

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM FHORBAIRT TUAITHE AGUS POBAIL

JOINT COMMITTEE ON RURAL AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Dé Céadaoin, 6 Feabhra 2019

Wednesday, 6 February 2019

The Joint Committee met at 10.30 a.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT:

Deputy Michael Collins,	Senator Paudie Coffey,
Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice,	Senator Maura Hopkins.
Deputy Martin Kenny,	
Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív,	
Deputy Niamh Smyth,	

In attendance: Deputies Seán Canney and Anne Rabbitte.

DEPUTY JOE CAREY IN THE CHAIR.

The joint committee met in private session until 11 a.m.

Smart Community Initiative: Discussion

Chairman: I remind members, staff, witnesses and those in the Public Gallery to turn off their mobile phones because they interfere with the sound system.

I draw the attention of witnesses to the fact that 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 committee. However, if they are directed by the committee to cease giving evidence on a particular matter and they continue to so do, they are entitled thereafter only to a 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 they are asked to respect the parliamentary practice to the effect that, where possible, they should not criticise or make charges against any person, persons 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 House or an official either by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable. It is proposed that any submissions, opening statements or other documents supplied by the witnesses to the committee for this meeting be published on the website of the committee. Is that agreed? Agreed.

On behalf of the committee, I welcome to this meeting to discuss the smart community initiative and Grow Remote: the Minister of State at the Departments of Rural and Community Development and Communications, Climate Action and Environment, Deputy Canney, who has special responsibility for natural resources, community affairs and digital development; Ms Caroline Henry, assistant principal officer at the national digital strategy unit of the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment; Mr. Jake Ryan, assistant principal at the Department of Rural and Community Development; Mr. Johnny Gorman, higher executive officer at the regional telecommunications development unit of the Department of Rural and Community Development; and, from Grow Remote, Ms Tracy Keogh, co-founder, and Mr. Paul Ellingstad, chapter lead. I call on the Minister of State to make his opening statement.

Minister of State at the Department of Rural and Community Development (Deputy Seán Canney): As a former member of the committee, I thank the Chair and members for the invitation to discuss the smart community initiative.

The Internet and digital technologies are transforming the way people live and work. However, figures from the Central Statistics Office, CSO, show that one in seven people have never used the Internet. Such individuals cite a lack of skills and the belief that they do not need the Internet as the key barriers to using it.

At a foundation level, minimising the digital divide is about ensuring broadband connectivity for the population in the first instance. Advances in 5G technology will enable wider geographic coverage. Thereafter, basic foundation skills and literacy will enable people to discover the constructive applications of digital technology and content. Addressing the foundations of the digital divide involves, in the main, reaching out to the most marginalised in society and helping them to participate in a digital society. The digital skills for citizens scheme of the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment provides basic digital skills classes to help people take their first step online. However, classroom training alone will not

suffice to tackle the problem, with the CSO indicating that approximately 16% to 18% of the population are affected. Any new interventions must be sustainable to provide the ongoing supports required to address and maintain inclusion in a digital world.

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 Departments, private industry and communities are necessary. By working together and combining existing assets and resources under a shared vision, communities can maximise the reach and impact of schemes and programmes.

The smart community initiative is a new approach that will bring exposure to digital content and technology into the community and support the discovery of the value of digital technologies 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 that had expressed an interest in this approach such as the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection, Bank of Ireland, Musgraves, An Post, the 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, namely, basic skills, economic well-being, physical and mental well-being, and history, culture and heritage.

The action group agreed to pilot the smart community initiative in Tubbercurry, County Sligo. Factors taken into account in selecting Tubbercurry included the presence of strong active community groups, a local presence of all 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 the Tubbercurry smart community on 18 January, 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 affected by digital content and technology, with 6% of Ireland's GDP and 116,000 jobs being accounted for by digital technologies in the economy. The opportunities digital technologies 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 workforce 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 16 April 2019. Grow Remote is about connecting jobs to the people and creating a remote community. It is about choice and when jobs are mobile it provides opportunities for communities to compete. I welcome the representatives of Grow Remote, who will speak to the committee later.

Over the coming months we will assess the impact of becoming a smart community on Tubbercurry, will record lessons learned and will develop criteria to identify key elements required

to become a smart community, as well as a set of metrics to be used to measure success. However, one pilot is not sufficient to test and build a robust, sustainable initiative, and we hope to trial this initiative in a further three locations this year. 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 will explore new ways of delivering Government services to enhance the user experience. 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 broadband officers and senior officials from each local authority and impressed upon them that they must play a vital role in promoting the smart community initiative and the work of Grow Remote.

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 but 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

Chairman: I thank the Minister of State. I welcome Ms Tracy Keogh and call on her to make her opening statement.

Ms Tracy Keogh: On behalf of Grow Remote Ireland and our 40 chapters across the country, I thank the committee for the opportunity to speak to it. I also thank the Minister of State, Deputy Carey, for having spent his evenings supporting our chapter on the ground in Ennis.

I have a fundamental belief in the power of community when it is given space to be done right. I have watched meetings of this committee and I realise the committee also understands this, as well as the challenges faced by communities, whether it is the housing crisis, congestion, carbon tax, the need for more and higher quality regional employment and the need to relieve the pressure valve on urban areas. There is also a challenge to increase levels of employment and the quality thereof in rural Ireland.

We consider remote work as enabling decentralisation but for the private sector and by choice. We work with three groups to make it a reality: First is the companies, including small and medium-sized enterprises, SMEs, whose greatest challenge is securing access to talent and then retaining it. Second is the talent, that is, the people themselves. According to a Vodafone study, 77% of respondents say they want more flexible working policies in Irish organisations. In a Wicklow County Council survey of commuters, 50% of respondents wanted to work and live in their home town. The third, and my most important group, are the rural community groups, which need to ensure the economic sustainability of vibrant rural communities and which are building capacity to enable this new type of employment.

We started off by asking how we might drive it more. Remote working companies have identified remote work as a skill in itself. The first thing Grow Remote must do is uncover the highly talented workforce in Ireland which is already skilled in remote work. Having located that skills base, Grow Remote can point to this as a place to locate. Grow Remote has intro-

duced a free scholarship programme for an accredited certificate in remote working.

Creating jobs in the regions relieves the pressure on our major urban areas in housing, congestion and everything else. Many people say that broadband in rural areas of Ireland is not sufficient. It certainly is not, but it is not inhibiting big companies from hiring here now.

The Grow Remote group began as a mobilised group of co-working managers, employers, and employees which saw an opportunity. It slowly evolved into an organisation with the structure to deliver its aims nationally and locally. It has 40 chapters across Ireland, as well as one each in Spain, Portugal and the US. We had not anticipated this scale but we hit upon a basic need which, if fulfilled, would enable our communities to thrive, and scaling was a natural next step.

A survey conducted by the telecommunications company, Blueface, found that there are 216,000 remote workers in Ireland. Our first goal is to understand that figure more deeply, and to establish their location, who these people are, who they work for and the nature of their skills. A recent Grow Remote event in a very rural location was attended by people from Dell, Pfizer, Wayfair, Shopify, Github and Hotjar. These are not companies that hire in this location specifically, but those people live and work in that community and contribute to it directly. When we mention rural jobs, we think of SMEs, and I am not asking that we let go of the SMEs. A man stood up at the rural meet-up - John Horkan, who is owner of Horkan Garden Centre and employs 150 people. It is a Mayo company, born and bred. He spoke about how he was surprised to see the vast variety of skills in that room and how seeing that is fundamental to supporting the Horkan Garden Centre on its digital transformation journey to ensure that SME is sustainable for that community.

