

## Innovating Communities - Designing Our Future

Enhancing the social and cultural capital of rural communities through teamwork, training, and effective collaborative technology, to stimulate innovation and healthy local competitiveness.

### EAFRD-funded projects

**Location:** Donegal, Leitrim, Sligo, Cavan, Monaghan and Louth, Ireland

**Programming period:** 2014-2020

**Priority:** P6 - Social inclusion and local development

**Focus Area:** Local development

**Measures:** M19 - LEADER CLLD

**Funding:**

Total budget:	1 085 455 (EUR)
EAFRD:	656 470 (EUR)
National/Regional:	388 865 (EUR)
Private/own:	40 120 (EUR)

**Timeframe:** 10/2020 - 06/2023

**Project promoter:**

- Monaghan Integrated Development CLG (Lead partner)
- Louth Local Development CLG
- Leitrim Integrated Development Company CLG
- Donegal Local Development CLG
- Breffni Integrated CLG - T/a Cavan County Local Development
- County Sligo LEADER Partnership CLG

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If a challenge secured enough interest, it was then turned into a free, facilitated capacity-building design-thinking training course.

Innovating Communities has energised and mobilised the rural population. Those who have completed the training have gone on to implement and share design-thinking techniques through their own community challenges.

## Summary

With the assistance of their LAGs, six Local Development Companies in the border region of Ireland came together to deliver the Innovating Communities project. It was the first project of its kind in Ireland since the inception of the LEADER Programme in 1991. The six LAGs planned and implemented a free training and mentoring project designed to empower local stakeholders.

The Innovating Communities project invited local people across the region to submit their own priorities and interests to a 'Challenge Bank' (an online project website tool) if they felt these could be advanced through a rural development project.

## Project results

- Biodiversity, climate change and sustainability were prominent challenges addressed by the training (e.g. food waste and recycling courses).
- In total, 1 364 people actively participated in the Innovating Communities training programme, and 133 different local challenges were addressed in the process.
- 878 young people have been trained in design thinking.



## Key lessons and recommendations

- The training used a 'person-centred design' approach to identify topics most important to an area. This was a very efficient and democratic means of solving the most pressing issues.
- The training was particularly suitable for those groups that wished to develop a strategic plan of action.
- The use of local volunteer co-trainers proved very important in bridging any knowledge gaps between the challenge and participants, and the trainer and process itself.



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## Context

The Innovating Communities – Designing Our Future project was initiated in the context of Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic, which highlighted and accelerated the need for innovation at a local level, to identify and respond to various new and unique opportunities and challenges faced by rural communities. Having not previously worked together as a collective on a project of this nature, six LEADER Implementing Partners came together, primarily due to their geographical proximity along the EU border with Northern Ireland. The cooperation project achieved the required scale and geographic coverage to enable partners to successfully pilot the use of the 'design thinking' problem-solving process. Each partner brought their unique experience and knowledge of the needs and opportunities for their respective area.

Prior to the commencement of this project, representatives from participating partners conducted a study trip to Steyr, Austria. The purpose of the trip was to meet with practitioners of a LEADER multi-region project called 'Nature of Innovation' who had previously applied the design thinking problem-solving process in a similar context. This visit inspired the group, and enabled them to experience first-hand how the creative problem-solving process could be effectively applied.

Innovating Communities is premised on 'tackling local challenges together'. The project was the first of its kind in Ireland since the commencement of the LEADER programme in 1991. It aligned with the EU Long Term Vision for Rural Areas and the need to involve more stakeholders in making our rural areas stronger, better connected, and prosperous.

## Objectives

The main objectives of the project were to strengthen resilience, local development and community-led action across the region. A main focus, thereby, was to help participants of all ages and backgrounds to appreciate and understand the most pressing issues of their local area.

A further key component of the project aimed at identifying, deploying and sustaining highly effective innovation training and support measures both in-person and online, to ensure more effective, systematic means of problem-solving. This aimed to build capacity and develop participants' skills in innovation, and to embrace their specific development opportunities.

