will be happy to elaborate on this area.

In conclusion, we again thank the committee for its invitation and welcome the opportunity to discuss these and other relevant issues the members of the committee might wish to discuss.

Deputy Martin Kenny: I thank the witnesses for attending. The enthusiasm of Dr. Senan Cooke is contagious for all of us. I live in a rural parish and some of his comments struck me strongly. Our parish has a three-teacher school and, on 30 September, we will not have enough pupils to maintain that number. Over the summer, we ran a campaign to get new families to come to the area. We found new families who were interested in coming to live in the parish but we do not have houses for them. One issue in Leitrim and in areas where there is poor land is that we cannot get planning permission to build new houses, and much of the old accommodation is not suitable. There are many issues confronting people in rural Ireland but the primary one is getting energy back into the community, trying to find employment for people and finding a sense of purpose for the future. That has been missing. I commend the work Dr. Cooke has done. It is refreshing to hear somebody say that we should not look at our disadvantage but at our advantage. We need to try to turn that around.

I am also conscious that for any sector of society to reach its potential, it must be at a certain level. We must get a certain platform under it, and the problem in many areas is that they are without that platform. They are below the waterline, as it were, and they need assistance to try to get on their feet again. Rural communities need some encouragement and help to lift themselves up. Investment is the key in many of those areas.

I thank Mr. O'Reilly for his contribution. I am conscious of the work LEADER has done in many areas. I know Ms Martina Ealey well because the old Arigna LEADER programme covered Leitrim before the divide, which was a huge backward step. The way it is set up now has not worked for communities, and that was acknowledged in the presentation. We have often discussed that with the Minister and, in fairness, he acknowledges that changes need to happen. He made some changes but, as Mr. O'Reilly said, they have not gone far enough. The issue I wish to discuss is social enterprise and communities coming up with ideas to move things forward. Many years ago, I was at an event which was attended by a Minister. People were talking about co-operative employment and communities coming together to do things. He made the quip that "Co-op is no op". Basically, if the private sector does not do it, it does not work. That concept still exists in large sectors of the establishment, the Government and the way in which things are implemented, whereby if an individual is not prepared to go out and take the risk, it will not work for communities.

We must change that, and the LEADER programmes have largely been trying to turn that around. As Dr. Cooke said, we must recognise that this has potential and can deliver jobs that are sustainable in the long term. However, we must change the mindset. Mr. O'Reilly put forward suggestions for what needs to happen, but what are the core ones? If he could pick three core changes that would turn this around and that he could put in place tomorrow, what are they?

Chairman: -----

Senator Paudie Coffey: I welcome the delegation to the meeting. It gives us an opportunity to review current mechanisms for delivering for our rural communities. I especially welcome Dr. Cooke, whom I have known well for almost 30 years. He is from a neighbouring parish. He mentioned the resilience of the community he comes from and the passion and commitment in it. In addition, we heard about the initiative and volunteerism of Dr. Cooke and like-minded people in that area which have turned a small rural community that was declining in numbers into a vibrant community of which not only they but also the people of Waterford are proud. It is held up as an example of community and social enterprise on many fronts.

I attended the launch of his book, *The Enterprising Community*, and it offers examples around the country of communities helping themselves. It identifies the challenges they originally faced and analyses how they went about reinventing and reinvigorating their communities. It is a roadmap for a community to regenerate itself. Dr. Cooke acknowledged that the LEADER group assisted the Dunhill and associated communities in starting on that road, and I acknowledge the fabulous work that has been done for over 25 years in communities throughout the country. However, a number of challenges have been identified and this is where the committee can be beneficial to the work of those who made the presentations. The challenges must be identified to help communities unlock their full potential and identify ways they can help themselves.

There is great resilience in rural Ireland. We often hear the negative stories but the people who reside there are resilient, innovative and committed. We must find ways in officialdom, as policymakers, to assist these people to achieve their potential by exploiting whatever assets are available to them. The first asset is the people. The second is the natural assets that surround them, be they walkways, greenways, mountains or rural areas. We must identify ways to exploit natural assets and this where the strength of local LEADER groups comes in. I am aware of the work they do on the ground. They are aware of the enablers and the natural assets in their communities. Mr. O'Reilly identified problems where changes are required, whether

that is funding, flexibility or identifying ways that communities can exploit their full potential.

Dr. Cooke mentioned that there is a lack of support for the CCJ, the voluntary network. Could he elaborate on what he means? Is it in terms of administration, financial support or recognition by those in authority - and I include in that the local, regional and national authorities? What does he mean by a lack of support? He has worked on a successful model that he wishes to roll out throughout the country and he is calling for further support to try to enable that. What types of support he has in mind in order that the committee can further analyse that? That would be a worthwhile exercise.

I have a question for the LEADER groups. They identified areas that we need to improve and how we can improve access to the various EU programmes, increase funding and so forth. We recognise that. Why are some rural communities far more successful than others? That is probably a simple question but it goes to the root cause of success in various rural communities. Why are some communities so successful and why do others seriously struggle? What can we do, as policymakers, to assist the Irish Local Development Network in helping rural communities? What policy changes are required and what do we need to do to assist those communities?

Deputy Michael Collins: I thank those who have contributed this morning. It is interesting to hear what has been going on in other communities. Dr. Cooke's story is known the length and breadth of the country. It is a fabulous project. I attended a community council meeting in Goleen in Mizen Head in west Cork last Monday night and we were talking about it, believe it or not, because we had purchased a bit of ground next to our community centre and are thinking of ideas. We might visit Dr. Cooke's project. If it is being talked about in Mizen Head, it is most certainly being talked about throughout the country.