As to what we do, the idea at the heart of Grow Remote is quite simple in that we bridge the gap between remote work and local impact. Our focus is on remote work for full-time employees, with all of the same benefits anyone would get with a local employer, simply without the office. We separate the suppliers of remote work into two streams, first, fully distributed companies with no offices and, second, companies which are on the journey and which have *ad hoc* policies and, say, let people work in Castlebar or Tuam but which do not have a unified approach to hiring remotely. Companies such as Shopify, Buffer and 10up are moving towards having no offices whatsoever.

How do we bridge the gap? We operate in chapters on a platform called ChangeX. It is textbook community development and equips communities with the tools and resources to make change in their own environment, which is what they are doing. Our chapters range from communities on Arranmore island, which has a population of 465 people, to Dublin and Lisbon. They all support each other in enabling each one to thrive.

It is relatively obvious why are we doing this but there are two main points. The first concerns bringing economic life back to rural Ireland. People need high-quality jobs in rural places and they need to be able to spend their earnings in the local community. They want to do that and we just need to enable it. The second is related to the perspective we came from. Regional hubs are popping up all over the country. They started off with a focus on anchor tenants, start-ups and SMEs and we believe the final pillar in enabling these hubs to thrive is enabling remote work and people who wish to work remotely, but not necessarily within their own homes. This reflects the wider point in regard to these hubs, which is bringing life back to the main streets and central areas of our towns and villages.

What is the committee's role in supporting Grow Remote? Our first ask is that we would like to commission an in-depth study of the opportunities remote working presents, and the challenges currently faced by companies wishing to pursue such a strategy. Second, we would like solid co-ordination across Government agencies on the topic of remote work. While we have had positive engagement with Government bodies on an informal basis, we are asking this committee to ask the Government agencies with responsibility for job creation, and beyond that to carbon emissions and that side, to work closely with our team at Grow Remote as we deliver the necessary supports.

To recap, as part of changing the narrative on rural Ireland, we need to show that there is an abundance of jobs in the most rural places in Ireland, the jobs that do not come with a ribbon cut and do not come in the usual way. Such jobs are in brilliant international firms such as Shopify, Wayfair, Trello, Buffer, 10up, Scrapinghub, Nearform and others. We can all think of a town in Ireland that has a pub, a shop and a GAA pitch - I am thinking of Ballinderry, County Galway - where a person growing up will think they can be a publican, an undertaker or a primary school teacher. We want them also to think they can work for Expedia, Shopify or Wayfair, and just because we are no longer seeing them on the main street does not mean there cannot be brilliant career opportunities with these companies.

The proverbial win-win is normally too good to be true but this is happening in areas across Ireland. It is a win for employers, which are seeing increased productivity and better brands that attract new employees, it is a win for employees, who are more productive and happier, and it is a major win for our communities which enables them to grow more. While it is not a silver bullet and is not the single solution to our changing world of work and life, it is a smart, effective, economically viable solution that has yet to be fully embraced and become mainstream among employers and employees and communities. The question is what else we have in our arsenal to drive job creation in Ireland and whether one of those elements is the driving of remote work as a serious solution.

A couple of weeks ago we launched Grow Remote in Tubbercurry with a fantastic local team with a brilliant track record in delivery. I thank the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment for its forward thinking and proactive approach to supporting that community on the ground and behind the scenes, thereby enabling it to thrive, in particular, Caroline Henry, Stephen Brennan and the Minister of State, Deputy Canney. I thank the committee for their time.

Senator Paudie Coffey: I welcome the witnesses. This issue deeply interests all of us in terms of how we can grow enterprise and enhance social inclusion for those of us who live in rural Ireland. The Minister of State has been on this side of the table advocating for rural Ireland and I know he is passionate about it. This is an interesting engagement. For once, we are starting to think outside the box, rather than going through the traditional streams of how we will get the networks into rural Ireland in regard to broadband, infrastructure and the various aspects of wireless technology, for example, the new initiatives from SIRO and the ESB, which are looking at ways other than the hard fibre that has traditionally delivered broadband in urban areas. That is all happening in the background but, in the meantime, it is refreshing to hear Ms Keogh outline how she and her colleagues are thinking outside the box, utilising existing infrastructure and getting ahead of the game in engaging with employers, Departments, this committee, agencies and others. I commend her and her colleagues for that.

It should not stop there. Ms Keogh in her presentation mentioned the power of community and quality of life, which are the traditional strengths of rural Ireland. We need to capture those,

as she said, and direct them in a way that creates jobs and allows people to live at home, earn an income and contribute to their local communities. That is what I am getting from her, in a nutshell.

I have a few questions. She mentioned enablers and this committee needs to help in identifying enablers to meet Grow Remote's aspirations and make them work. She referred to access to regional hubs and to commissioning a study to identify further opportunities. I ask her to elaborate on that, distil it down and tell us what specific opportunities she has in mind. Should we bring specific employers before a committee such as this or try to assist Grow Remote in engaging them through its chapters? There are the SMEs, ISME, Retail Ireland and all of the representative agencies and the larger brands and companies which mentioned. Ms Keogh might identify some of the enablers we could assist in identifying.

I want to direct a question to the Minister of State, as I recognise the role he can play in being the champion for initiatives like this across Government. As we know, the Government can often work in silos within individual Departments and it is very hard to get that recognition of how cross-cutting initiatives like this can work. I refer, in particular, to the delivery of broadband and access to digital, which is of primary importance, and the Minister of State and his colleagues are doing their best to enhance that. We need to engage the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation and encourage its officials and representatives to engage with us to look at how we can assist organisations such as Grow Remote. There is significant potential if this is managed in a co-ordinated way, and I am excited to hear so much work is going on behind the scenes. We need to see more of that. We could consider whether we should invite representatives of other agencies or Departments or employer representatives to see how we can channel them into thinking about Grow Remote and how we can improve the prospects for job creation in rural Ireland. The committee would be doing a job in that regard.

I thank the witnesses for the presentation and I look forward to their responses.

Ms Tracy Keogh: I thank the Senator for his kind words. They are much appreciated. I will respond first on the report. Many things could be done. We have an e-workers grant, for example, but it is hard for remote working companies to administer and it is not well promoted. There are various things but instead of coming to the committee and asking for one-off items like that or the e-visa that Estonia does very well - there are other models we could adopt from different countries - we would like to open it further and make sure that the things we ask for are viable and will have a meaningful impact. The study is essentially to understand the current landscape. For example, the figure of 216,000 workers is large, but is that the case or not? Can we delve a little further into that? Are there any infrastructure challenges that the Government can work on to support companies to hire outside cities and in more remote areas? That is what we want to do. It is broad, but as soon as the committee starts speaking to the companies we are speaking to, that will begin to firm up. People have been thinking about this but they have not had the opportunity to appear before the committee, as we have been given today. As soon as that gateway is opened, the committee will have floods.

