Innovating Communities

Project Evaluation

Dr Brendan O'Keeffe, O'Keeffe Social Research
Dr Karen Keaveney, UCD Rural Development

UCD DUBLIN

Innovating Communities

Monaghan Integrated Development

Louth Leader Partnership
Building Community & Enterprise

Leitrim Development Company

Cavan County Local Development

Sligo Leader Partnership

Donegal Local Development CLG
Forbairt Áitiúil Dhún na nGall

Comhairle Contae Mhuineacháin
Monaghan County Council

Comhairle Contae Lú
Louth County Council

Comhairle Chontae Liatroma
Leitrim County Council

Cavan
Comhairle Contae an Chabháin
Cavan County Council

Sligo County Council

Comhairle Contae
Dhún na nGall
Donegal County Council

LCDC
Coiste um Fhorbairt Pobail Áitiúil
Mhuineacháin
Monaghan Local Community Development
Committee

LCDC
Coiste um Fhorbairt Pobail Áitiúil Lú
Louth Local Community Development
Committee

LCDC
Coiste um Fhorbairt Pobail Áitiúil Liatroma
Leitrim Local Community Development
Committee

LCDC
Coiste um Fhorbairt Pobail Áitiúil
an Chabháin
Cavan Local Community Development
Committee

LCDC
Coiste um Fhorbairt Pobail Áitiúil Shligigh
Sligo Local Community Development
Committee

LCDC
Coiste um Fhorbairt Pobail Áitiúil
Dhún na nGall
Donegal Local Community Development
Committee

MANNOK

COMBILIFT
LIFTING INNOVATION

SouthWest College
InnoTech
Centre

Innovating Communities

Rialtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland

Tionscadal Éireann
Project Ireland
2040

Ár dTodhchaí
Tuaithe
Our Rural
Future

LEADER

The European Agricultural Fund
for Rural Development:
Europe investing in rural areas

Funded by the Department of
Rural and Community Development

LEADER 2014-2022 Programme

Table of Contents

List of Figures

List of Tables

List of Abbreviations

A&CB	Animation and Capacity-Building
CAP	Common Agricultural Policy
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CLG	Company Limited by Guarantee
CLLD	Community-Led Local Development
CPD	Continuous Professional Development
DKIT	Dundalk Institute of Technology
ENRD	European Network for Rural Development
EU	European Union
FE	Further Education
FTE	Full Time Equivalent
GAA	Gaelic Athletic Association
HEI	Higher Education Institute
IC	Innovating Communities
ICT	Information Communication Technologies
ILDN	Irish Local Development Network
KPIs	Key Performance Indicators
LAG	Local Action Group
LDC	Local Development Company
LEADER	*Liaison Entre Actions de Développement de l'Économie Rurale* (Links between Actions for the Development of the Rural Economy)
MIDC	Monaghan Integrated Development Company
NGOs	Non-Government Organizations
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
RSI	Rural Social Innovation
SI	Social Innovation
SICAP	Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme
UNSCGs	United Nations Sustainable Development Goals

Executive Summary

This report presents an independent external evaluation of the 'Innovating Communities: Designing Our Future' LEADER inter-territorial project. The project was operational for over three years (from early 2020 to mid-2023), and it was promoted by the six local development companies in the Southern Border Region, with Monaghan Integrated Development CLG acting as the lead partner. The main aim of the project was to provide communities and local organisations with training in 'design-thinking' methodologies, in order to promote and support increased innovation, strategic developments and solutions to so-called 'wicked problems', such as the climate and biodiversity emergency.

This report comes at the end of the IC project (ex-post evaluation), and it is informed by data that were collected in the final months of the project and after its delivery. In addition, the evaluators undertook a mid-term evaluation, and they played an oversight role in the project during its rollout. Thus, this report draws on both formative and summative data that have been gathered and collated between 2020 and 2023. The evaluators used a mixed-methods approach; they surveyed course participants, convened focus groups with them; interviewed the project promoters, trainers, co-trainers; and reviewed project documentation. They also drew on data that had been collected via the project's dashboard and they participated in the project's learning showcase, which took place in County Monaghan in April 2023. At that event, the evaluators presented an outline of their findings, and they elicited feedback from stakeholders. Thus, while the evaluation may have been resource-bound, it was extensive and comprehensive, and it is underpinned by robust data from multiple sources, thereby enabling triangulation and ensuring reliability.

The evaluation finds that:

- The project partners and beneficiaries adapted well to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and by the obligation to adapt from in-person to on-line and blended delivery;
- Inter-stakeholder collaboration worked well, and a regional framework has been established that can potentially pursue further development initiatives, enable information sharing and elucidate cross-county and inter-regional needs and potential;
- The project exceeded its key performance indicators on all metrics, including the number of people trained;
- The training was specifically made available to cohorts who have tended to be under-represented in rural development decision-making, most notably young people, and there is scope to build on their participation and knowledge acquisition;
- Design-thinking methodologies were imparted, in line with the project's development plan;
- The delivery of training was effective, and the local development companies generally supported post-training follow-up activities;
- Despite having an education-sector partner, the project did not have options or pathways for accreditation or progression in the formal (HEI) sector;
- The project partners put in place systems for ongoing data collection, and these (especially the dashboard) generated valuable information, but they could have been more effectively promoted and harnessed over the project's lifetime;

- Trainees / course participants are applying design-thinking approaches and methods in various projects and community settings, and there is evidence that they are responding to endogenous and exogenous challenges and opportunities – in line with the principles of rural social innovation (RSI);
- There is evidence of innovation, associated with the project's outputs, and the resultant approaches can dovetail with other area-based and community-led approaches, including Smart Villages;
- The project's processes and outputs reflect the LEADER approach (specificities), and there is the potential to further harness and grow the project's deliverables through the continued application of the LEADER approach, not just in the delivery of the forthcoming set of local development strategies (LDSs), but across the totality of local and rural development interventions;
- The project has transferable features, and the local development companies are recommended to include it in the delivery of their LDSs (2024-2029); and
- Communities' and trainees' capacity to further promote design-thinking is governed, inter alia, by their access to human and financial capital, and there is a need for an on-going focus on the Innovation Communities (IC) project's delivery, even though the LEADER project has formally ended.

The evaluators note that the project partners took on board the findings and recommendations of the mid-term evaluation, and their responsiveness contributed to the project's outputs in 2022 and 2023. Thus, the project points to the merits of an on-going and embedded approach to evaluation that draws on internal and external processes and the co-creation of knowledge.

IC has added value to area-based and community-led local development in the locations and sectors in which it has been delivered. The learning showcase (April 2023) provided an opportunity to promote inter-community networking and information sharing and to provide feedback on the evaluation findings and recommendations. Thus, the learning showcase represents good practice in respect of giving effect to the LEADER specificities, and the evaluators recommend that the key messages from this report be fed back to IC project participants and disseminated to relevant agencies and decision-makers.

The scale and nature of some of the ideas and challenges, which IC participants have identified, are such that responses and interventions need to extend beyond endogenous approaches. Indeed, nexogenous development and an associated favourable and supportive policy and institutional milieu are required in order for IC and similar innovative project to be fully effective.

1 Introduction

This report is an end-of-project evaluation of *Innovating Communities: Designing Our Future*. Innovating Communities (IC) was a training programme designed to strengthen local development and community-led action across Counties Donegal, Leitrim, Sligo, Cavan, Monaghan and Louth. The LEADER programme, under which the Innovating Communities project is funded, is a key element of Pillar Two of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and has now been in place for over thirty years in Europe. The acronym 'LEADER'' derives from the French acronym "Liaison Entre Actions de Développement de l'Économie Rurale", which translates as 'Links between activities for the development of the rural economy''[1]. LEADER was introduced to support locally-led, bottom-up, community development in rural territories throughout Europe, and as such is underpinned by seven core principles: a bottom-up approach; a place-based approach; local partnership; integrated and multi-sectoral strategies; networking; innovation; and cooperation. Inter-territorial Cooperation LEADER projects are designed to support Local Area Groups (LAGs) areas to cooperate with one another to enhance the innovative character of local development by pooling and combining knowledge, skills and experience in thematic areas common to the strategies of each participating LAG area. Co-operation projects must demonstrate genuine added value for the areas concerned[2], and it was under this funding mechanism that the IC project was supported.

This IC project was regional-wide training project, using the LEADER Cooperation Measure over a three-year-plus period, involving a group of six LEADER-implementing local development companies namely:

- Cavan County Local Development (Breffni Integrated CLG);
- County Sligo LEADER Partnership CLG ;
- Donegal Local Development Company;
- Leitrim Development Company;
- Louth Local Development; and
- Monaghan Integrated Development Company.