I come from a rural community in a mainly rural constituency in west Cork. Eight businesses in my constituency have closed in the past two weeks. A school can close due to a fall in population. I know we can identify many houses that are empty in our community, particularly in the towns. We have been pushing for the regeneration programme to be expanded into areas like west Cork. The programme is not working and is not moving in our direction. I find that communities are pulling out all the stops but they face a gale. That is the difficulty. The change in the LEADER programme was detrimental to west Cork. I can see the evidence in the trail of destruction it left, which we predicted but nobody listened. Much of this comes within the remit of the local authorities. I contacted my local authority about six weeks ago on a broadband issue and received a response yesterday. That tells us where things have gone in this country. It took six weeks to respond and the response was totally contradicted by the information I received from Eir. I think the whole thing is lost. It has lost touch with reality on the ground.

Local communities are fighting very hard to come up with projects and turn things around because nobody wants to lie down. People in Drimoleague recently got a grant to paint the village, which has gone through tough times. It is now rejuvenated and bright and the council is resurfacing the village roads. Things like that are small but they are very important to communities and have made a major change in Drimoleague.

Without easier access to LEADER funding and funds that will continue to regenerate communities, things will go in only one way, unfortunately. If we keep closing services such as post offices, we will knock the very life out of towns. I come from Schull where the local bank was closed. The second biggest shop in the town closed within 12 months with the loss of 17 jobs because people were going to the neighbouring town to do their banking and no longer came into Schull. The same will happen if post offices close. There is no forward thinking by

the Government. A small subsidy needs to be given to postmasters because they cannot live on the minimum wage. That would be a long-term gain for a town or village.

Dr. Senan Cooke: Senator Coffey asked me what could be done and what help could be given. Communities Creating Jobs, CCJ, was set by Dunhill Rural Enterprises Limited in Skibbereen following the conferences we had. We have a national organisation. A colleague of mine, Dr. Yvonne Crotty from DCU, is at the back of the room. What we want is so small, it is unreal. Dunhill Rural Enterprises, a voluntary organisation, has invested at least €5,000 or €6,000 every year on items such as an office, phones and copying. That has kept CCJ going on an administrative basis. We have carried that cost.

The first thing we need is for our model to be interrogated and, if possible, piloted. It would be the second pilot because when we went to Galway, we worked with three parishes or communities and identified 116 jobs which would be provided by a business coming back from Boston, another coming back from Dublin and another coming back from London. Joe McDonagh, who was the chairman of the sub-committee in Croke Park, died and the project went off the rails, even though Enterprise Ireland had backed it with €13,000, GMIT had put €6,500 into it and the GAA had put €6,500 into it. The whole thing fell apart. As we were in the south east, we were unable to do anything about it because of our distance from Galway. However, with a second pilot and some help for administration, the model could prove itself. We believe it will transform society and the economy. People can look at us and ask what we are on about but I can tell members that if our model, which did not belong to me but to people, is implemented, it will transform local communities. Of course, it will do nothing without LEADER, local authorities and everyone else. I have spoken about two small steps that would make a major difference.

With regard to why schools turn things around, four individuals in Dunhill guaranteed a €400,000 loan - €100,000 each from their own pockets. They went down to the credit union, borrowed the money, bought a field, built 40 homes for young families, saved the schools and created a new dynamic in the parish for business people. The GAA club and the school were given a big lift. It was one of the most top-class things that ever happened. The GAA club set up a draw in 1989 that raised £1.5 million. It got five clubs together to share the costs and each one maximised the profits. They were able to maximise the profits while sharing the costs in five ways. We got £30,000 from Noel Davern out of a total of £350,000, and the five clubs, Dunhill, Roanmore, Kilrossanty, Dungarvan and Lismore, raised the rest.

I have been around the country. There is nothing people are not prepared to do. I was speaking on Kilkenny-Carlow community radio. People from Danesfort, which is near Kilkenny, asked whether they could talk to me. I told them to come down and I thought one person would come. I found seven people outside the door. They told me about their plan, which would cost €1 million. Was there any worry about whether they would do it or not? It did not enter their minds. Of course, they would do it and they would get the money from whatever source, including the community. Another GAA club opened an all-weather pitch that cost about €400,000. It has now spent €1.5 million. The treasurer told me it only owes €150,000 of that and set out what the club was going to do next. Everyone says rural Ireland is dead and gone when the complete opposite is true. It has massive potential, provided it receives help from LEADER and the local councils. There is massive potential and social enterprise would be a billion euro sector if it got the chance. I have spoken to the different parties in Waterford, including Sinn Féin, Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Labour Party and the Independent Deputy and Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills, Deputy Halligan. I am trying

to chase them and to see if they will agree to get the new policy through. I told somebody in the hotel this morning that to do so would unleash a massive amount of resources and energy that will transform this country, which we sorely need. We need our communities to motor ahead and not to worry about Brexit, Trump and all the other things that happen in the world about which we are not happy.

Mr. Eamonn O'Reilly: There may be three or four answers to the questions so I will let my colleagues answer them.

Mr. Declan Rice: I will take the easiest question first on why some communities are successful while others are not. I am being facetious, of course, because it is very complex. It comes down to empowerment, support with resources, and confidence. There is an induction loop into which all these things feed. Deputy Martin Kenny asked us for the three most important things. There could be 30 things but broadband would be at the top of the list. People compare it with the introduction of electricity but I think it is more serious even than that. It is like water, that is, running water and wastewater treatment. It is not just a question of what broadband to have and we know that all salespersons say theirs is the best system. We need future-proofed broadband in rural areas so that we can compete with urban areas at the right price. The LEADER programme has a role to play and the national broadband is in stream so we do not want to compromise that. We have a broadband team in our programme but we are constrained in what we can do. Very low amounts can be spent on capital, with a maximum of €20,000 on a single project. As members will imagine, that does not do an awful lot. We would welcome the opportunity to do something in the blue areas where State money is not going and we have made a proposal to the Department on that basis. We would like to lend a hand and we should be empowered to do so.