Mr. Paul Ellingstad: I am an example of somebody who has been remote working for more than 15 years. I have fortuitously been in the IT sector. I have been working over 25 years since I started my career. I have been living in Ireland and working for multinational companies in global jobs. It started in Gateway 2000 in Europe and east Africa as well as global roles when I lived in Dún Laoghaire. I moved to Clare in 2007. I was able to do that because of the trusting relationship not only with my employer but also with my manager. I find that while more people are building those relationships, that trust it is still not at a point where the culture and

trust within organisations enable the potential we have today to be pervasive.

In terms of what the Government can do to support it, there is still a perception that remote working is about converting a spare bedroom into a home office and hoping there is good broadband. It is about co-working spaces and how the Government and local organisations can support them. If people are coming together in a co-working space, they have all the social interaction and the vibrancy of the community yet they are connected with their customers, employers or employees anywhere in the world. It is about encouraging those spaces and, as Ms Keogh noted, going beyond the mindset that this is for small start-ups and trying to create new businesses. That is definitely part of it, but there are so many people around the country and the world who have the capability to work in remote spaces and make their communities vibrant if they are given that opportunity and the process and trust are built with their employers and with the community.

Deputy Seán Canney: The Senator is correct that no Department should work in a silo. The Tubbercurry smart community is an example of where a number of groups and agencies have come together. When I was there, Sligo IT was very active as well, and, therefore, education comes into it. Returning to what has been said about Grow Remote, I have been informed by the IDA that foreign direct investors want to know that their workers can work from home, not necessarily from the house but that they can work from Tubbercurry, Tuam, Ballinderreen, Gort or wherever. They can work there and, perhaps, drive three miles home. They have a better quality of life and we save significantly on transport costs, emissions and so forth. Ms Keogh referred to win-win and I was impressed by what I saw in Tubbercurry in terms of collective responsibility and collective action on the part of a large number of people. Having met Ms Keogh and her group, I believe wholeheartedly that we are working on something that will make a major difference to rural Ireland. Ms Keogh said the lack of broadband in rural Ireland is not necessarily an inhibitor. If we have places in towns that can take up the slack, we will be able to develop and keep jobs in the towns and villages. That is the first step. Rural broadband is another issue.

I am committed to this and I will be talking to other Departments to explain what is happening here and to get their input. That is a big factor which is often missing. Some Departments do not know what is happening in another Department. There might be good initiatives. Officials could be wondering how they will do something when it has been done.

Deputy Martin Kenny: I thank the witnesses for their interesting presentation. I wish to raise a couple of matters. The first is the chapters, how they are set up and what mechanism a community project or group goes through to engage with them. I am from south Leitrim. Carrick-on-Shannon has a good broadband service and is the place where everything is happening, but there is very little outside that. That is one of the difficulties. I live in a rural parish where there is a pub and a shop. There used to be a post office but it is not there anymore. We will not discuss that today. We have a football pitch. The school was a three-teacher school but unless we attract another 16 children by next September, it will become a two-teacher school. Once it becomes a two-teacher school, it will be on the way out. In many rural parishes around the country there is no town. There is a wire running on top of the poles from Mohill to Aghavas that is supposedly the broadband wire. It has been there for three years but there is no broadband. It is the same in many places. I rejoice in what the witnesses are telling us, but we have heard so much of this for so long that many rural communities have become disheartened and have given up. They have tried so hard but they find it very difficult.

I would like to have details on how these chapters can work, which businesses could be

involved and how people can live at home in a rural area and go to the small village or town nearby and work from there. If that can happen and there is a market for that and if something real can be done to change things around, that is wonderful. However, we are hesitant in believing it because we have heard so many promises in the past.

The other issue is how to make this happen. Communities have come together and have worked hard for a long time to try to make things happen, but it has generally ended up that these little development organisations have just become social clubs. There is little at the end of it. That has to change. If the witnesses are saying there is an opportunity here in that regard, we must first get these broadband wires running along the top of the poles live and working. We need to have not just one or two major towns in each county having good broadband but to get broadband everywhere. I do not expect it to go down every boreen. People in rural Ireland are not stupid. They understand that. However, there must be a decent broadband provision in most places. If there is an opportunity for remote working for people living at home through many of the multinational companies or reasonably well established companies, as was mentioned by Ms Keogh, how is that accessed? What is the A, B and C for doing this? We must see the framework and the proof of concept. We are sick of concepts and reports on how things could be done because when it comes to it, nothing happens. That is the reality for many people living in rural areas where there is a three-teacher school being reduced to a two-teacher school. They want to change that.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: I am sorry I was not present for the presentation but I watched it in my office. Ms Keogh knows who I am because my good friend, Mary Fahey in Portumna, has done a great deal of work on remote working. This week we were about to run it out of my office in the hub in Portumna. Ms Fahey is also a Grow Remote chapter leader. I am well versed in Grow Remote. I once mentioned it on “The Tonight Show”, and it is my most retweeted comment. People who are in on this understand what it is about and they see the value in it, but we have to assist in getting the word out about it and how it works. The Minister of State, Deputy Canney, rightly said that we have to encourage communities to work together. This is about people who do not want to be in their offices or homes day in and day out because of the loneliness attached to it. Employers take comfort in the fact there is communal working taking place.

In regard to LEADER funding, is there capacity for funding under this scheme to be ring-fenced for the conversion of buildings by the chapters, because this is a growing entity? In Galway, the Abbey community was awarded €50,000 under the town and villages renewal scheme to convert its community centre into a digital hub to facilitate people from that area. As we know, there are broadband blackspots in Ballinakill, but that does not preclude people travelling five miles to work in this facility. In areas where, in the chapters’ experience, there are suitable properties to develop this community experience, chapters could be the lever in accessing funding under LEADER to deliver them.

Ms. Keogh’s background is in Grow Remote but I assume she works for an industry or an organisation.

Ms Tracy Keogh: I work for an organisation that was started in a volunteer capacity.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: For what organisation does Ms Keogh work?

Ms Tracy Keogh: I work for Bank of Ireland.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: Am I correct then that Bank of Ireland would be a key driver in providing Grow Remote with opportunities to promote this experience among the businesses with which it does business?

Ms Tracy Keogh: No, it is separate. It started off as a grassroots movement and it built of its own accord to what it is today.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: I am trying to understand how we promote what jobs are available. As I understand it, there are approximately 10,000 jobs available. When I open the hub in Portumna on Saturday morning I want to be able to educate people about what jobs are available. We could also do that in SuperValu or elsewhere. Am I correct that there are approximately 10,000 jobs available?

Ms Tracy Keogh: I think 10,000 might be too much. There are hundreds of jobs. On one site alone, NoDesk, there are hundreds of jobs available.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: People are not aware of that. This is a good news story about which we need to be spreading the word.

Ms Tracy Keogh: Yes.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: Would Mr. Ellingstad agree with my points in regard to LEADER?

Mr. Paul Ellingstad: Absolutely.

Chairman: I must ask Deputy Rabbitte to conclude as Deputy Martin Kenny is waiting for responses to his questions. I invite the witnesses to respond to the questions from Deputies Kenny and Rabbitte.