These local development partners in the Southern Border Region, in their capacity as LEADER Programme implementers, took part in a process to defined, formulated, animated and oversaw the delivery of this training programme focused on supporting and stimulating innovation at community level for their respective rural communities. The partners committed to working with a wide range of rural stakeholders in the development and delivery of the IC project. Whilst innovation has been a core principle in both the LEADER / CLLD approach and in various iterations of Ireland's rural development programmes for the last 20 years, the partners wanted to reflect and garner a renewed focus and fresh impetus. Innovation in rural development is seen as pivotal in assisting rural communities to be more active stakeholders in making their communities more vibrant and sustainable.

1.1 The Innovating Communities Project

The Innovating Communities Project ran from January 2020 to June 2023. It provided training in 'Design Thinking' and set out to encourage people across the Border Region of the Republic of Ireland (referred to in this report as the 'Southern Border Region') to take part in a community of learners,

[1] https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/leader-clld/leader-toolkit/leaderclld-explained_en
[2] https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/leader-cooperation_factsheet_ie.pdf

with 'Teams' of 'Challengers' focusing on local challenges and developing sustainable solutions to improve community life.

Design Thinking is a mindset and process that uses tools to drive innovative and empathetic thinking - putting people at the heart of solving challenges. It can be applied to any challenge from helping young people access better job opportunities to developing a tourism strategy for a group of villages. It can tackle defined and complex challenges, referred to as 'wicked' problems, such as climate change.

The IC project was established as a training programme, aimed at harnessing a rural population that is open to new ideas and ways of working. The project aimed to deliver innovative and creative training modules to meet current challenges whilst building capabilities to cope with future opportunities, by adopting new techniques, increasing problem solving capability and increasing confidence. The goal of IC was **to identify, deploy and sustain highly effective innovation training, support tools and infrastructure in a regionally coordinated project**. This included new localised training modules in each participating location and one cluster project covering all six participating partners.

The envisioned legacies of the Innovating Communities project are to enhance innovation capability in the respective local communities and to instil greater confidence, understanding and experience of analysing problems and creating solutions with a longer-term impact for innovation in the region.

The project sought to deliver:

- A total of 102 training modules across the six LAG areas, with a total of 900 plus participants over 9,000 course training hours. The planned outcome was that the volume of training will leave a legacy in all six participating LAG regions, equipping communities to be better able to overcome future challenges;
- A total of 24 'co-trainers' (local facilitators) from across each area trained in Design Thinking methodologies – thereby ensuring a strong scaffold and network of four local design thinking trainers in each LAG region after completion of the project; and
- The individual LAG regions and combined Southern Border Region would have newly trained / skilled people, idea generation processes, creative infrastructures and engagement tools. A single large cluster project will be developed in the form of twelve LEADER Learning Labs, two in each LAG region as a means of establishing rural innovation capability that can be enhanced throughout the life of the project (the Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)) are outlined in detail in (further details in Figure 2).

The deliverables were identified following an extensive process of planning and preparation by each local development company (LDC), led by Monaghan Integrated Development CLG. This resulted in the identification of *Design Thinking* as the preferred methodological approach for training. Following a study tour to a LEADER project in Austria (see Figure 1), many of the lessons learned from their training process have been applied. The LDCs also undertook their own research that enabled them to identify development areas and priorities as well the thematic areas that would be the subject of the training modules (these will be explored later in the evaluation). In December 2018, LAG Implementing Partner representatives from the region conducted a study trip to Steyr in Austria. The purpose of this was to meet with LEADER practitioners in a project who had applied Design Thinking in a similar context to the then proposed IC project. This study visit allowed the group to see working examples of good practice in Austria, whilst also paving the way for further links with Andreas Kupfer, the Austrian project lead. Both Mr Kupfer and his colleague, Hubert Preisinger, provided a significant amount of helpful guidance and information to help shape the format and structure of the business plan for IC in Ireland.

Having observed and studied the project in Austria, the Border Region LDCs recognised that the Design Thinking process is not a panacea for all ills; there are often many challenges along the way, due to the disruptive and change-centric nature of Design Thinking. By placing a significant focus on understanding and empathising with the issues at hand, visual communication and prototyping and testing solutions, the Austrian Model did, however, produce some very promising learning experiences under the wider programme umbrella. Those outputs led to the future development of projects beyond the scope of the training programme. It was with these learnings in mind, that the IC project was developed and implemented in the Southern Border Region. The iterative approach to the project's development highlights the value of inter-territorial cooperation across member states, where peer learning can progress ideas and shared experience can help to develop further meaningly projects.

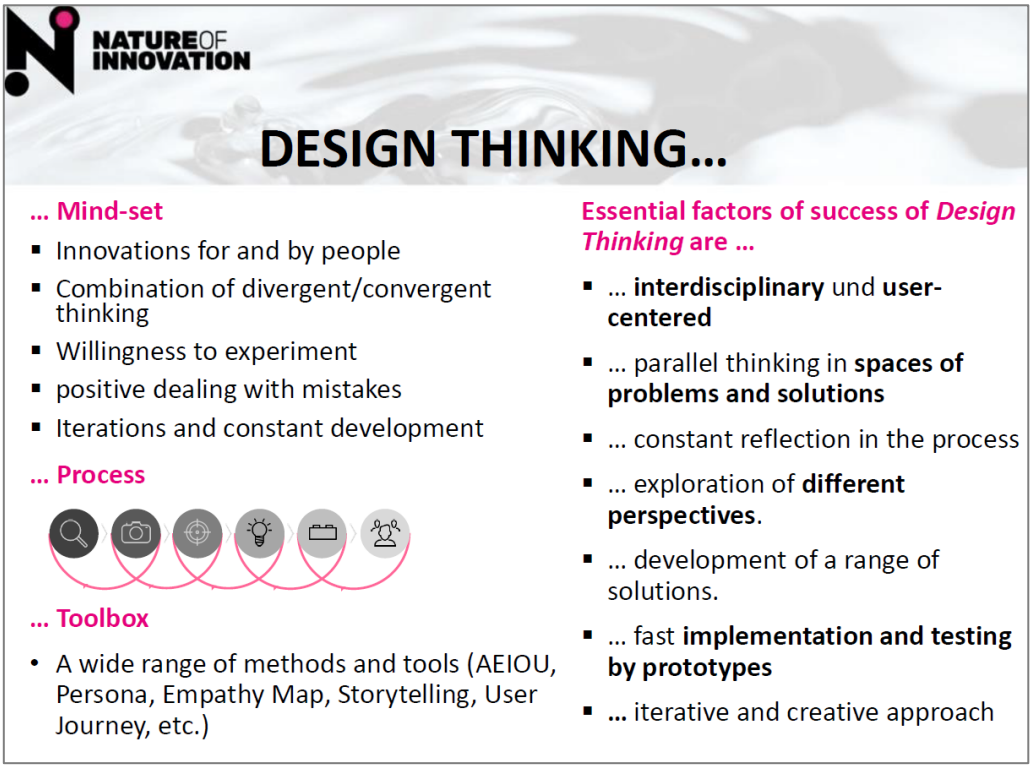


Figure 1: Extract 'Nature of Innovation' Presentation, Andreas Kupfer, ENRD Workshop Brussels Feb 2017

The **first outcome** of the project will be the number of people trained in design thinking. This will be achieved through intensive training provided which will include a strong focus in 'learning by doing' and experiential learning. A total of 102 training modules will be delivered across the 6 LAG regions over the 2.5-year period. 60 of these courses will be Design Sprint Modules with 63 hours of training delivered, 42 will be Full Scale Modules with 126 hours of training delivered. Based on an average of 8 participants per Design Sprint module and 10 participants per Full Scale Module, there will be 900 participants trained over the course of the 2.5-year project. A total of 9072 training hours will be provided for a mix of face-to-face class time, module communication, planning, preparation and individual follow-up supports. This volume of training should have a significant bearing on the future approaches to innovation in all 6 participating regions and will leave the legacy of communities who are better able to overcome future challenges.

The **second outcome** will be that 24 co-trainers from the local community will have been trained in design thinking. These trainers will then be deployed to work alongside the contracted Senior Training Specialist and their team of 6 trainers. The 'experiential learning' process will include module work (extended multi-step challenges), maker activities, and place-based (community-connected) learning experiences. Deep learning occurs best when students apply what they have learned in the classroom to answer relevant questions in the world.

This training approach will ensure that there is a strong legacy of 4 local design thinking trainers in each LAG region. They can then use the learning and experience gained to lead future training and build further capability for development of new innovative projects. They will also champion the use of rural innovation tools within their communities. This is very much in line with the EU Smart Village concept which is primarily about how rural communities themselves make best use of both technology and social innovation to respond to ongoing and emerging needs. "It also underlines the need for greater focus on empowering communities at the very local level if rural areas are to survive and thrive in the coming decades".

The **third outcome** of the project will be the development and use of new idea generation processes, tools and the use of creative infrastructures and engagement tools.