There needs to be some form of social framework to let social enterprises help themselves, be they community shops or enterprise centres. There are a number of streams of funding which are used by community enterprises in an *ad hoc* way. As Dr. Cooke said, people will do whatever they can to get resources to make things happen. Often they are not helped and the rules do not help them in getting resources. If the commercial sector is pulling out of rural Ireland, as it increasingly is, the only way it will be addressed is by social enterprises and communities in rural Ireland stepping up to the mark. If people are pulling out commercially there is a reason for it and that is that they cannot make enough money. The only way we can do this is on the basis of supports. The community undertakes to take on some burden and the State also agrees to do it. That will mean an expansion of the current schemes and the dedication of long-term funding. There are real jobs in that and real opportunities to add value. We have been a bit mealy mouthed about this.

We are talking about community empowerment and Mr. O'Reilly mentioned a number of things which we have been supporting over the years. We have commissioned research on social enterprise and a conference is taking place today on social enterprise in local development companies. It is becoming a fashionable concept but it needs vigorous support at a tactical level and it needs people to ask what we need. We will work with the committee on that and we have a lot of ideas, though we are not looking for them to adopt them wholesale. We would like to set up a conversation with the committee on these issues. There is a lot of synergy.

We have been very constrained in the LEADER programme and broadband is an example of this. We understand that the broadband plan is technical but we feel we are not being given the chance to do all we can do. Some of us have 26 or 27 years experience in the rural and local development sector and we have internalised a lot of the knowledge that is out there. We see

ourselves as facilitators of the community but not as having to do things for the community. We feel we are not, however, being allowed to spread our wings and do it.

I am lucky enough to work for a company which is one of only four independent local action groups, LAGs, in the country and I can feel the pain of my colleagues when we talk about projects. I had a meeting yesterday with three other companies on a simple project based on community shops, for which we were hoping to appoint somebody to do some work. I thought it would take a month but it took six months. That was because they had to go through the local community development committees, LCDCs, and there were two in one county so it went around the track to be signed off. What is the point of that? I am happy that we are an independent LAG. It does not get us out of all our problems but it does mean that we are responsible for our own fate, the captains of our own ships and masters of our own souls. We need to ask what was so wrong with the situation and what is right about where we are now.

We would like the opportunity to help rural Ireland. We have loads of ideas so ideas are not the problem. I give the Minister credit for recognising the flaws in the system but it is still not right from a structural point of view. We will get to the end of this programme and the money will all be spent and spent properly. However, LEADER is burying its talents in the ground. We want to make the most of what we have and do much more than we are doing at the moment. We feel, however, that we are not being facilitated.

Mr. Jim Finn: I will address the questions of Deputy Kenny and Senator Coffey on what can be done to get rural Ireland up and running. I am a voluntary board member from Tipperary and a retired farmer. The biggest mistake in the current LEADER programme is that we are not allowed to animate and build capacity in communities. Members wonder why one community is better than another. My answer is that rural development has a cycle of between 20 and 25 years and we need that to build capacity in rural Ireland. Some communities got up and running in the 1990s and are now the successful ones while others lag behind. The former got assistance more quickly and were maybe better educated. It cannot be done overnight but takes between 20 and 25 years. If the Members of Dáil Éireann and Seanad Éireann want to do one thing, they can help us animate communities in the new programme coming down the line. If we can do that we will be helping to build the communities and to put in place the structures mentioned by Dr. Cooke.

While we are seeking changes in the new programme, in the past farmers, postmen, school teachers and so on became activists in their communities, took on board memberships and undertook the task of empowering their communities. Currently, few young people join the boards of local development companies and we need to address that. All of our companies are doing the best we can. We realise that we have to be accountable but bureaucracy has increased and there is now less local decision making. In the past, decisions were made locally. Nowadays fewer decisions are made at parish level than was the case in the past.

I refer to a very successful organisation that has been already mentioned, namely, the credit union movement, which in the past was available to local development companies and they delivered.

Ms Martina Earley: I thank members for their questions. I will try to respond to aspects not covered by my colleagues. One of the three core issues for us in terms of change is the stop-start of rural development. We waited a long time, from 2013 to 2016, for the last programme. In the context of Brexit and its likely impact on rural Ireland, this is not acceptable. We are calling for a continuation of the LEADER programme, a national rural development programme of

the type we had previously from 2001 to 2006 and local development strategies in 2019. It is critical that the stop-starts of the past are not repeated.

The next programme is very much about smart villages. It has been agreed by Europe and it underpins the bottom-up approach to local development companies, local people mobilising and using their assets, including new technologies, as possible solutions. We are seeking support for this programme. We urge that local rather than national funding be made available because local communities are often left behind when it comes to national funding. It is often the case that the best dressed and the most dynamic get the funding. We believe that local development companies, working with all partners, including local authorities and elected representatives and communities, are best placed to develop all community and rural development, with the focus on communities. Our boards are community-led, working with State sector social pillars. We have the structures in place.

As mentioned, Arigna LEADER in 1991 was very successful. Three local authorities came together when the coal mines closed. Local actors came together with their own funding and decision making, supported by elected and local authority representatives, and the fruit of those community projects are up and running. In terms of disadvantaged communities, as stated by Mr. Finn, they were the earliest into LEADER. We can never be complacent. There are always new issues arising for communities. Local development companies put in the hard work at ground level. They never say no to communities. We believe that hard work, strategic development and long-term plans are necessary, but based on consultation with the communities. To ensure a return on public investment, development must be sustainable and a community has to want it.