Ms Tracy Keogh: Am I correct that Deputy Martin Kenny's office is in Manorhamilton?

Deputy Martin Kenny: I have an office in Manorhamilton and another in Carrick-on-Shannon.

Ms Tracy Keogh: Manorhamilton is one of the areas where this started for me personally. I was in with Mr. Ronan Hazlette who converted his building into a co-working space for Manorhamilton and called it Manor Hub. Mr. Hazlette works all over the world. He is a fantastic guy and he has such conviction and passion for his community. I wondered how I was going to support this experience. It is so difficult. It is not an easy win. I understand that communities have been doing this for a while because we are a community that has been doing it. People may have heard about the things that do not happen but that is part and parcel of community. Grow Remote has taken the energy from Tullamore to Gorey to Cork to Valentia Island to Arranmore Island and brought it together in a structure where we can get it to others and set out our coherent asks. This ensures we do not turn into a type of social club. On that note, when I was listening back to the committees, I heard one man speak about the importance of social enterprise in communities. We strengthen groups by training them up and building competent communities. As communities, we need the help of the committee around structuring our thoughts and opinions and the actions that we want to take. We have received great support from Social Entrepreneurs Ireland. Without Mr. John Evoy being at the other end of a telephone call for me, I would have been fairly stuck.

Deputy Kenny also asked about chapters. We went to ChangeX and we set out what ever the community needs to do. We built the guide to finding remote work so that people know where

to find it. The Deputy is right that 64% of people say they do not work remotely because they do not know where to find that work. These jobs are not listed on the same sites as other jobs. That was a core part of what we did. We then gathered all of those tools together and brought them to ChangeX. Communities that want to do this literally need only take five steps to set up a chapter. The set-up process is pretty structured. ChangeX is a tremendous organisation to enable this. I am not sure if anybody here read the article by Mr. Pat Spillane in, I think, *The Irish Times*, in which he spoke about the schools, the three children and the three teachers and how when something goes wrong in rural Ireland, we say it is dying or that we must go to Dublin to get help to fix the problem. He also spoke about a community, Kiltyclogher, and how it set out to identify its reality and restrictions and what it could do in that regard.

Mr. Paul Ellingstad: They set up Kilty Live.

Ms Tracy Keogh: They got the school reopened. We can be proactive rather sitting back and worrying that we might fail. We need to equip our communities with the tools and resources to make their own change. I hope I have answered all of the questions put to me.

Deputy Seán Canney: Deputy Martin Kenny spoke about fibre running along poles not being live. I had a meeting this morning with the telecommunications industry. They have a clear understanding of what I want them to do. As stated in the Dáil by the Minister, Deputy Bruton, and me, if the Deputy raises that specific issue with the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment, we will have it followed up and get back to him on it.

Deputy Rabbitte spoke about CLÁR. She also mentioned the town and village renewal scheme. The Department has a number of streams of funding to which people can make applications, including the rural regeneration fund. There is funding available to enable identified buildings, whether publicly or privately owned, to be brought back into public use. We do not need to reinvent the wheel. Where we have libraries, we have a tool and a network. We are investing in digital enhancement of libraries so that they can remain open. These are called “open libraries” and they are open remotely from 8 a.m. until 10 p.m. There is an open library in Tubbercurry and this provision is being rolled out across the country. On the day I visited Tubbercurry library, senior citizens were being trained in computer skills, including how to send an email and how to access information online in regard to booking a holiday and so on, such that they are not left behind in their communities in the digital age. There is a huge amount happening. It is not always about finding new buildings. There are libraries in many places that we should be utilising more. They should not be open from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. only. They should be open remotely and we are doing that.

This is the type of initiative and forward thinking we need in terms of utilising the assets we have. In doing that, we will create the spaces we need. Communities in villages that do not have libraries can access funding for the creation of these spaces through CLÁR, the town and village renewal scheme, the community enhancement programme, as well as the rural regeneration fund. These funding streams will be of great assistance to such. We all know of buildings that have been closed for years which could be opened up for this purpose. That is what is happening. We have also piloted six villages in the country where we have given funding for the community itself to come up with a scheme for what it wants to do to regenerate its town. They probably will come up with six different proposals for each town. The reason for that is because not every town is the same. Their needs and wants are different. Rural regeneration means that rather than Dublin telling us what we will give in Tuam, Claremorris or wherever, we will ask people to create the plan they want, ask them to bring that back up to us, and we will try to fund that. It is a different, bottom-up approach.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: Perfect.

Chairman: I thank the Minister of State. I welcome Grow Remote here. I went to a chapter meeting in Clarecastle, County Clare, and I saw how this works. It was incredible. I must compliment Ms Keogh and Mr. Ellingstad for doing this because they are making a real difference. Every rural community in Ireland can benefit from Grow Remote. It is such a simple idea but it works. It is about bringing everything together. Mr. Ellingstad hit on the core point stating that one needs a structure.

The Minister of State, Deputy Canney, was talking about town and village, the Clár programme and other revenue sources. There are 40 different chapters in Ireland and abroad. We need to put together a package where Grow Remote could link in with SMEs or multinational companies - Mr. Ellingstad touched on it as well as a culture of trust between the employee and the employer where one is working remotely from his or her house or co-working space. Dublin's urban sprawl would benefit from this as well as fewer people would be commuting. There are the issues of housing in Dublin, pressure on schools and whatever else. Working remotely is the way to go.

Ms Keogh mentioned producing an in-depth report on working remotely.

Ms Tracy Keogh: Yes.

Chairman: The committee should examine that proposal, take it on board, and look at the challenges, barriers and different issues that exist in the organisation growing itself even more. It is all about linking what the organisation has to offer with companies out there.

There is a work-life balance as well. I love County Clare. It is the best county in Ireland.

Deputy Seán Canney: That is not true.

Chairman: It is. If one could live in Clare and work in Clare, it would be the best place to be. Working remotely, one could achieve that.

Listening to Mr. Ellingstad, he works for a serious global company. He is working from home in Clarecastle in County Clare. I went to that chapter meeting on Thursday week last in Clarecastle, my own village, and was impressed to see the number of people who were there. They were serious players and they are working remotely from home. It is a matter of trying to join that up and get that message out.

I thank the members for agreeing to have this meeting today and for having Ms Keogh and Mr. Ellingstad attend. We need to publicise the work they are doing in conjunction with the Department and the Minister of State, Deputy Canney. This gives them this opportunity. I would certainly agree with the proposal Ms Keogh has on producing a report on remote working.

Ms Tracy Keogh: Brilliant. I thank the Chairman.

Chairman: I thank Ms Keogh and Mr. Ellingstad again. I call Senator Hopkins and then Deputy Niamh Smyth.

Senator Maura Hopkins: Apologies, I was a bit late. I had another meeting. I got a lot from the questions and answers section.