A single large cluster project will be developed in the form of 12 LEADER Learning Labs, 2 in each LAG region as a means of enhancing Rural Innovation skills that can be enhanced throughout the life of the project. This will be coordinated at regional level and implemented in each location.

Figure 2: Innovating Communities Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) – extract from IC Business Plan

Based on Figure 2, which is extracted from the IC Business Plan KPIs, the evaluators created a summary of the project's processes, outcomes and impact. It is within this framework that the evaluation was carried out, and under which the evaluation report is structured (see Table 1).

Process	Outcome	Impact
• Focus on 'learning by doing' and experiential learning • 8 participants per design-sprint module • 10 participants per full-scale module	• 102 training modules delivered – 60 design sprint and 42 full-scale modules • 63 hours of design sprint delivery • 126 hours of full-scale module delivery • 9,072 training hours	• On future approaches to innovation in all six areas • Communities better able to overcome future challenges
• Co-trainers working alongside senior training specialists and team of 6 trainers	• 24 co-trainers trained in design thinking • 4 local design-thinking trainers in each LAG area	• Championing of rural innovation in communities • Application of EU smart village methodologies
• Idea-generation processes and tools • Creative infrastructure and engagement tools	• 12 LEADER learning labs (2 in each LAG area)	• Enhanced rural innovation skills

Table 1: Innovating Communities Project - Process, Outcomes and Impact (authors' elaboration)

1.2 The Region

Monaghan Integrated Development CLG was the lead partner in delivering the Innovating Communities project on behalf of a group of LEADER Implementing Partners in the Southern Border Region – the counties that are shaded in blue in the following map, which were under the remit of the Border Regional Assembly up to its abolition in 2014. The Local Development Companies (LDCs), as Implementing Partners, ran the project on behalf of the six respective Local Action Groups.

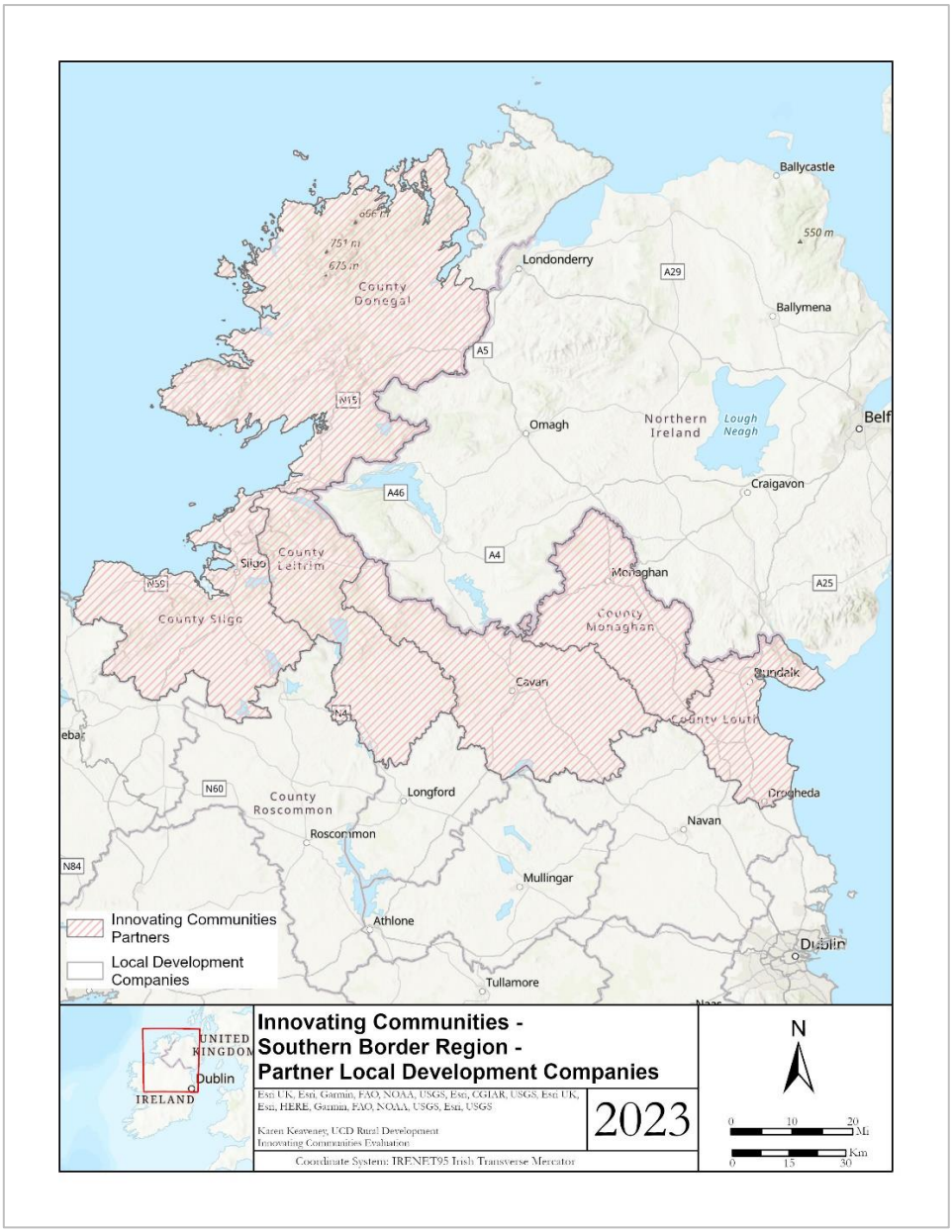


Figure 3: Innovating Communities geographical coverage – the Southern Border Region

1.3 Data Sources & Methodology

The following report comprises the end of programme review and evaluation of the activities of the Innovating Communities project up to March 31st, 2023. As part of the review, the evaluators assessed the project under the three key areas, which focus on:

- Process
- Output
- Impact

For the preparation of this evaluation, a number of sources were used to provide data. They were:

Data Source	Instigator	No. Responses / Participants
'Initial' Questionnaires	Local Development Companies	42
Innovating Communities Dashboard	Ice Cream Architecture	353
End-of-Course Questionnaire Survey	Independent Evaluators	289
Focus Groups	Independent Evaluators	24 / 4 focus groups in total

Table 2: Primary Data Sources

The 'initial' questionnaires were designed by the local development companies (LDCs) early in the roll-out of the IC project, and they were circulated to participants in 2021 - during the first modules that were undertaken. These asked participants to comment on a module's usefulness and accessibility, as well as the pace of delivery and the facilitator's approach.

Since the inception of the Innovating Communities (IC) Project, Icecream Architecture (the training specialist and delivery partner) operated a dashboard where all participants could post information about challenges/ opportunities and other project activities. Furthermore, the dashboard was used to relay comments / feedback about participant and co-trainer experiences, and to convey issues or recommendations they had. As of 31 March 2023, there were 719 individual entries on the dashboard made by 353 participants, and these offer a valuable source of data.

In order to address specific research questions relating to the project's process, outputs, and impacts, the independent evaluators designed a bespoke end-of-course questionnaire. The design of this survey incorporated feedback from the interim evaluation mid- and end-of-course questionnaires (see Figure 4 for further information), and it was co-designed with the six partners to ensure all relevant elements were included. The questionnaire survey was circulated to all active participants of the IC project between May 2022 and March 2023. It was distributed via the IC learning platform, as well as by email to trainers and co-trainers for circulation to participants as courses ended. The survey responses (n=289), up to March 31st, 2023, were used as one of the primary data sources for this Report. Due to the number of school-based or youth courses that took place as part of the project, there were a high level of responses from young people (62% (n=178) youth or school-based respondents). This proportion of young respondents has helped to provide useful insights into the youth experience.

During the evaluation of IC, the independent evaluators undertook an interim study of the project. Details of the data collected for that interim evaluation are outlined in Figure 4. This interim report or related data is referred to briefly in this final report where pertinent information was identified, for example, in relation to reflections on the immediate impact of the Covid-19 restrictions.

In the late stages of the project, and following the completion of the majority of courses, in March 2023, the evaluators held a series of focus groups (3), which had 18 participants in total. Focus group members were recruited from among all IC participants, including those from a school-based course, and co-trainers. The discussion was informed by the preliminary analysis of the survey findings, and by the remit of this evaluation, which is focused on process, outputs and impacts (see Table 1).

Following the Innovating Communities Learning Showcase, a final focus group was held with the senior management representatives from each participating partner (n=6).

In Chapters 3 to 5, qualitative data derived from the end-of-course questionnaire survey and the focus groups are presented anonymously, and with all identifying information removed. All participants consented to their views being included in this report, and in any future related publications, with the commitment from the independent evaluators that it will remain anonymous/be anonymised. As a result, survey and focus data are presented with individual coding of each respondent or participant. Table 3 outlines how each participant's qualitative data is coded.