On farmers, the current LEADER programme does not sufficiently address farm diversification. There is no specific measure in this regard in the programme. Also, in terms of enterprise support under the LEADER programme, innovation is key. In other words a company must prove its enterprise does not already exist. We recommend that the back-to-work enterprise allowance model, which is so successful in terms of start-up businesses, be used in the farming sector, working with farmers on a collective basis to free up the stringent measures under LEADER in terms of innovation. There is no support programme specifically geared towards the farming sector.

Chairman: I thank the witnesses for their responses. I will move now to the next round of speakers, starting with Senator Grace O’Sullivan, followed by Senator Hopkins and Deputy Fitzmaurice.

Senator Grace O’Sullivan: It is wonderful to hear the witnesses’ enthusiasm. They are the champions in their communities. I acknowledge the presence of Dr. Senan Cook, whom I know personally. I attended the communities creating jobs workshop in Dunhill. What is being done in this community, in terms of bottom-up, is incredible. As someone who lives close to the Dunhill, Fenor, Boatstrand and Annestown area, I know that it is the creative holistic approach taken to developing the community that has been a success. It is about opening one’s mind and opening potential.

Ms Earley referenced the ability to innovate. We have no national policy on social enterprise. Having listened to the contributors, I recommend that this committee contact the Minister, Deputy Ring, and ask him when we will have such a policy. The witnesses have identified the need for same. We all recognise the importance of sustaining rural communities. The Green Party made a submission to the national social enterprise strategy in December 2017.

One of the areas we looked at is the transit to decarbonising our environment, which feeds into what Mr. Finn had to say in terms of the farmers. The Green Party believes there is huge opportunity to mobilise and engage communities in rural Ireland on the issues of renewable energy efficiency and reducing greenhouse gases. Do the witnesses have any plans in this area in their communities? For example, there is potential for farm buildings with regard to solar energy generation and potential in the renewable sector in general in enterprising communities to develop the whole energy market as we move away from the burning of fossil fuels.

The point for the Green Party is that we get bottom-up movement in this area and that we get co-operatives moving and communities moving so that we are working towards a healthier and better environment for all. I understand it will take considerable innovation, but that micro-generation of energy has huge potential for rural communities. I know in Dr. Cooke's area there is some engagement with regard to the potential of wind energy. Although there is considerable opposition, it is because the model currently being used is a top-down model with large corporate businesses coming in. We lack that community engagement. Do the witnesses see that potential in their communities? How could the Government support them in that regard?

People in my area in Waterford say they have difficulty in accessing LEADER funding for projects. Individuals have to provide their own guarantee based on the match-funding mechanism. Could that match-funding be minimised or what could be done to give more people the opportunity to develop their enterprising ideas without barriers at the initial stage?

We need to come in behind what the witnesses are doing, particularly the model Dr. Cooke spoke about. The Green Party would be 100% behind him if we can get that pilot going. His presentation ticks all the boxes and he is very enthusiastic. However, it is not just what he is saying here; we know it in the community. Along with Senator Coffey and Deputy Butler, we see what he is doing. That model would be brilliant if we could roll it out and we will give whatever support we can in doing that.

Chairman: This is the first meeting on this general area. The committee will produce a report with recommendations to Government. It is very apt that Dr. Cooke and representatives of the LEADER companies are here.

Senator Maura Hopkins: I thank the witnesses for their presentations. I know Dr. Cooke, because we shared the pulpit in the speaker's corner in Ballaghaderreen when we talked about the same subject of rural communities. The presentations answered many questions on LEADER.

We know that certain rural areas are doing well and others have challenges. I ask Mr. Rice to outline why that is the case. He spoke about support, resources, confidence and obviously the big game-changer, better broadband. Mr. Finn's contribution dealt with the longer-term planning emphasising that things do not happen overnight. We need to bring all of those issues and challenges together to try to support the weaker communities in particular. Ms Earley will know that because I work very closely with her and the other staff in Roscommon LEADER Partnership who are doing tremendous work. They have a particular focus on areas of disadvantage and communities that need extra support to get themselves more organised in making applications. We need that longer-term planning on where we see ourselves going.

The Chairman spoke of preparing a report. One of our key challenges is to try to support those rural communities that need extra help. We have said that communities that are well supported, resourced and organised will succeed. Our challenge is in the other areas. Mr. Rice said it is a complex issue, but that does not mean we cannot rise to that complex challenge, which

we should do.

I will give some examples from our area. We spoke about an integrated approach. Roscommon LEADER Partnership is working with Roscommon County Council and the ITs, as well as being rooted in the community. A very good example is the recently established food hub in Castlerea. That responds to market demands in terms of the need for more workers in that sector. We know we need more chefs. There is huge possibility in the area of food and obviously training for that. I use that example because it is responding to market demands. The key issue in sustaining any rural community is people being employed. We need to see more of that.

The other example is Kilbride community centre. What Mr. Finn said reminded me that 21 years ago that community centre had a long-term vision. It never stood still in wanting to achieve and build on success. Roscommon LEADER Partnership has been very much involved with that centre. It set up a community shop which is a very good social enterprise that is responding to the needs within communities. While I have many more examples, I use those two to emphasise the need for the Minister, the Department and all the supporting agencies, including the employment agencies to respond better to weaker areas.

We have wonderful examples. I am sitting beside two representatives from Waterford and Deputy Butler is also in the room. Dungarvan has been completely transformed by the greenway. We need to find the resources in weaker areas and rise to that complex challenge and try to support the people within those communities as much as possible. I do not really have a question because many of the questions have been asked. It is just a point that needs emphasis.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: I welcome the witnesses and thank them for their presentations. In particular I mention Ms Earley who comes from our neck of the woods.