I will speak about my own experience in Roscommon-Galway. I attended the launch of a

digital hub attached to the library in Ballinasloe at the end of January. Obviously, it is a positive development. Ballinasloe Area Community Development, BACD, is proactive in encouraging the exacting goals that Ms Keogh and Mr. Ellingstad were talking about with regard to trying to work with companies to ensure that a number of employees could benefit from working in this space. We all know the challenges of travelling to Galway city, Dublin or wherever on a daily basis. Galway County Council is supportive of this initiative as well. The Minister of State will be aware that Mr. Michael Burke, CEO of the Chanelle Group, attended the launch and was involved in its promotion. It has been there for the best part of a year and a half. They had their first client at the end of 2018 for a number of weeks. There is considerable potential but we are not harnessing it enough. We talk a lot about the infrastructure that is needed but the infrastructure is there. This is a space which could work for many people. I will also give the example of our fabulous new Áras an Chontae building in Roscommon town. Similarly, there is a digital hub attached to that. There is much more potential than is being currently utilised to support people to live in rural areas to enjoy the quality of life that we all promote and enjoy.

My point to the Minister of State and to the other individuals on the panel today is we should be doing more to ensure the fabulous hub over the library in Ballinasloe and the digital hub in Roscommon town are utilised to their maximum potential and we are not doing that currently. I suppose all of us want to be proactive. We want to work on the resources that we have or the resources that we can deliver on, but these are resources and infrastructure that are already there.

We need to communicate that more widely. I was quite interested in what Mr. Ellingstad stated about how he began working from home and that his manager worked quite closely to encourage that. What more do we need to do in our work with companies to make known the potential of these hubs? I am only speaking about the ones in my region but I know they are underutilised. I strongly believe more needs to be done to encourage employers or entrepreneurs to set up and benefit from the good facilities that are currently in rural areas. Obviously, I am working closely with BACD, and in Roscommon, to promote that but there is another piece of work that needs to be done to finish off this jigsaw given the infrastructure that is there. I would appreciate a response on that main point.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: I thank the Minister of State and Ms Keogh for their presentations here this morning. For once, it sounds like a positive story and something exciting with significant potential for our communities and for those of us living in rural Ireland. We tend to focus on negative developments such as post office closures. They present a physical disadvantage, as we perceive it to be, in terms of the loss of another important building, business and footfall with respect to the opportunity to bring people into our towns and villages. I am thinking of towns such as Kilnaleck and Killeshandra that have been affected in that way but, as Ms Tracy Keogh pointed out, there are probably other small towns that face different types of difficulties. For example, Belturbet and Bawnboy in west Cavan are on the cusp of losing a secondary school. It is a scary prospect for towns or villages to face a school closure and the loss of youth and footfall that would entail in terms of the families, students and staff who circulate in them.

The presentation made by Ms Keogh is about a positive development, about which I would like to know more. I compliment the Minister of State who has been greatly involved in this initiative. I would be interested to hear where the organisation's other chapters are located because I am not aware of this initiative. Does it have a chapter in Cavan or Monaghan, which are the counties I represent? Ms Keogh's message today is that two elements have been fundamental to the success of this initiative, namely, community and communication. There are many voluntary groups in our towns and villages across the country, be it the town development

association, the Tidy Towns committee, or those involved in the Community Alert programme, which all do different and important jobs. They are the glue that holds our communities together. The initiative Ms Keogh presented is an opportunity to bring all those under one roof and, more important, provide jobs in our small towns and villages.

I travel the N3 to Dublin and back every day and it is evident we have a commuter crisis. Commuting is what kills people and diminishes quality family life and family time because people spend many hours in their cars travelling to and from work. That is the experience of many people in Cavan and Monaghan which do not have a rail service. As the train is not an option, people spend two or three hours travelling to and from work every day. They are exhausted by the time they get home and they do not have quality time to spend with their young children, spouses or whomever.

This is a positive initiative. Will Ms Keogh expand on the point my colleague, Deputy Rabbitte, raised regarding the funding opportunities that may exist to embrace this initiative? Are local enterprise offices, LEOs, involved in this initiative? Has there been a gender breakdown of the number of females and males benefitting from this initiative? It would offer a major opportunity to women who have great career prospects but who have had to be put them on hold because of childcare expenses. For most families, childcare can be as expensive or more expensive than their mortgage. Couples have to weigh up whether it is sensible for both partners to work. Women are the potentially untapped human resource that can be expanded. This initiative provides a platform for women to work remotely. Have any studies been done in this area? Are there figures on a gender breakdown of who benefits most from this?

Ms Keogh is right that we tend to jump on the bandwagon about what is wrong in our communities. The subject of her presentation provides an opportunity that communities should consider. As the Minister of State correctly stated, every town is unique in terms of its disadvantages but also in terms of its advantages. It may be close to a motorway or it may have a secondary school or an education and training board in the locality that produces young graduates who ordinarily would have to go to college in Galway, Dublin or Belfast. Perhaps this initiative would offer jobs that they could tap into in their communities and keep people - our most important resource - in rural communities.

I have two essential questions. First, is the organisation working with the LEOs? What other funding opportunities are available to Grow Remote? I also asked about the gender breakdown. Communication is key to this initiative. The many voluntary groups working in our communities tend not to communicate with each other. However, they are all passionate about working for the betterment of their communities. This initiative would be a vehicle to enhance this. I ask Ms Keogh to expand on her proposals in this regard.

Ms Tracy Keogh: I understood Senator Hopkins said the hub in Ballinasloe had been without tenants and empty for a year and a half. Is that correct?

Senator Maura Hopkins: Approximately.

Ms Tracy Keogh: Grow Remote had many catalysts and that was one of them. Some hubs are not at full occupancy. They need to be at 60% occupancy to break even and be financially sustainable. Sometimes people have been quick to say they do not work. In rural Ireland, we do not have the luxury of saying they do not work. They need to work, so they are on a journey.

Senator Hopkins spoke about a hub targeting a company which could base a group of em-

ployees in its area. It is probably looking at satellite offices, which is one stream, but if we consider the bigger trends, companies are operating without offices. Some companies are being approached by centres in areas such as the Burren, Ballinasloe, Loughrea and Portumna asking them to open up satellite offices. They are finding it difficult to do this, however. Grow Remote came about precisely to provide support in such circumstances.

In terms of enabling hubs to reach their full potential, in many instances, they are definitely not there yet. One of our chapters in Termon in Donegal is working on an EU funded project focused on how co-working spaces in rural areas enable rural areas to thrive. It is building that blueprint. To take up Deputy Smyth's point, I have repeatedly heard about the importance of building competent communities and enabling the sharing of case studies and things that work among communities. Another organisation is also working on that blueprint, which I assume will be completed by the middle of this year. This will help hubs identify what is best practice and adopt which elements are relevant to their area.

I thank Deputy Smyth for her kind words on our chapters. She fundamentally gets our bigger mission and the purpose of it. All our chapters and locations can be viewed on changex.org/growremote/locations. We are essentially everywhere. We have one chapter in Monaghan. I was in the county yesterday and there is a tremendous local council in Monaghan. It is very forward-thinking. The first question I ask in every community is whether people know what Wayfair is. Invariably the response is "No" and I think that is why the jobs are not there. The difference between knowing about Wayfair and not knowing about it is the difference between having these jobs in an area and not having them in an area. Monaghan is building out a particularly ambitious chapter and it sees a great opportunity in it.

On funding, going back to the foundations of Grow Remote we have found, as all community organisations find, that the landscape for funding for communities is a minefield. I went to Brussels three times last year to try to understand the system. I have asked counties about it and different counties seem to do it differently. Wherever there is a fund open, we have submitted an application.