Data Source	Code format	Example
Interim Report – Mid-course evaluation	SurResM(respondent identifier number)	SurResM1
Interim Report – End-of-course evaluation	SurResE(respondent identifier number)	SurResE1
Final Evaluation Report – End-of-course evaluation	SurFin(respondent identifier number)	SurFin1
Participant Focus Groups	FGPart(focus group identifier number).(focus group participant identifier number)	FGPart1.1

Table 3: Coding for Qualitative Data

Interim Evaluation – Questionnaire Surveys – extract from the Interim Evaluation Report

In order to address specific research questions relating to the project's process, outputs and initial impacts, the independent evaluators designed a bespoke mid-course and end-of-course questionnaire for the Interim Evaluation. Both surveys were circulated to all active participants of Innovating Communities in December 2021. The survey responses, up to February 9th, 2022, were used as one of the primary data sources for the Interim Report.

Both surveys were distributed via the IC learning platform, as well as by email to all participants at the mid-point of a course (the mid-course evaluation, n=17) and to those who had completed a course (end of course evaluation, n=14). For the purposes of the interim report, the majority of variables were combined (n=31). Evaluators' Questionnaires (n=33 in total by February 9, 2022):

- Mid-course evaluations (n=17)
- End-of-course evaluations (n=14)
- Co-trainers' evaluations (n=2) – due to the low number of completed co-trainers' evaluation, these were not used in this report

The evaluators complemented this dataset with qualitative data from three focus groups – two with participants and one with co-trainers. These took place in February 2022:

- Focus Groups (n=3)
- Participants (n=10)
- Co Trainers (n=3)

Figure 4: Interim Evaluation - Questionnaire Survey

Each of the partner counties was represented in the survey responses as follows (Figure 5):

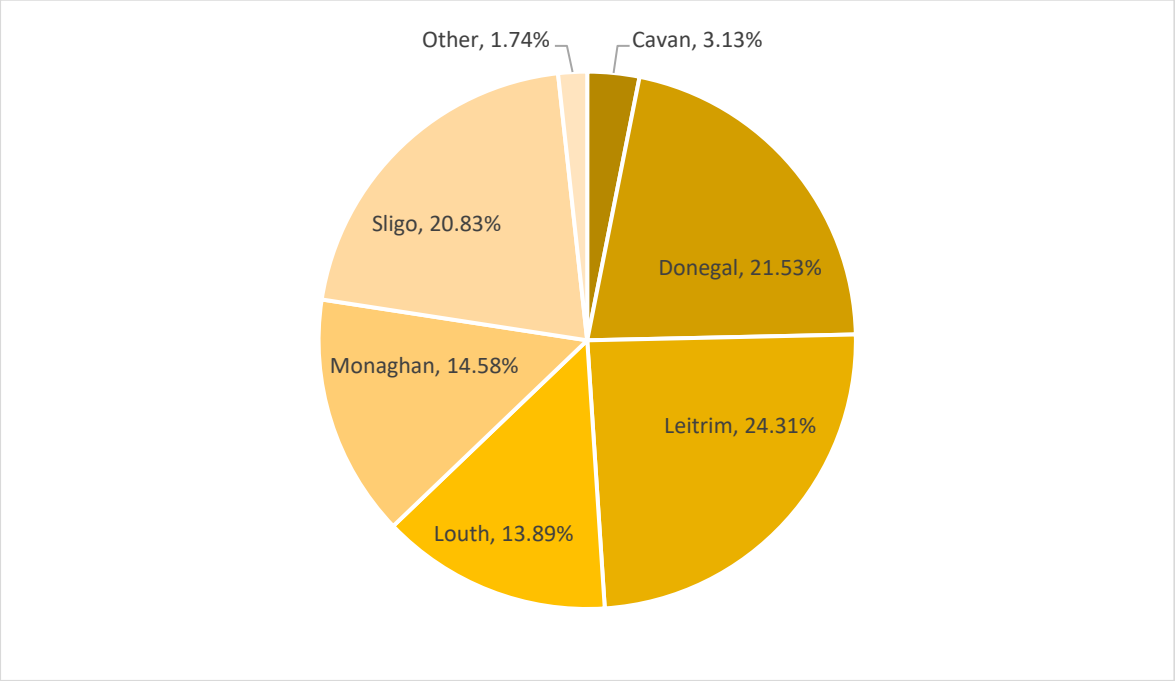


Figure 5: Proportion of End-of-Course Evaluation Survey by County[3]

The dissemination of initial review findings took place at the Learning Showcase (April 2023). This represents good practice; the event provided feedback to those who had participated in, and contributed to, the evaluation. It provided an opportunity for further learning and information sharing. Moreover, the evaluators were able to take on board the feedback they received from the showcase attendees, and their observations and suggestions have been reflected in this report.

This independent and external evaluation of Innovating Communities has been adequately resourced, and the evaluators have had full and timely access to all relevant materials. Moreover, they have been invited to attend parts of the consortium's meetings, and evaluation has been embedded in the project from the outset. Embedding evaluation in this project, as in any development initiative, represents good practice, and the evaluators recommend that a similar approach be pursued in any follow-up of subsequent projects, programmes and / or initiatives.

[3] As the graph shows, a small number of the survey respondents indicated that they reside outside the project area (the Southern Border Region). They were, however, involved in projects that are based in the project area, and they participated in the IC training programme. For information, the three Counties categorised as 'other' are: Meath, Roscommon and Galway.

2 Setting the Context for the Innovating Communities Project

2.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to establish the context for the Innovating Communities Project. Here, we will explore some of the key literature and thinking in respect of contemporary rural community development in Europe. As part of this brief literature review, we examine how the IC Project sits within the current thinking around the processes of inclusive rural development. As such, we explore the following five themes which are pertinent to the project. These are as follows:

1. Rural Social Innovation;
2. Neo-Endogenous/Nexogenous Rural Development;
3. COVID Impacts on Community Development;
4. Rural Youth; and
5. Design Thinking.

These themes and the key findings of recent academic research provide a framework of analysis for the evaluation.

2.2 Rural Social Innovation (RSI)

As part of conceptual framework, we propose that the project is an example of 'Rural Social Innovation' (RSI) – a concept which has emerged in recent years as a potential response to inequity, and weak social and spatial justice in rural areas. While the evaluators are applying the overall concept of rural social innovation to the Innovating Communities project, it is important to note that the very term and concept itself is contested. Bock (2016) identifies that while for some, RSI is an opportunity to empower communities and individuals, others cite the withdrawal of the state, and the shifting of responsibilities for rural development from government to individuals and from the public to the private.

The following are definitions of Social Innovation, as they apply broadly [emphasis added by authors]:

"Social innovation refers to the design and implementation of new solutions that imply conceptual, process, product, or organisational change, which ultimately ***aim to improve the welfare and wellbeing of individuals and communities***" (OECD, 2000).

"… we define social innovations as new ideas (products, services, models) that simultaneously meet social needs (more effectively than alternatives) and create new social relationships or collaborations. They are innovations that are not only good for society but also ***enhance society's capacity to act***" (European Commission, 2011).

"***Changes of attitudes, behaviour or perceptions of a group of people joined in a network of aligned interests*** that, in relation to the group's horizon of experiences, lead to new and improved ways of collaborative action within the group and beyond" (Neumeier, 2012, p. 55).

For the purposes of this evaluation, we adopt a similar definition as Bock's (2016, p. 555) idea that the commonly held view is that social innovation is "a motor of change rooted in social collaboration and social learning, (with) the response to unmet social needs as a desirable outcome, and society as the arena in which change should take place". Taking Bock (2016), and Dargan and Shucksmith's (2008) perspective, when social innovation is applied in the rural setting, it inherently encompasses that ***'new***

collaborations refer to citizen engagement and networking', and that the desired end is 'an innovative and vital rural society'.

Although Social Innovation (SI) has been proposed as a positive way in which to respond to local needs in an inclusive manner, and indeed, it is seen in a generally positive way in terms of its intent (Bock, 2016), it is important to note that the inception of SI comes from the financial crisis, of the late 2000s, and the series of austerity measures that dominated politics and policy at the time, and since (Edwards-Schachter et al., 2011; Neumeier, 2017; TEPSIE, 2014). In the case of **Rural** Social Innovation, as with much of the drivers of rural development processes, it comes from a need or gap in provision, a gap that was once filled fully by the state. While the general definition is acceptable, the process of social innovation in itself is more muddled, and there is agreement that the processes and outcomes should be beneficial. What the actual outcomes are vary based on who or what is driving the need for social innovation, the context and the stakeholders.