There is considerable debate about rural Ireland. The message needs to go out clearly that it is probably the best place a person can live. However, we need to ensure we keep people in order to keep those areas vibrant. At one time in nearly all rural areas people either set something up themselves or had to go somewhere else to work. At one time it was the case that one either set something up oneself or one had to go working somewhere. A massive amount of people set up their own little businesses and were their own entrepreneurs in rural parts of Ireland. I come from a rural setting and an agricultural background. There would be a guy down the road who would do welding, a person up the road who would do fitting and another individual who would do something else. Unfortunately, there are problems at present in the context of getting planning permission for people who want to do something in their areas. The authorities want to move such people to areas where everyone is doing it. There may be merit in some of that but it may be blocking some things. What are our guests' views in that regard?

To put it simply, I believe that agriculture is the background of most people in rural Ireland. With regard to the CAP - and the new CAP is coming in 2020 - in many parts many parents have said that they are only getting a few thousand and that they cannot make a living out of that. There has been a flight of youngsters from the land. To keep people in those areas, young girls and lads must be encouraged and given a fair crack of the whip. I have noticed that in certain parts of the country in which larger-scale operators have come in and are renting land and in which there has been a flight from the land, communities are not as vibrant. What are our guests' thoughts on family farms?

Our guests referred to broadband. I have made study of the issue. There is an amount of toing and froing in respect of broadband. I hope everything will work out. I went to England and

looked at areas in which there is community involvement in delivering broadband. Companies such as Eir have to be put in their box and asked whether they are prepared to facilitate people who are prepared to bring a connection right along a particular road? If a community is willing to do that voluntarily and is willing to do it safely and have everything right, giving it funding may be a way to speed up the process of rolling out broadband in areas such as those to which Mr. Rice referred that do not have a service at the moment.

A problem I notice, and with which I am sure our guests are familiar, is that with more people going to work - which is good and which is appreciated - we find that in initiatives in local towns, such as the Tidy Towns competition and community employment and Tús schemes, there are criteria to fit and if one does not fit them, one is told "Goodbye" and must take a year off and draw social welfare rather than staying in the job one was in. This has put pressure on rural communities that were trying to make their towns or villages better. Do our guests agree that we need the Departments of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Transport, Tourism and Sport, Employment Affairs and Social Protection and Finance to get involved? Being realistic, the banks have moved out of many parts of Ireland the banks have moved. There is no point crying about that. We do, however, have the credit unions and the post offices - wherever some of them will be. The credit unions have a lot of money and are willing to spend. It is actually people's own money. The credit unions need a bit of flexibility to be able to move into the area of resourcing and funding rural Ireland. Included in that would be, for example, the GAA and the different town teams and so on. What are our guests' ideas regarding joined-up thinking of this nature?

We should never underestimate the amount of work that people who are part of voluntary groups do every night. There may be towns or villages that are doing better than others but, in fairness, everyone is trying. I have yet to see a village or a town in which there is not somebody doing pioneering work. However, such people are up against a headwind for the simple reason that they always have to be on the ball. I noticed it earlier when Mr. O'Reilly was talking. There should be a one-stop shop to which people could go so that they would know what is coming out in January, February, March and so on. They are looking at papers and are trying to find out this information. We have to realise these people work voluntarily. What are our guests' ideas? I know new ideas are being thrown out in terms of towns and villages. I saw one community, with which I would have worked, that had the idea that three, four or five small villages, in which there would be a shop, a pub, a church and whatever, and a main town in the middle could be worked into an economic area that would feed the constituent villages. What are our guests' views on that matter?

The obstacles regarding the LEADER programme are a major problem. It is good to hear that all funding will be drawn down. That would be great. Is it not now that we need to start making sure that the voices calling for simplification are heard? What are our guests' views on municipal districts having more autonomy over the budget for their areas? What happens at present is that the council is given money and it then decides what to do with it. Should there be involvement for municipal districts, which would know more about what it is going on in an area, which would have more autonomy and which would work with local communities in a bottom-up manner? We can work from the bottom up, but the foundations need to be there and the different Departments need to work together.

In the context of agriculture, the CAP is a big issue coming down the line. We see it in the west of Ireland especially. We see youngsters moving away from family farms. The more that happens and if the people are not there, it will not matter if we were the greatest magicians in

the world, it will still be hard to revive activity. What are our guests' thoughts on a tax credit to encourage people to come to areas that are being hit harder than others?

Deputy Eugene Murphy: Much of what I want to say has already been covered by Deputy Fitzmaurice and Senator Hopkins. As a result, I am not going to prolong proceedings. I welcome our guests. It is great to meet them. I know of their drive and enthusiasm to make things better. I am sure they will not mind if I keep a special mention for our own lady from Roscommon. I really want to pay tribute to Ms Earley because she has a real hands-on approach and she has been involved in many innovative ideas throughout the county. Like Deputy Fitzmaurice and Senator Hopkins, I am sure we really acknowledge her enthusiasm. I am always amazed by the amount of meetings, gatherings and launches politicians have to attend at night, but Ms Earley nearly outdoes us. She is great for that. I really want to pay tribute to the work she does in our region.

I will keep to basics. The biggest problem in a county like Roscommon - and Deputies Fitzmaurice and Kenny and Senator Hopkins will know this as they are from adjoining counties - is broadband. I know I am being a bit parochial but if one looks at County Roscommon, it is obvious that it needs the national roll-out more than any other county. More than 50% of the county is relying on the national roll-out. We have been disappointed on many occasions. In their engagement with Government, did our guests speak to it about broadband? Is it talking about giving them a greater role in respect of broadband? Like other politicians, companies approach me and state that they can deliver this or that but I am not going to go around recommending a broadband company because I do not know what it will deliver. Many of them pick and choose in any event. They are in business and the reality is that they want to be successful and make money. I have seen this happen in the county already. They came in, picked the cherries off the tree and left everything else. We do not want that scenario but it really is vital and important for rural Ireland.