In terms of the local employment offices, everyone with whom we have been working has been fantastic. In places such as Tullamore the LEOs have been great and very proactive. However, because we are a national organisation, it is hard to structure engagement with the LEOs because it tends to be one-off cases here and there. That is one of the challenges we have. We emerged nationally and it was not as if we were based only in Tullamore, Offaly or Galway.

On women benefitting from the initiative, that is very important to me personally. We do not have any statistics on it. I call tell Deputy Smyth about one women how was in our chapter. She is a single mother who was living in Dublin. She was renting and had to move out of her home. It had not occurred to me but moving out means moving children from school. This caused major interruption to the woman's life and she was certain she could not do it. She moved to a commuter town, convinced her boss to allow her *ad hoc* to work remotely and, through Grow Remote, was able to get a referral into a bigger remote working company and secure a proper full-time remote working job. That is the type of success we are seeing.

I do not have any statistics on the issue but Abodoo, an Irish recruitment company, is focused on unconscious bias in hiring. Employmum focuses on bringing women who have been staying at home back into the workforce. WorkJuggle is also focused on enabling that workforce to come back. It is not the only part of this, but it is a major one.

Deputy Seán Canney: On Senator Hopkins's point about Ballinasloe, one of the things that happens is that we put a lot of energy into getting something ready and then it seems to flatline. Sometimes, this is because it takes a while to get it moving or to get the trajectory right. The most important thing is that we now have a broadband officer in every local authority. We will be looking to these officers to map the assets we have in order that we can say, for example, that in County Galway there is a hub in Ballinasloe, another digital hub in another location and open-access libraries. We will have our assets mapped so that we can direct people looking for spaces to Ballinasloe or wherever else. The hub in Ballinasloe is in a county council building. The library is downstairs. It is in the old convent. It is a fine space. We need to promote this hub through the local employment offices, IDA Ireland, Enterprise Ireland, and so on. Grow Remote will be engaging with the broadband officers. Ms Keogh is meeting with them next month to see how they can collaborate with each other to make people more aware of what is available.

To return to Deputy Niamh Smyth's question about statistics on gender participation, the Western Development Commission has carried out and published research on the benefits of remote working and the gender balance in the region in which it works. That might give the Deputy a flavour. The research is on its website and we can get it to her.

The Deputy mentioned the need for us to provide jobs for communities. I differ with her on this point. As legislators, politicians and policymakers, we have to provide the infrastructure to allow the jobs to be created. Vibrant communities, of which we have many, need to be harnessed. I have seen at first hand the example of Tubbercurry. There are many moving parts, but they are all moving together in synch. That is very important. They are on the same page as the local authority, Sligo IT, An Post and all of the other organisations involved in that action group. They are a solid block moving together. It comes back to what Senator Coffey said about Departments being islands and not knowing what is going on elsewhere. It is the same thing in communities. Organisations need to work together and, in many cases, they are doing so. We need to encourage more of that so that we are all moving the same way.

The Deputy also mentioned funding. As stated earlier, there are many funding streams available but we also have many existing assets which we do not realise are there or which are not used as they should be used. I gave the example of the libraries earlier. Where we do not have assets we can target buildings that are derelict and get them opened up. That seems to be the high-energy part of the solution. We should not be doing that unless we have sustainable plans for filling those assets afterwards.

Senator Maura Hopkins: I thank our guests for their comments. In the context of what the Minister of State indicated earlier, it is very positive that companies providing foreign direct investment are asking questions about, and seeing the potential of, working from home. We want to benefit from that potential in rural areas. The Minister of State mentioned a sort of directory and the broadband officers. That is important because there is a need for some level of co-ordination. The word "communication" has been used quite a number of times. It is about knowing where resources are, such as in Ballinasloe or in Áras an Chontae in Roscommon town.

Work needs to be done with companies in this area. This work could potentially, though not necessarily, be around satellite offices if the companies wished to establish them. Work should be done with them on one-off working or further measures. Work is definitely needed because the infrastructure in place is definitely under-utilised. This is a point of which we need to take cognisance in the context of this committee.

Mr. Paul Ellingstad: Building on that, I would like to address some of the questions raised by Deputies Rabbitte and Niamh Smyth. Having worked in the technology sector for the last 25 years or more, I can state that the technology is very much the elephant in the room. Everyone talks about the technology; that is what gets the attention. The mouse that roars like the lion is the culture and the processes. That is what is missing among the companies and employers. They are looking at whether they have the broadband and the offices and whether they trust the employees. If one looks at the Sunday business papers or at forums like the World Economic Forum, one will see hashtags like #thefutureofwork and people looking at artificial intelligence, AI, and robotics replacing human jobs. Others are talking about digital transformation and the disruption of business models by companies such as Airbnb and Uber. The mouse that roars is to get dialogue going about figuring out the processes and the culture both for employers and employees. Customers have already moved to this. Customers do not mind if a person is based in India or Timbuktu, yet we have very outdated and primitive processes and culture around allowing employees to live literally anywhere in the world while staying connected to their employer, their customers and their partners.

There are really four key ingredients to this that I have seen from inside the technology sector, namely, people, processes, technology and culture. It is about taking a systematic approach instead of taking the silo approach to which Senator Coffey referred. It is about optimising the system not only by looking at the technology, but by looking at the people, the processes, the technology and the culture that make remote working work for employers, employees, customers and, ultimately, communities.

Deputy Niamh Smyth took the Chair.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: This is a fascinating debate. The possibilities are limitless. The last statement made, namely, that location is irrelevant, is probably 70% true. There are so many potential variations on this theme that the only limitation is our imagination. There is one irony in all of this, which is that decentralised Departments, apart from the Department of Education and Skills in Athlone and so on, were basically co-located working places. The further the digital revolution goes, the more the arguments against decentralisation fall. Did it really make a difference if, when one called the then Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, one thought that one was talking to a person in the Custom House when one was actually talking to someone in Ballina? No. It made no difference. Did the person physically have to be beside the person they were working with? No, not really. All of us, as Deputies, operate in different locations all the time. Most of us have our staff well away from where we are ourselves located. The only limits are literally in our own minds. I welcome the idea.

I have a few questions. The witnesses are talking about co-located places in Corr na Móna or wherever. I am looking for something like that in Corr na Móna, but only for one reason. Only 100 or so of the 400 houses around Corr na Móna have gigabit technology. The rest are on 5 Mb and cannot work from home. I know of many existing businesses that cannot get in the net so we need a co-located place within four or five miles so that they can be brought together and connected to gigabit Internet. Those who have direct connection to gigabit Internet are working from home. I have a question that relates to that and two other questions. Everybody should have Internet access, that is, fibre to the home, with speeds of 1 Gbps. Mobile technology is no good because it is constantly subject to contention. It is great when one is out in the field or something like that but it is not a good basic technology when one wants to do work at home and everyone wants to work at the same time. I am very much in favour of the fibre connection to one's basic place of work and the other supplementary service. On what does the

co-location part depend?