As highlighted by a number of authors (Bock, 2016; Borzaga & Bodini, 2014; Neumeier, 2017), while much effort has been put into definitions of SI, and in-turn RSI, less attention has been paid to the mechanisms of the application and implementation. This evaluation, arguably, addresses that deficit in our understanding of the mechanisms of RSI by presenting the IC project as a potential transferable example of '*how to do rural social innovation*'. Despite the criticism or lack of consensus in the literature on Social Innovation, we take on Bock's (2016) call to keep an 'open mind' and to consider the IC project as an example of a rural social innovation project in action. As Bock (2016) contends, social innovation offers an interesting and appropriate approach to rural development, particularly when looking at engaging those who may otherwise feel marginalised. Ultimately, Bock (2016) identifies that social and relational aspects are a part of rural development, and that "at the end of day, development results from social interaction and collaboration" (p.553).

Neumeier (2012, 2017) and Bock (2012; 2016) highlight that social innovation is part of the evolution of rural development, and indeed, it reflects the earlier characteristics of rural development, such as exogenous development, (neo-)endogenous development and relational place-making. Bock (2016) suggests that SI reflects a broad evolution of thought on Rural Development, in that, it views the rural:

i. as harnessing local resources and collective action (see van der Ploeg & Long, 1994);
ii. through balanced external collaboration, while still being derived from the local (neo-endogenous); and
iii. keeping place at its core, whereby social relations around place-shaping and place-making determine development (Woods, 2015).

2.3 Neo-Endogenous/Nexogenous Rural Development

In the discussion on Rural Social Innovation, the principles of rural development emerge in parallel to those that underpin SI. Therefore, this evaluation has been carried out in the understanding that:

- ideas for local areas should be generated endogenously in order to address local needs, and with the purpose of empowering individuals and communities to engage with, and lead on, positive change and adaptation (Lønning, 2018; Shucksmith, 2000, 2010; van der Ploeg & Long, 1994; van der Ploeg & Renting, 2000);
- that there should external input and investment in the ideas generated, i.e. neo-endogenous rural development (Shucksmith, 2010); and

- there is strong interconnectedness in the region – within localised networks of countryside, villages and towns, and within the region itself, i.e. nexogenous rural development (Bock, 2016).

The IC project, which is the focus of this evaluation, was designed to support communities to respond endogenously and creatively to local challenges. In practice, 'Design Thinking' (see Panke & Harth, 2019) was adopted to address what Lønning (2018) identifies as a deficit in the mobilisation process; that is, that too much is decided before people even begin to get involved in their communities and localities. The project had the goal of addressing the key challenges for places in the region, to empower people to be part of the response and ideas, and broaden the ownership base of local strategies and plans (van der Ploeg & Long, 1994; van der Ploeg & Renting, 2000). Arguably, the IC project addresses Lønning's (2018) suggestion that endogenous 'development strategies', as opposed to endogenous development in and of itself, is vital to 'place success'. As will be outlined later in this report, the IC project was focused on developing design-thinking skills in rural citizens, thereby providing them with the means to carry out evidence-based decision-making and empower them to take plans to the next step by accessing funds and/or working with relevant authorities to implement their proposals.

2.4 COVID Impacts on Rural Community Development

Westoby and Harris (2020, p. 554) highlight that the COVID-19 "pandemic has created opportunity, as never before, to explore 'community-online', and the role, practice and efficacy of virtual communities during a time of physical distancing. For community development and social services, from March 2020 to February 2022, there were highly restrictive limits on in-door and out-door gatherings, premised on maintaining two-metre distance between individuals, as well as mandatory mask-wearing in in-door settings. While restrictions varied at different stages during the pandemic and in different countries and regions, the limits to travel distance, and the restriction on gatherings, had direct implications for day-to-day community interactions and social capital. Ultimately, measures to suppress the spread of COVID-19 have meant that 'how we do community development' altered dramatically, and in March 2020, changed, abruptly. For community organisations accustomed to gathering easily, and indeed gathering in and off itself being a process of community development (Bhattacharyya, 2004; Kenny, 2019; Ledwith, 2020; Summers, 1986), the restrictive measures necessary for the prevention of the spread of the virus, had the potential to stifle activities on the ground from the bottom-up. It was under these circumstances that the IC project began. Initially intended as a fully in-person project, like many other community-based activities at the time, Innovating Communities had no choice but to conduct all training online for its first year, followed by a mix of hybrid and in-person training once restrictions were lifted and/or changed, depending on COVID rates and government policy.

The first measures to restrict movement and gatherings in Ireland were implemented on March 12th 2020 with the closure of all schools and the movement to online learning - for all teaching from early years to higher education. With the increase in the number of deaths, further restrictions were put in place, and measures including mandatory stay at home orders, and the idea of 'cocooning' for those over the age of 70 came to the fore. It was at this point, that geographic restrictions came into place with a limit of movement of 2km and only leaving home for exercise (within the 2km), to buy food or to attend medical appointments. These movement restrictions remained in place for varying distances throughout 2020 and 2021. Only essential workers could move beyond these limits, and 'cocooners' as they came to be known, had to remain at home regardless of the above, i.e. could not go out for

exercise or grocery shopping, and hence had to rely on assistance from the community and/or family networks.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, we gradually learned about the resilience and vulnerabilities of rural communities and place. Broadly speaking, rural economies provide essential goods and services, including food and energy, far beyond its own localities to towns and cities, including to hospitals and health centres (OECD, 2020). In the longer term, if there are continued changes in consumption patterns and a move towards remote working, a basis for sustainable rural growth may emerge from this challenging time (OECD, 2020). The OECD identifies a series of opportunities for rural areas in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, in the context of how community development processes adapted, and how communities responded to the impact of restrictions on isolated rural populations. Of particular relevance to the IC project are the following:

- Higher relevance to enhance quality and use of digital tools/broadband in rural regions; and
- Mobilise and strengthen local networks and co-operatives structures to face future shocks (OECD, 2020, p. 6).

However, there have also been significant challenges and pressures in rural areas and on rural communities since the virus took hold in the general population. As identified earlier, demographic characteristics with a higher proportion of older people and the potential for greater levels of isolation and lack of access to basic services, have the potential to leave certain cohorts of particularly vulnerable people. Community development in Ireland has a high reliance on volunteers, many of whom tend to be retired and/or older. While new volunteer networks emerged in the form of, for example, the GAA 'Call to Action', or 'Community Call', these were temporary, and they were successful in the first lockdown (2020) due to the high numbers of people who were without work during that time, and were receiving government payment supports. Access to broadband and/or digital skills and capabilities greatly influenced how participants could engage with the training in the IC project. The height of the COVID-19 pandemic this was an incredibly challenging time for participants, trainers and the six LDCs running the project.

2.5 Rural Youth

A strong feature of the IC project, and of the data gathered for this evaluation, was the participation and representation from young people. While there has been a long held view that youth are central to the future sustainability of rural places, it is only in recent years that that policies and funding mechanisms have been adopted to address this need[4]. In the rural context, through the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), there has been a strong focus on young people and farming, with measures around generational renewal featuring in different iterations over the past two to three decades. However, as seen in the breadth and depth of themes identified and explored in the IC project, there are a wide range of issues that are a priority of rural populations, that go beyond agriculture. In addition, there is no homogenous rural population. Indeed as exemplified by the themes addressed in IC, diversity and a changing rural populations are central to future rural sustainability.

[4] For example, in the current Horizon Europe – Research and Innovation fund, there is strong emphasis on generational renewal in farming and rural areas: https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/docs/2021-2027/horizon/wp-call/2023-2024/wp-9-food-bioeconomy-natural-resources-agriculture-and-environment_horizon-2023-2024_en.pdf

Rural youth has been identified in this Chapter due to the high levels of engagement from this particular cohort in the IC project, and due to the emphasis on young people in European rural development approaches in recent years. Where authors such as Zagata and Sutherland (2015) identify that we need more nuanced understanding of young people in farming, they also highlight the need to understand their aspirations and goals for the future, as they relate to where they are from. Flannery et al. (2022) identify that motivations for engaging in education around sustainability and agriculture are driven by a desire to remain living in the countryside, and due to their love and attachment to rural places, rather than financial goals.

With the focus on young people and farming being to the fore, there is relatively little recent literature on young people and their engagement with community development, especially in a rural context. Brennan et al. (2007) highlights that young people are central to community development processes, and there is need for policy makers to understand how to engage this age cohort, and to understand their role in CD. Shucksmith (2004), twenty years ago, specifically examined young people and social exclusion in rural areas. He particularly emphasised the reality of young people living in rural places, and the impact that lack of access to opportunity has on their well-being, engagement and future. If we are to engage with RSI, as outlined by Bock (2016) and Neumeier (2017), then young people must be active participants in innovation. Methods for meaningful engagement need to be explored more thoroughly. It is possible that IC is a strong example of that engagement.

2.6 Design Thinking

Design Thinking, as process, has existed for a number of decades and was initially developed to assist product design and business innovation: "Design Thinking is a problem-solving method geared to overcome wicked problems, that have no right or wrong solution and resist traditional scientific and engineering approaches" (Panke & Harth, 2019, p. 284). Current thinking on the process originated in Stanford University with the work of Larry Leifer and others. Their research has evolved from previous decades of thinking about how to address complex challenges. In recent years, the process has increasingly been applied to social and/or community settings. The user focus of Design Thinking has the potential to be highly applicable and innovative for social and environmental challenges in particular. The flexibility of the process also appeals to those attempting to address the 'wicked problems' (Rittel & Webber, 1973).