We talk about the post offices, which definitely are important in parts of our regions, but they are not as important as broadband. I am wondering about the engagement there. I fully accept what Ms Earley has said about the stop-start scenario. It is doing the whole LEADER project no good. We have seen this happening in our county. People lose faith in it so I fully agree that we must have an ongoing plan. It should not be the case that, over weeks and months, we merely hear that particular measures will be brought forward. That is not a good scenario.

Many communities have fantastic ideas, as Deputy Fitzmaurice noted. If we consider the innovative people in rural Ireland over the years who started businesses from old sheds in backyards, it is amazing. That would not happen anywhere else in the world.

In the context of our town of Strokestown, despite the wind farm on Sliabh Bawn, about which, as Deputy Fitzmaurice knows, I got many a slap in the face, we have a group of 15 people who go onto that mountain to walk and exercise. Coillte has put in a large number of tourism attractions. It could do much more but it has done a certain amount. My point is that there are seven people within a radius of ten miles who have tourism business proposals to link up. One of those is for a wood museum in Strokestown. Such a museum would be unique and would attract people from throughout the country and abroad. We have the National Famine Museum, which attracts 65,000 visitors. If we had something like that, it would be great. In terms of developing the museum, I am coming up against a brick wall. It appears that nobody at Government level is able to help us. We do not have such a facility anywhere in Ireland. Coillte has 700 acres in the area on which there is a wind farm, but now we have tourism-related and health promotion activities on it. A wood museum would attract many people to that area

and would be a fantastic economic boost for the region, but it is impossible to develop such a project. I would love those involved in LEADER to be given more power by Government to involve themselves in that type of development. On foot of the discussions they have had with the Minister, will our guests indicate whether consideration is being given to granting them more powers to take on such projects?

We had briefings yesterday with the IFA and a point made strongly by the representatives - Deputies Martin Kenny and Fitzmaurice and Senator Maura Hopkins will be aware of this - is that they are open to dealing with the question of renewable energy. There is a huge area, as the Chairman knows, that could be developed. Is that something the Government is discussing with our guests with a view to developing it further? It is my belief those are the areas we have to develop.

Chairman: Deputy Martin Kenny wants to make a brief contribution.

Deputy Martin Kenny: I will make a comment that cuts across all of that. Many people on social welfare who want to participate in various schemes or start their own businesses are in a trap because they cannot get any help. It is almost as if they fall into an abyss. They have to be on social welfare for a year before they can get on the back-to-work scheme and many other schemes. They despair in terms of trying to get out of the trap to which I refer. Many of the schemes in my area do great work. They have people in their late 50s and early 60s who will not get a job in the economy yet they are sent to JobPath to write curricula vitae for jobs that do not exist. What are our guests' views in that regard? I am of the view that it is creating a logjam and that it is an issue which must be resolved. I accept that it is a matter for the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection but it is an issue that affects everyone.

Another point is that it is also about the difficulties people in rural areas experience. Yesterday, we had people before another committee on the issue of school transport. If one member of a family living in a rural area works, they cannot get a medical card or school transport. They cannot send their children to school and end up telling themselves that they would be better off if they did not have jobs. That is the reality for many people in rural Ireland. Somebody somewhere needs to realise the impact the withdrawal of services will have eventually. All of that is having a negative knock-on effect. I would like the witnesses views on those issues, but particularly the issue of people who find themselves unemployed and how they can get assistance to get back on their feet and back to work rather than being sent down a route where there is no work.

Senator Paudie Coffey: I am conscious that a Seanad vote is due and I may have to leave. I want to ask a question while I am here. The Chairman mentioned that the committee will consider following up on much of the evidence presented today. I would like to make a formal proposal to the committee, which I ask the witnesses to assist us with. My formal proposal is that we, as members of a joint Oireachtas committee, would compile a formal report on supporting community and social enterprise in rural areas nationally. I ask that we would have a deep engagement not only with our witnesses today but also with other collaborators and stakeholders who can assist us. I am formally proposing that to the Chairman. I ask members to support us on that and we might be able to agree on a rapporteur. I raise it now to ask if our witnesses would collaborate, help and inform us on doing that report. It is timely now to prepare for future rural development programmes.

Chairman: We will certainly take that on board and discuss it further, perhaps in private session. Many points have been made and some ground may have been covered already. Not

everyone has to speak on his side but Mr. O'Reilly might try to address some of them. Dr. Cooke might do the same.

Mr. Eamonn O'Reilly: I will ask Ms Earley to speak first on some of the specific points. Mr. Rice can come in on farm diversification and so on, and I will wrap up. In fairness, many questions were posed.

Ms Martina Earley: One of the most important aspects is that we have Outreach offices in all their areas to ensure the farming community feel comfortable coming in to us in their wellies or whatever. That local engagement is key.

I was challenged by my board because the numbers relating to Tús were decreasing. Also, we were delighted with the increase in the number of rural social scheme places; we now have almost 174 in our county. We had engagement with the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection locally and identified a need to increase the awareness of the farming community in terms of accessing the farm assist scheme. Our team came up with an app that tested the means and engaged with the farming community. Our partnership, the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection and the IFA are now going to the marts in County Roscommon where we hold workshops and have direct engagement with people on farm assist. Farm assist now attracts a training budget that we are accessing, which is very important. The rural social scheme is key to our county and to our farming community.