Who will avail of this? It was very interesting to see a report in the local authority information we get every day on the web to the effect that Dublin is the second or third most expensive city to live in when the cost of finding somewhere to live versus salary is taken into account. The obvious reason is that we are forcing people to live here. It is not that they want to be here, as we know from the number of Civil Service staff requests to transfer out of Dublin, which are eight or ten times higher than requests to transfer to Dublin. Businesses that employ high end people sometimes need to physically meet people. I have been arguing about what will happen with our highly educated rural people who work in the cities. It must be remembered that a higher percentage of people from rural areas have a higher level of education than people from urban areas. The percentage for Dublin is approximately 40% but in many areas of rural Ireland 55%, 60%, 65% and 70% of young people have a higher level of education. That does not show up in the statistics because when the census is taken they are all living in Dublin. However, if we go back to where they grew up and the schools they attended, we find the statistics show that access to third level education, if we take the entire span of Dublin, is much higher in rural areas. Why is that important? Many people when they reach their mid-30s are doing the reverse of what they were doing when they were 18. At 18 people want to live cities but when they reach their 30s they are thinking they would love to be living back in the country in a nice safe place and have their children attend the nice little school they attended. My prediction is that if we can get in the proper technology and get employers to think outside the box, we will have many people coming to the city two days a week to have their meetings and then work from home on the other three days. Most people now work six or seven days a week at home, on and off, because of access to computers. What is the Government doing to encourage that? It would sort out many of the traffic problems that are intractable in our cities.

Unfortunately, I was not here for the presentation because I was attending a meeting of the Dáil reform committee. The Government seems to be looking for jobs for people who do not have jobs. It is telling companies in the market that Ireland has many top class people who could work for them but they live in "Ballywherever". The solution it is offering, therefore, is to provide a centre in which jobs will be created. We have many advantages as a people in terms of servicing multinational companies, including that we are English speaking, friendly and helpful. Does the Government have a policy of telling IDA Ireland that the days of having to bring an entire factory here are over and that it could attract many jobs to Ireland, irrespective of location, be it from Tory Island to the corner of Wexford or from County Louth across to the tip of Kerry, without providing major infrastructure, factory buildings and so on? Will IDA Ireland be given the remit to ask all these multinational companies if they want top class out-workers? It is amazing that we are going back to the past when out-workers at home provided the big mills with product.

I will make one final point on what Mr. Ellingstad said. I do not know if people share my frustration but I hate dealing with telephone companies and banks now because I am put through to a call centre and speak to somebody at the far end of the world who does not know my problem and cannot solve it. I will be honest about that. It is not because they are far away but because one can never get back to the same person if one rings again. We need call centres where people can have human contact with someone who knows their file in the way bank managers or staff in telephone companies used to know our files 30 or 40 years ago. It does not make any difference if that person is based in the Arctic or the Antarctic Circle, provided he or she knows our case and understands where we are coming from. That will become the next selling point for companies. When we have a problem we do most things online to deal with it

but when we need to talk to a human to sort out a problem, we need a human who understands it and can sort it. When we talk about no location, that might be physically true but it is not mentally or emotionally true. The small nature of society here means we are particularly good at connecting with people and problems. If companies were to go that extra step, they would do a fantastic marketing job for themselves.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Niamh Smyth): If it is agreed, we will take questions from Deputy Fitzmaurice also.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: I thank the witnesses for their presentations. I agree fully with the concept of people being able to work from a hub or from home. As the Minister of State is aware, Internet access is poor in many areas, although in fairness some towns have been brought up to specification on that. I will be fairly brief. The Minister of State spoke about libraries and different facilities. There are former technical schools, community centres or various buildings in towns that communities are trying to refurbish which could be used to encourage and facilitate people to set up a small office or whatever. The first thing that has to be done is make sure it has Internet access. Second, the building has to be into a proper state for use. Some people have done that under the rural economic development zones, REDZ, programme but it takes a while to do this because of the funding streams required. In fairness, some education and training boards, ETBs, are involved but they may have to go through LEADER, which is a long process. Is there any way we can streamline the Department's rural development programme the specifically target smaller towns such as Glenamaddy, Ballygar, Strokestown and Castlerea? In that way we could make sure we keep local people in local areas.

Broadband officers were mentioned. One can ring them up to tell them the situation regarding broadband access. Many small businesses in an area might call them to explain the position they are caught up in with regard to bad broadband service. However, with the best will in the world, the broadband officers cannot do anything about that. Until the national broadband plan is rolled out throughout the country, they are really only messengers. There are small businesses in rural areas such as Ward & Burke Construction near me which do not have a broadband service. Eir provided broadband extending one mile out of town but beyond that it was a case of to hell with it. Ward & Burke Construction has 22 staff and requires broadband because it works with England, Canada and America. The problem is that we do not have the infrastructure in place. While it is great that private rather than public investment has made broadband more accessible for people to do their work in some towns, that is not the case in many other areas. I ask that work is done on the LEADER funding especially to make it more available for such facilities to assist them to get up and running. The REDZ project has helped some areas but one might need to spend between €100,000 and €200,000. There is a payback because such schemes will help people to live and work in an area and not leave a rural part of the country to work in a city, thereby increasing the demand for housing in cities. We can talk in circles all day about every bit of smart technology. Down through the past 20 or 30 years many towns, between community centres and different buildings, have come up. I am not saying that progress has not been made. I ask that the final tin hat is put on this and make sure that we can get this facility thus encouraging people into those areas. There is no point denying the fact that the scheme takes money. A library has been mentioned. We are trying to get the library to become a tenant in the technical school in Glenamaddy. It takes money to bring a building up to specification, especially an older building, which the witnesses will know as they know about quantity surveying as well as anybody. To get a kickstart is the big thing to facilitate the people. It is like climbing a stairs; one must create the first step and keep putting in all of the steps to get to the top. I want this work done quickly enough around the country in order to facilitate people.

Deputy Seán Canney: If Ms Keogh does not mind, I shall answer a few questions.

Deputy Ó Cuív mentioned IDA Ireland. The issue has moved way beyond what he talked about in that the foreign direct companies are telling IDA Ireland that they want to see where people can work remotely. We are moving away from having 500 or 1,000 jobs in a big building. We are back to where the FDIs are asking whether we have the facilities for people to work in their own areas, like we have done in Tubbercurry. FDIs are asking whether people can work remotely from Tubbercurry or other towns. Working remotely is what it is all about. IDA Ireland does not need a remit because the demand for remote working is coming from foreign direct companies. We must provide the facilities so that remote working can be achieved, and that is the way it is working. There is no point in us telling IDA Ireland what it should do. Rather, we have to facilitate the FDIs.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: It is still what Governments normally do but go on.

Deputy Seán Canney: That is the way it is. The FDIs are in that space where we have to provide resources, map what we are doing and identify what we have. We must say that people can work remotely in Tuam or Glenamaddy, for example.

Deputy Fitzmaurice mentioned broadband officers. I agree with him to a certain extent that up to now one had to ring them to discover where one was in terms of the broadband roll-out. The broadband officer concept is completely different. Before the Deputy came in here, Senator Hopkins talked about how the accommodation over the library in Ballinasloe was vacant for 18 months after the place had been turned into a hub. The broadband officer is there to coordinate our assets so that IDA Ireland and Enterprise Ireland know what we have. As I said earlier about Grow Remote, I will meet the broadband officers and seek more collaboration in terms of this concept. The broadband officer role will expand and there will be an office within the local authority so that people can go into that office and get more information about where they can locate.