> "Design thinking is a playful approach that should by no means be misunderstood as 'anything goes'. Rather, a design thinking process requires careful facilitation with clear rules, especially with regard to time management. Equally important is a thorough follow-up that summarizes and expands upon the results" (Panke & Harth, 2019, p. 284).

Innovating Communities has the potential to show how Design Thinking works in the community setting in Ireland, with a user-centred focus, and to have long-term impact on the places and people in the region. Researchers have found that the process can enhance emphatic reasoning and emphatic responses by bringing interested actors together and connecting them through common purposes. The facilitator's role in Design Thinking is to translate the broader concepts into concrete and tangible artifacts that participants are able to grasp, engage with and act upon. The key steps undertaken in Innovating Communities is:

Figure 6: Design Thinking Methodology

In terms of the evaluators focus on the IC project being a potential example of Rural Social Innovation, the methods associated with Design Thinking (see Figure 6) were applied as means through which ideas and responses could be generated locally. This reflects Lønning's (2018) assertion that ideas should be generated endogenously. Design Thinking was a adopted for IC as means to facilitate this generation. This in addition to the role Brown and Wyatt (2010) see for DT in Social Innovation. By recognising that each place or challenge or community is different, then appropriate solutions will be found:

> *"Design thinkers look for work-arounds and improvise solutions and find ways to incorporate those into the offerings they create. They consider what we call the edges, the places where "extreme" people live differently, think differently, and consume differently" (Brown & Wyatt, 2010, p. 29).*

2.7 Summary Remarks

Both Bock (2012; 2016) and Neumeier (2012, 2017) pose important questions of Rural Social Innovation – these questions are highly pertinent to this evaluation. The key question in Bock's (2016) paper is: *How can social innovation enable us to fight rural marginalisation, and which conditions must then be met?* We present the evaluation of the IC project as a response to this question by assessing if the project achieved its aim and objectives, and we seek to examine what can be learned from the implementation of a project, such as IC, for community-led local development in the future. For Neumeier (2017), question are: *Which factors bring forward social innovation and where in the innovation process do they take effect? To what extent can rural development policy purposefully exert influence on these factors?* In response to these questions, we consider what can be learned from the process and methodologies of the IC project; how the lessons learned are transferable to similar contexts in Ireland and Europe; and how policy instruments might assist the rollout of similar projects, considering the lessons learned.

Finally, Neumeier (2017, p. 40) identifies the top six factors that influence success for Rural Social Innovation projects:

1. Commitment of the participating actors: this commitment can derive from different motives, but it is especially the intensity and continuity of the actors involved that is important for success.
2. Abilities of the participating actors: this refers, for example, to specialist know-how, social competencies and actors' willingness to innovate.
3. Organisational structure: this is important to ensure coordinating processes and communication.
4. Quality of the functional concept: this refers especially to the definitions of targets and measures, which can motivate the actors involved, by providing a common vision.

5. Climate of acceptance/cooperation: this means the acceptance of the concept and processes to be followed by the actors, as well as the willingness to cooperate fairly and constructively.
6. Access to financial resources: both the resources of the actor network the social innovation process is based on, and external support.

We include these six factors as a set of questions to test our evaluation and examine – the ways in which the IC project approached and delivered in respect of the following:

1. Encouraging commitment from participants;
2. Harnessing the skills already available in the community, and training them where needed;
3. Establishing a mechanism through which citizens could engage in local decision-making;
4. Identifying appropriate challenges and ideas for their localities;
5. Developing collaborative environments that met the needs of those involved, and wider society; and
6. Setting-up community groups to access funding.

The following three chapters address these questions to varying degrees in respect of the project's processes, outputs and initial impacts.

3 Process

The following three Chapters are based on the evaluation team's analysis of the primary data collected through the Innovating Communities learning platform (dashboard) by Icecream Architecture, through data from the evaluators' questionnaire surveys and focus groups and documents provided by stakeholders in the IC project. The analysis is situated in the contextual literature and research outlined in Chapter 2. This chapter focuses on 'process' evaluation, whereby 'how' the IC project as a whole was implemented. The purpose of this chapter, therefore, is to outline the governance and operations, as well as understanding the training model implemented and the finances applied. Given the timing of the IC project's rollout, we reflect on the impact the COVID-19 restrictions had. In the following chapters, outcomes and impacts will be evaluated, which involved more in-depth mining of the data to explore how day-to-day operations and training was perceived by stakeholders.

3.1 Governance

As outlined in Chapter 1, Monaghan Integrated Development CLG was the lead partner in delivering the Innovating Communities project on behalf of a group of LEADER Implementing Partners in the southern Border region. As with any project of this size, there was an organisational structure, which provided oversight of the overall project, ensuring the three sets of KPIs were delivered. This structure is outlined in Figure 7. The Innovating Communities Steering Group had full oversight of the project, and it met on a monthly basis. The steering group consisted of senior representation from each LDC, i.e. the six Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) were members and LDCs could also include a senior member of staff such as the LEADER Officer. The group was chaired by the CEO of the Lead Partner, Monaghan Integrated Development CLG. In the early stages of the project's development and rollout, the academic partner South West College, through its 'Innotech Centre'[5] played an advisory role. South West College is a college of Further Education (FE). Its main campus is in Enniskillen, which is adjacent to the Southern Border Region. The college plays an important role in the region, in delivering its remit to generate a strong and vibrant economy through the development of professional and technical skills and by assisting employers to innovate. It supports social inclusion by providing those with low or no qualifications, or who have other barriers to learning, with the skills and qualifications needed to find employment and to become economically active[6].

[5] https://swc.ac.uk/about/business-services
[6] https://swc.ac.uk/assets/uploads/2022-CDP-SWC-19.10.22.pdf

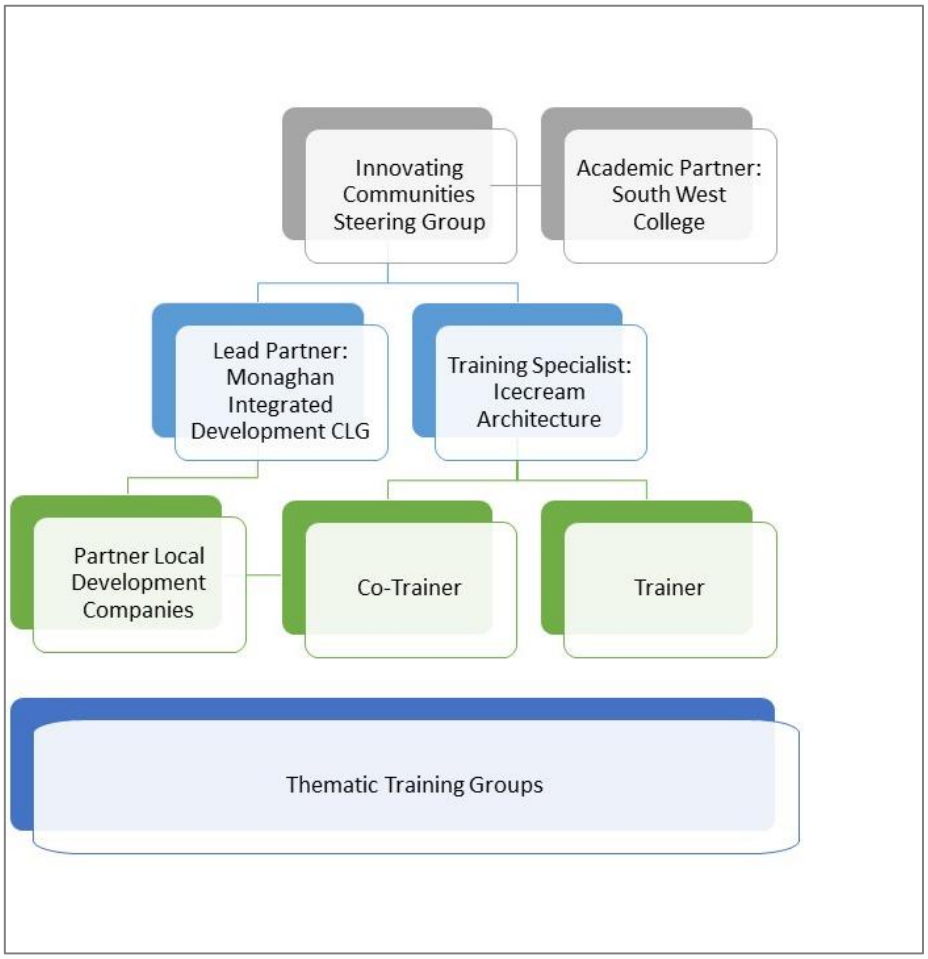


Figure 7: Organisation Structure for the IC Project

The steering group met on a monthly basis over the life of the project. As part of those meetings, the Evaluation Team and the Training Delivery Specialist, Icecream Architecture were invited to report updates. From time-to-time depending on specific needs, sub-committees were appointed for targeted reasons, for example, for the organisation of the final Learning Showcase[7] event, which was held in April 2023.