Our company was delighted to be given the challenge of having a national contract for digital skills. We focus in particular on the farming community, working with the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, because from talking to the IFA we know that the future of farming is in precision farming and digital knowledge. We have to support our farming community with digitalisation. We are on the ground to offer support in that regard. We supported more than 5,000 farmers last year, working with the IFA and Teagasc, in terms of their digital uptake.

This is a complex issue. Farming communities are embedded in the communities. They want a community that will sustain the next generation - their children and families - in order that they will be there to mind them. It is a life-cycle approach. We need to take a holistic view. That is why LEADER works. It is integrated and it is about having the job, the social enterprise, locally. We are calling specifically for an action such as the back to work enterprise allowance or a special scheme to support the farming community and their farm diversification projects.

There is a lack of trust in the farming community. We have to engage with them and build up that trust. They are sceptical about the bureaucracy and the loss of forms. Local development companies are ideally placed to continue our work on LEADER and the rural social scheme throughout CAP and the next programme with the farming community. We have their trust. They are our colleagues. They are the people we work with on a daily basis.

In terms of Deputy Martin Kenny's point regarding how we deal with people who are unemployed and getting them support, the social inclusion community activation programme that we operate is good. It is personalised. We sit down with people individually and find out where they are. It is confidential. Sometimes there are many other holistic issues. We work with them on an individual basis to break down their issues. There is personal development, training and education. It is done on a case-by-case local basis.

We recommend to Government that the Tús programme be extended similar to the community employment scheme. One year is simply not enough. The feedback from Tús participants is that it is wonderful as a bridge to employment. If that was extended, it would be of great benefit.

Mr. Declan Rice: I will try to go quickly through some of the questions. Senator Hopkins mentioned a number of issues about the challenges. As Ms Earley remarked in covering a number of issues, we see ourselves as one-stop shops for communities and small businesses and we would like that recognised in any new framework, particularly from the point of view of innovation. It is something which we understand. It does not always have to be Einstein stuff. It can be merely a simple transfer of ideas from one area to another or from one context to another. The innovation broker idea is something which we see. Going back to what Mr. Finn was saying about animation being an important part of the role, we meet people both in farm yards and in community centres at night, kicking the tyres, etc. We do all of that stuff but we would rather have sufficient resources to let us do it to the level we think is needed.

One issue on energy is that the smart village idea is very much about areas that make the most of opportunities they have as well as integration and all of those good things. If local energy is to be a factor in rural and local development, grid access will have to be improved and localised, solutions found for local sources of energy we produce and communities will have to be allowed to keep the money they make from those sources of energy. A little work has to be done on that. Europe, as ever, is probably ahead of us in some of the examples but perhaps the smart village concept will lead to those being cascaded down.

Broadband was mentioned by a number of members. Mr. Jan Dröge, the director of the broadband office, is coming to Ireland next week to meet us. He is the head of the broadband at local level. We have many ideas. Deputy Fitzmaurice mentioned them and we have put some to the Department. There are issues, as we are told repeatedly, with state aid in respect of the national broadband plan but we are willing to have a go and put our shoulder to the wheel. We have a coherent and rational way of dealing with that.

That covers most of the questions. I probably left a lot out.

Mr. Eamonn O'Reilly: Mr. Rice is fine. Will Mr. Saunders come in on the social welfare?

Mr. Joe Saunders: Ms Earley covered it. I echo Deputy Martin Kenny's concern that many people may fall into a chasm between unemployment and a more sustainable living income. We share the view that in the transfer between a scheme and something else, there should be a mid way point that provides an incentive to people to progress. That will form part of our discussions with the Department. The committee's predecessor in its report on building viable rural communities had some ideas in that regard that we share.

The other aspect the Deputy mentioned was that those aged 55 years plus who are not physically up to the challenge of getting back on a building site or who will not do so again have a great deal to offer and there is probably a third way somewhere between employment and self-employment. Some of the activation measures, in their current iteration, may not be the most suitable but those people are anxious to give back to their own communities and to contribute in their own way.

A national employment service, although under the remit of another Department, should be community-based and not-for-profit, and it should link strongly to the SICAP programme

meaning that there would need to be a level of cross-departmental co-operation that allows for a community aspect to alternatives to welfare.

Mr. Eamonn O'Reilly: I will try to wrap up. We are partnership companies as well. As well as a bottom-up approach, much of our work is with many of the agencies. We can bring that expertise, be it with Teagasc or the enterprise boards, to it, for example, with small farmers. My board, NEWKD, has joined Teagasc and the ETBs have talked about digital access for farmers. This is a localised version of what Ms Earley has been rolling out. A partnership approach is important as well.

We were asked about municipal districts and the autonomy of decision-making. It is not for us to say how local authorities should operate but the more local the decision, the more empowered the community. That goes back to Mr. Finn's point as well.

We were asked about a tax credit for hard-hit areas. VAT was reduced for the tourism sector. Changes to VAT or tax credits may be something that should be explored for the western seaboard and rural areas. We do not have a fix on that but it would be a positive development.

Regarding biodiversity, Mr. Finn stated that some farmers generate up to 40% of their income from solar energy in Germany. That goes back to retaining young people, with newer technology and newer ways of gaining income, on the land.

We would say "Yes" to the Minister and the Department asking us about taking on other programmes. They are keen that we do that and we are keen to do so. We cover the entire country. We are positive. We have a good relationship with the Minister and the Department in exploring those ideas. There are nine areas in the CAP and we do not want to be pigeonholed into any one of them because we feel we have a role in the environment and sustainability farming.