In terms of Grow Remote, Ms Keogh can answer for herself. Grow Remote is not a concept where we are trying to get companies because there are jobs. Instead, we must let people know that the jobs are available and get them to apply. A lot of the work concerns increasing the knowledge and understanding of what exists.

Deputy Fitzmaurice mentioned old buildings and the LEADER fund, and Deputy Rabbitte mentioned the issue earlier. Where we have buildings that we can utilise, then fine. Where we have buildings that are derelict in places where there is no library or whatever, then we should consider ways to bring them back into use. Personally, I think the rural regeneration fund is the way to go because it takes between €200,000 or €500,000 to do up a building between fire certification and the whole shooting match. That is where the money is. We should identify buildings in towns that can be utilised for multiple purposes. As I said earlier, library buildings should not only open between 9 a.m. or 9.30 a.m. and 5 p.m. The open library access is going on now. In a large number of libraries we are rolling out a scheme where people can get a card that allows them to access the building between 8 a.m. and 10 p.m. throughout the year; that is happening already. Customers can check their books in and out by using a card. All of this kind of stuff is happening.

In terms of funding, people can apply for funding from the LEADER programme but the rural regeneration fund is probably where a lot more can be done and where the opportunities exist. Under the rural regeneration fund, as much as €1 billion will be available over the next

ten years and there is €315 million available for the next three or four years. We need to examine all the means of funding. Every town could have a different asset and need so we cannot give the same thing to everybody. That is why we have a pilot scheme comprising six towns. They can identify what they want from the ground up rather than people at central Government level telling them what they will receive. We are trying to change the thought process when it comes to developing villages. I believe that I have covered all of the questions.

Deputy Martin Kenny: I do not see how the local libraries in my area would be suitable because there is public access in and out of them all of the time and there is not space, in general. Mohill is a town near to where I live. The old vocational school building in Mohill has lain idle for years. I approached the vocational education committee about allowing a community project to use the building but the VEC said, “Oh, no. We had an experience of that before. We let community projects in and we could not get them out.” That is the kind of attitude one is up against. I agree with the direction outlined by the Minister of State.

Let us say that a community in a small town or village owns a building, and many of these buildings are in disrepair. Let us say a community wants a hub set up in a building. How many work spaces are necessary to make the project viable? Is it work space for ten or 20 people?

Let us say a community agrees to do this tomorrow, meet on Friday night and submit an application on Friday week. To whom do they send their application? Where is the money going to come from? How quickly can this be done? I take the point that was made earlier. I know about “Kilty Live” as I was involved with setting it up and I understand what the people of that community did. We are trying to do the same in my parish but the problem is we do not have houses and there are no houses for rent anywhere. Sometimes the reality on the ground is different and we need to imagine what that is like. We need to be proactive and come up with imaginative ways forward. We really need to have a very set line on how to achieve this. I know that the Minister of State is a man that can do that and I encourage him to come up with a solution.

Deputy Seán Canney: The Deputy said that he does not believe there is space in his local libraries. I urge him not to rule anything out and visit Tubbercurry to see what was done there. If somebody just wants to use the library that the Deputy mentioned on a Saturday or Sunday then they can or they will be able to do that.

Deputy Martin Kenny: This is going to be a full-time job.

Deputy Seán Canney: No. If people want to get into the libraries we are digitising the libraries, putting money into creating digital facilities within libraries and also getting people open access to the libraries. That is just part of the overall approach.

Deputy Kenny asked how many desks are needed. In Headford, it took two weeks to create ten spaces upstairs in a sports club in Moyvilla. The organisation received €2,000 from Galway County Council for the project. The venue is now being run nice and quietly but within an existing sports complex. There is no set way of doing it. It is all about doing what one can with the assets one has. If someone has a building, he or she may avail of the digital innovation fund to assist in developing innovation. If the building belongs to a local authority, he or she may approach the local authority for assistance or funding. Deputy Fitzmaurice will know that the former vocational school in Dunmore was renovated and is now an enterprise centre. There are challenges. If there is no other use for a public building such as the former school in Dunmore, common sense will prevail. That may not always be the case but we will keep working on it.

Ms Tracy Keogh: I will address each of the points raised insofar as I can. A database of hubs has been made available by TechIreland, which is led by Niamh Bushnell. Its database, available at www.techireland.org/hubs, lists all of the more than 200 hubs across Ireland.

I made notes regarding broadband but I am not sure if I want to address it. I am 29 years old. I decided to move back to the regions from Dublin and other areas. I want to live in a place that does more than ask for broadband to be provided. A bigger vision is needed. Broadband is only an enabler. We know from places such as Ballinasloe - we have a fantastic chapter in Ballinasloe - where broadband has been provided that it does not solve the world's problems. We need to take a holistic approach.

Deputy Ó Cuív spoke about rural areas and people in their 30s. A group in Canada that studies rural rejuvenation identified that people move back to rural areas in their 30s. If one wants to target that demographic, one needs to speak to them about schools and target the children more than the parents. Remote work levels the playing field. A recruitment firm which utilises remote working stated that talent and intelligence are equally distributed but opportunity is not. That gap is closing. When jobs are not location dependent, rural communities can compete on a level playing field with urban areas. People can make the choice to live where they wish to live rather than because of the area's proximity to jobs. A previous meeting of the committee dealt with the opportunities offered by decentralisation. As I previously referenced, remote work is essentially the result of private industries choosing to decentralise.

We work with broadband officers on an individual basis. They do a tremendous job and look at everything that broadband will enable rather than just as a utility. For example, Ciaran in Donegal played a significant role in getting our chapters up and running. That subsequently led to people on Arranmore Island being trained in the skill of remote work. My experience on the ground has been very positive.

It is great to hear that IDA Ireland is active in this area. It probably played a major role in developing remote working here. While I lived in Galway, it was announced that Shopify was to provide a certain number of remote jobs. Overnight, people such as Aodhán Moran began walking into our core working space. I had never seen him before. There are many catalysts to a company choosing to go remote. I saw the power of what could happen. IDA Ireland played a significant role in building and catalysing this momentum.

Remote working jobs are currently available. That is one of the first things we point out to companies. We encourage Irish companies who operate remote working on an *ad hoc* basis to start developing policies, procedures and the culture and technology that is needed to ensure it is sustainable. If they keep going on an *ad hoc* basis, those jobs would probably be the first to go if we dropped from full employment. While we are at full employment and there is a talent war, we must make sure that we are encouraging companies to urgently implement the tools and policies required to ensure sustainable growth into the regions.

Deputy Seán Canney: It is great to hear such positivity from the young people in the room. I compliment Ms Keogh and Mr. Ellingstad on their belief and positive enthusiasm. It is an example to us all.

Chairman: On behalf of the committee, I thank the Minister of State and his officials for their attendance. I also thank Ms Keogh and Mr. Ellingstad. It was a very worthwhile engagement and I wish them well. It is an area on which the committee needs to do further work. We will compile a report on remote working and investigate how we can advance that cause.

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The joint committee adjourned at 12.45 p.m until 10.30 a.m. on Wednesday, 20 February 2019.