Following a tendering process, the steering group appointed Icecream Architecture[8] to deliver the training in the region. Icecream Architecture was responsible for the coordination of all training in collaboration on an operational basis with the lead partner (further details in section 3.2); the establishment of the project website and learning platform (https://www.innovating.ie/, see Figure 8); all communications through the learning platform, module development, academic partner liaison, the recruitment of co-trainers, and the appointment of Design Thinking specialists/trainers.

[7] For information about this event, please see: https://www.innovating.ie/showcase
[8] https://www.icecreamarchitecture.com/

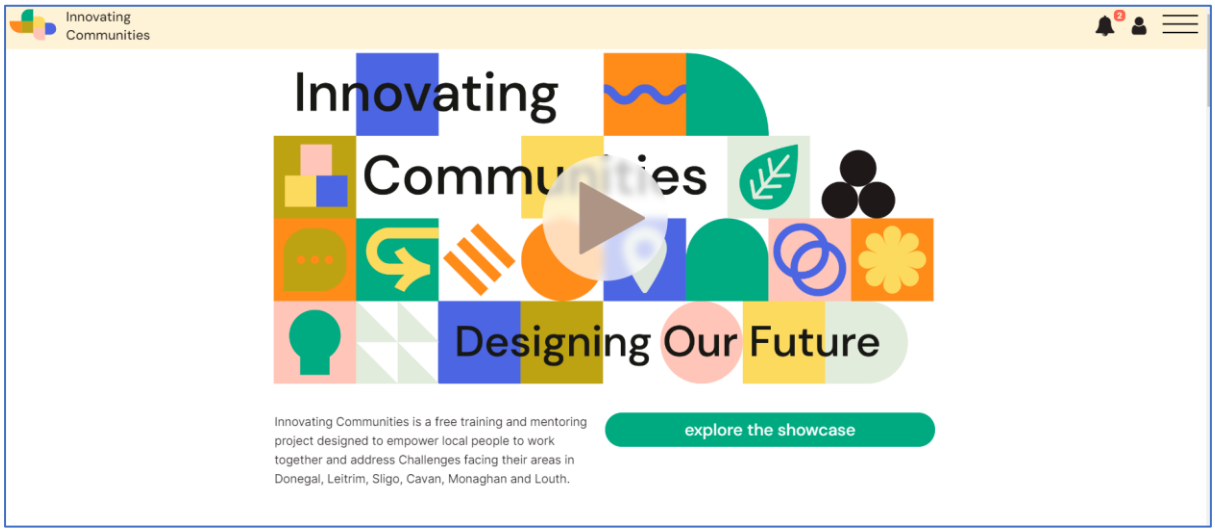


Figure 8: Screenshot of the Innovating Communities Website & Learning Platform (accessed July 26, 2023)

3.2 Partner Roles and Operations

This section reflects on the approach taken to the operation of the IC project and to the role all partners played in that operation (see also Table 4). The day-to-day operations of the IC project were determined by three key factors: (i) the cooperation approach; (ii) the LEADER methodology; and (iii) the delivery of training. Given the timing of the project's rollout, just as the COVID-19 pandemic was beginning, there was an obvious impact on training methodologies and delivery, more of which will be discussed in section 3.6.

3.2.1 Cooperation Approach

The LEADER cooperation measure, under which the project was funded, meant that an economy of scale was achieved whereby the six LAG areas were positioned to facilitate social innovation and best practice. In the focus group with the steering group members, this factor was identified as a highly important contributor to the project's delivery. The socio-economic commonalities across the Southern Border Region, together with the project partners' common aspirations for the region that centre on rural sustainability, sustainable livelihoods, environmental protection, and regeneration in terms of job creation and countering population decline, provided the basis for the initial proposal. The steering group identified that without the funding provided through the LEADER cooperation grant, no LDC on its own would have had the capacity to deliver training at scale. The co-operation approach, therefore had an increased feasibility when compared to any singular approach an individual organisation may have been able to deliver on.

3.2.2 LEADER Methodology

The second driving factor is the LEADER methodology itself. The IC project, as a cooperation project, attempted to address issues of concern and 'challenges' for current and future rural and regional sustainability. Current and future challenges such as the climate crisis, globalisation trends, changing demographics in marginal places, and the need for just transitions, informed, shaped and drove many of topics and themes explored in the training. By adopting an economy-of-scale approach, and while recognising that small-scale local initiatives are important, the IC project sought to find value in addressing regional skills development approaches as a means to stimulate social innovation through the LEADER method. The seven principles of the LEADER approach or methodology are:

1. Bottom-up approach;
2. Place-based approach;
3. The local partnership;
4. An integrated and multi-sectoral strategy;
5. Networking;
6. Innovation; and
7. Cooperation.

3.2.3 Training Delivery

The third factor, namely training delivery, refers to how the IC project connected meaningfully with local populations and rural communities across the region. As briefly mentioned, and as will be discussed in detail in Section 3.6, the restrictions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic had a major impact on the operation of the project, especially in its first year. Nevertheless, the delivery of training was designed around the seven principles of the LEADER methodology outlined above. This approach meant that ideas and challenges were identified from the **bottom-up**, by local, **place-based** communities and individuals. These were identified in **partnership** with existing and emerging groups, the Local Development Companies, and Icecream Architecture. By recruiting locally based co-trainers, courses were run in an **integrated** manner that sought to ensure a **multi-sectoral approach**. Facilitation of **networking** amongst community groups, individuals, NGOs and local government were core to the training. This approach resulted in an **innovative** model and the exploration of a more innovative approach to community development, all of which was based on **cooperation** across the six LAG areas.

As outlined in Figure 7, the lead partner and Icecream Architecture were responsible for the operation of the IC project. As the lead partner, Monaghan Integrated Development CLG appointed a project coordinator for the lifetime of the project. The project coordinator (Collette McEntee) was responsible, in collaboration with the training specialist, for the coordination of the programme. Both the project coordinator and the training specialist reported into the steering group on a monthly basis, at its scheduled meetings, and on an on-going basis as required. The project coordinator was based at the offices of the lead partner, in order to ensure smooth operations and good communication.

The project coordinator was the main contact point for all stakeholders and actors involved with Innovating Communities. She played a pivotal role in the entire project, and for many became the public and trusted face of the IC project. Her on-the-ground knowledge combined with expertise in project management ensured that any challenges were addressed in a timely manner. The greatest challenge was faced in the early stages of the project due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Remote working for staff (in the constituent LDCs) and the Training Specialist (from Icecream Architecture) being unable to travel or deliver in-person training, as originally envisaged, made for difficult circumstances and for very problematic beginning to a project that by its nature was highly ambitious and innovative, without having to now include virtual learning.

Icecream Architecture recruited and appointed expert facilitators and design thinking trainers either from its own pool of staff or externally (from the region). The trainers were recruited on a module basis, depending on their own areas of expertise. Their main responsibility was to deliver the module assigned to them, to support the experiential learning of the participants, and train through experiential learning the locally based co-trainer.

Co-trainers were identified in each LAG area through a collaborative process between the respective LDC and Icecream Architecture. The majority of the co-trainers were existing LDC staff (generally development officers). The project partners envisaged that the co-trainers would benefit from

participating in the project, while also providing participants with supports in terms of logistics, back-up and follow-through on project ideas. Their local knowledge was vital to connecting the trainer to key issues in the local area, setting the context for whatever topic was the focus of the course(s). In undertaking this role, the co-trainer was trained in the Design Thinking approach to community development.

Finally, the 'thematic training groups' were supported by key gatekeepers or actors who either lived or worked in the place / locality which was the focus of a particular course, and/or who had a strong knowledge or interest in the course topic. These community stakeholders were actively recruited through the promotion of the IC project training by the LDCs.