Matched funding was asked about earlier. We have rules on the community side and the private sector makes up 50%. There has to be a sense of viability and fair play regarding the private sector. On community funding, other funds such as the Clann Credo or Community Finance Ireland provide loans and they are very much on the ground. The credit unions are also an option and, locally, some of our bodies explore it. If we have gone through a business plan with an individual, the credit unions will take it that we have gone through it. They are aware of the professionalism and experience of our staff, and they will take that as a way of easing the process. Credit unions are giving out unsecured loans to farmers for up to €50,000 now. They operate on a local basis as well.

We are happy to progress with any of the matters discussed here today and feed back into them for the future. We are delighted to be able to have such a robust and interesting discussion.

Chairman: I thank Mr. O'Reilly. Dr. Cooke might say a few words to wrap up.

Dr. Senan Cooke: I would like to ask everyone a question. I agree with everything I have heard on this side and everything I have heard from the members, and I am not being nice to them. There are lots of good ideas from everyone. I am going to leave here and there will be a row in the first place I go into, although I will not want a row. Going in with a reasonable request on one occasion, I was asked which letter in the word "No" did I not understand, the "N" or the "O". I was then asked whether I had a problem. We have the LEADER programme with all these brilliant ideas and they are doing brilliant work. The committee members are doing brilliant work as well. I read about them in the newspaper and I look at them on the television and this "That is a great idea." For example, there was a good idea about social welfare.

The good idea about rural Ireland is put forward time and time again. The suggestions Senator Coffey came up with, even the suggestions he put there to us, are good. What is the problem? How can we deal with the gap between all of us and the system? I do not blame anybody in the public service for anything. The system they are forced to manage forces then to implement actions. When people go to the public house they will be asked if they have heard about something - things that could not be made up. The LEADER programme came out some time ago with a 50% grant for communities and it was equated with a 50% grant for the private sector. A community of volunteers was equated with private people looking for profit. That could not be made up. Those are issues that we spend much of our time thinking about.

We had a young chap and we begged Tús administrators to let him stay with us for another year. It would have suited us and it would have given us more work. He had a degree but he had been bullied in school. The difference he was making would not be believed. When the 12 months were up, Tús took him away from us and gave him nothing. Three years later, he is eligible again. He is being told that he did great work with us three years ago. We are being asked to give him another year. He is 28 or 29 years of age and a lovely fellow with lots of potential. We had him for 12 months, we were doing great work with him, he was coming out of himself and talking to us freely and he was getting involved. He would not say “Boo” when he came first. Where was he for the past three years? He is back on 23 September. The only place Tús wants to put him now is back to us because it thought that when he was with us first he was going well so perhaps now he can pick it up three years later and we can build on what we were doing with him. There are a million of those type social welfare issues, which I could talk to the committee all day and all night about. Between us we have all of the answers, so why can we not implement all of these measures? Why can we not give that role to LEADER? I do not understand.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: First, different groups come into a committee. We will do a report and that will be sent on. At the end of the day-----

Dr. Senan Cooke: That is fine.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: -----however, let us nail it down to this. If the will is not there within either the Government or a Department, we will lobby. Deputy Martin Kenny and I are in opposition. At the end of the day, however, unless hard decisions are made, whatever is agreed in Europe under the CAP by officials and the Government, and whoever supports the Government, they must be pushed by the people that either support a Government or are in Government. That is the only way it will be achieved.

Dr. Senan Cooke: Social enterprise is €1 billion sector. The potential in rural Ireland is enormous. All these people running big multinational companies are based in communities in rural Ireland. They can be tapped into. They will sponsor us, help us, give us expertise and connect us with the global economy. We are being offered this all of the time. When ask if we can do that, we are told then that we cannot. It is not in the criteria, that is not on and this is not on. I am asking the committee if we can all work together and see if we can get the new policy and then an implementation plan. If we do that, it will be a huge step for us.

Chairman: I thank Dr. Cooke. We have had a constructive and positive engagement on the topic. I thank each of the witnesses for their contributions. I pay tribute to my own local development company in County Clare. Ms Doreen Graham is at the helm. She does a fantastic job and I work closely with her on many projects. We are working on one currently which will deliver additional moneys to Clare. I am looking forward to announcing that scheme in the com-

ing weeks. It goes back to the partnership approach Mr. O'Reilly mentioned. If we can work together - the State, politicians, the agencies, community activists like Dr. Cooke who has-----

Dr. Senan Cooke: It is Senan.

Chairman: That is fine.

Dr. Senan Cooke: It is a good Clare name from Scattery Island where Saint Senan came from.

Chairman: It is all about partnership and working together. We are to the fore in that respect in the county I represent. We have developed a rural strategy in conjunction with all of the stakeholders, including LEADER. It is about working through that programme, developing plans in conjunction with communities and trying to unlock the potential that Senator Coffey spoke of. This year for my summer holidays my wife, our two children and I went to Waterford.

Dr. Senan Cooke: That is good.

Chairman: We did not get to Dunhill. We went on the greenway.

Dr. Senan Cooke: That is very good.

Chairman: That is the potential Senator Coffey mentioned. Opening up that 50 km greenway has resulted in much social enterprise along the route. It is fantastic to see. I am working on a similar project in County Clare. It involves LEADER as well along the banks of the River Fergus between Ennis and Clarecastle. We hope there will be spin-off activity as well. It is about unlocking that and working in partnership. This is a key priority for our committee and I thank the witnesses sincerely for engaging so constructively and positively. We will take up the offer of more engagement and the clerk will be back in touch. I wish the witnesses well in the future. We will suspend and resume in private session.

The joint committee suspended at 12.36 p.m., resumed in private session at 12.40 p.m. and adjourned at 12.46 p.m. until 10 a.m. on Wednesday, 3 October 2018.