## Activities

Project activities included:

- Training and mentoring in design thinking: design thinking is a five-stage problem-solving process: at Stage 1, participants learn how to empathise with the people affected by an issue; at Stage 2, how to define the challenge; at Stage 3, how to develop ideas; at Stage 4, how to test the ideas; and then finally, at Stage 5, how to materialise the solutions. Training and mentoring were delivered by a contracted team led by community design specialists, supported by local volunteers, through a series of free facilitated courses formed around a local challenge. Training was conducted online and in person. In total, across the region, there were 1 364 active training programme participants, and a total of 3 092 hours of group training were delivered.
- Identifying and selecting relevant development challenges: training was determined by responses to an interactive online voting tool on the project website called a 'Challenge Bank'.



This enabled rural residents to submit their own ideas which they felt could be advanced through rural development projects. From there, a wide audience could view the challenge, agree, 'like' it, and perhaps get involved in addressing it. If a challenge secured enough interest, it was turned into a free, facilitated capacity-building design-thinking training course to help the group work through the selected challenge and reach a solution. Courses were structured as either 'Sprint Challenges' (shorter duration) or 'Marathon Challenges' (longer duration), depending on the suitability of participants and the co-trainer matched with the challenge.

The project covered a large number of themes, including biodiversity, climate action, youth development, agriculture, smart villages, health and wellbeing, connectivity / broadband, etc.

Key stakeholders involved the six Implementing Partners of the LEADER Programme in the border region of Ireland, supported by their respective LAGs, and the Department of Rural and Community Development in Ireland. Programme participants were diverse, and included rural individuals, school groups, community groups, farmers, and enterprises. This was complemented by the participation of the Southwest College as an academic partner to the Innovating Communities project.

## Main results

The main results included:

- 1 364 people actively participated in the Innovating Communities training programme and 133 different challenges were addressed in the process.
- 878 young people have been trained in design thinking.
- Biodiversity, climate change and sustainability were prominent challenges deemed important by participants and addressed by the training (e.g. food waste and recycling courses).
- Economic concepts for new businesses and initiatives emerged from the process and were acted upon (e.g. one participant set up her own craft business).
- The integration of young people, women and minority groups was integral to the success of the project, representing a truly bottom-up, Community-Led Local Development approach, whereby everybody was given a voice.
- The project has led to an increase in resilience and digital literacy. As much of the training took place online initially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, participants adapted and transitioned to a digital way of interacting and learning.

- The project proved that the design-thinking approach is transferable across the EU and beyond. It is a systematic way of solving problems more effectively.
- Participants including young people have gained a range of skills such as, but not limited to, problem-solving, trial and error, communication, teamwork and perseverance. The training has helped to build capacity among young people to identify future challenges and capitalise on opportunities.
- The project has given rural stakeholders a voice, including minority groups which may not have otherwise been part of a formal group.

## Key lessons and recommendations

- The training used a 'person-centred design' approach to identify topics most important to an area. This was a very efficient and democratic means of solving the most pressing issues.
- Already-formed community groups facing a specific challenge were ideal candidates for this project, as opposed to one person with an idea, as this involved bringing a new group of interested participants together and gaining their commitment. The training was particularly suitable for those groups who wished to develop a strategic plan of action.
- As part of programme delivery, each LEADER Implementing Partner recruited and trained between five and seven local volunteer co-trainers to facilitate the training, alongside one of the designated contracted trainers. The local volunteer co-trainers proved very important in bridging any knowledge gaps between the challenge and participants, and the trainer and process itself. They also played a key role in ensuring the legacy of the project locally.

## Quotes

*"The project has worked well by encouraging participants to meet others, facilitating networking and the formation of creative ideas. It offered opportunities to learn new skills of design thinking which incorporates design, analysis and solution-based tasks and enables collaborative work leading to the development of informal conversations and ideas for local context and areas."*

Collette McEntee,  
Innovating Communities Network Admin Coordinator





*“We have come up with some better solutions - better thought out and more appropriate than we would have without the course. We have built good relationships with other people on the course which will be a longer-term benefit.”*

Innovating Communities project participant

### Additional information:

[www.innovating.ie/](http://www.innovating.ie/)

[www.innovating.ie/showcase](http://www.innovating.ie/showcase)

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=fcVINPIBWjE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fcVINPIBWjE)

[www.facebook.com/innovating.ie](https://www.facebook.com/innovating.ie)



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