Role	No.	Responsibilities	Actors	Funding Source
IC Steering Group	1	Governance and Accountability; Monthly Reporting; Appoint external contractor	CEO of Lead Partner (Chair); CEO of each LDC;	External/Various
Lead Partner	1	Leading the project; Appointment of project coordinator.	Monaghan Integrated Development	Innovating Communities project
Training Specialist	1	Delivery of all training; Coordination of all training in with the steering group; Establishment of project website and learning platform; Communications through the learning platform; Module development; Academic partner liaison; Co-trainers recruitment; Appointment of Design Thinking specialists/trainers.	Icecream Architecture	
Project Coordinator	1	Coordinating the project across the 6 partners; Assisting implementation of the Project; Liaising with training and service providers; Oversight of project budget; Reporting on progress with forecasts and supportive data; Keeping records.	Based in Monaghan Integrated Development	
Trainers	6*	Recruited on a module basis Deliver assigned training module(s); Support the experiential learning of the participants; Train the locally based co-trainer.	Icecream Architecture	
Co-Trainers	38	Support the experiential learning of the participants; Support the trainer in the delivery of the module(s); Become experienced in the Design Thinking approach.	LDCs	
Thematic Training Groups	133[9]	Subject matter experts and local activists providing advice and supporting modules	Various community stakeholders	External/Various
*due to staff changes or required expertise, this equates to 6 full-time equivalents (FTEs)				

Table 4: Roles and Responsibilities

[9] Thematic training groups are elaborated on further in Section 4.2.1 – when aggregated across counties there were 133 thematic groups; these operated independently within each county, meaning that the there were 391 thematic groups effectively.

3.3 Training Model

Over the course of the project, two types of courses were delivered: a Design Sprint (21 hours) and a Design Marathon (42 hours; see Figure 9). Participants were invited to register on the IC project learning platform. In addition to registering for a course, they could also add to the ideas bank and identify challenges (more information on the identified themes is presented in Chapter 4). Depending on the topic of a given course, participants could choose whether they embarked on a 'Sprint' or a 'Marathon'. In total, 99 number of sprint courses, and 33 marathon courses were completed.

Figure 9: Extract from Innovating Communities Handbook – Training Contact Hours

Both types of courses were delivered in a way that worked for those who had submitted the challenge, and for the co-trainer matched with that challenge. Icecream Architecture led the training, working with a co-trainer to facilitate the sessions. As highlighted above, the co-trainer was ordinarily a staff member of the LDC, and as such was a member of the community or worked/lived in the area, thereby bringing local knowledge and context to the project, while providing connections to wider networks. Courses generally ran on a weekly basis, as a series of 2-hour sessions. The duration and length of each course could be changed to best fit the team of challengers.

In the initial stages of the project, the partners identified key themes, by consensus, which would be the foci for the training courses. These topics were:

- Smart Villages;
- Social Enterprise;
- Climate Action / Transition to a Zero-Carbon Economy;
- Biodiversity; and
- Digitalisation.

Following the initial start-up phase, communities and individuals could identify challenges thematically, and courses were then designed to address those challenges. Furthermore, users visiting the platform could add a new challenge or opportunity, or express their support for an existing suggestion on the platform.

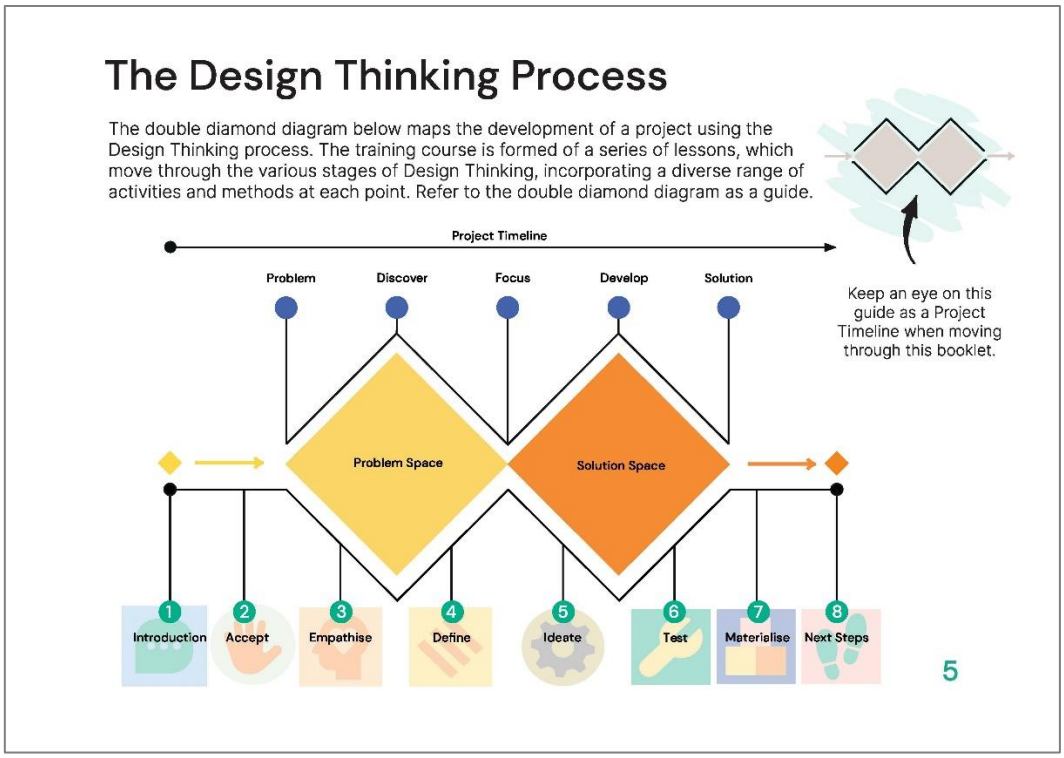


Figure 10: Extract from Innovating Communities Handbook – Design Thinking Process

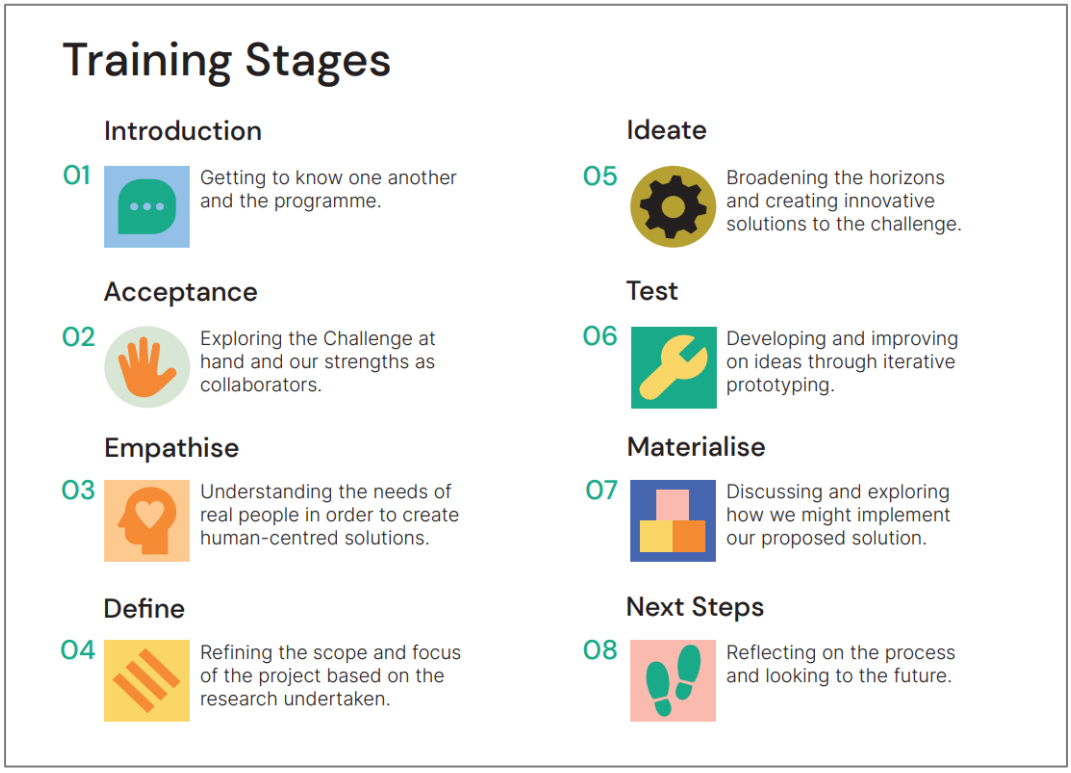


Figure 11: Extract from Innovating Communities Handbook – Training Stages

3.4 Connecting with Communities

The training courses were the main point of contact for the communities and individuals who engaged with the IC project. It was through initial recruitment, via the LDC and/or the local community group, that participants first became aware of Innovating Communities, and the trainer and co-trainer were the main points of contact. Details on the courses' operations will be discussed in Chapter 4, but in this section, it is useful to examine general perceptions of the project from a broader perspective.

As outlined in the project KPIs, IC aimed to train a large volume of participants in the training modules, across the Southern Border Region in a number of locations. Communications across multiple networks and platforms was essential to recruiting participants. It was of particular importance to strongly communicate the value of the training to potential stakeholders for themselves as individuals, and for their communities. The IC Business Plan identified that given the nature of the project, as a 'from scratch proposition', it would have to be newly launched, and was the first of its kind locally. Awareness was raised with the assumption of initially low levels of understanding. This meant that it was particularly important that the value proposition is clearly understood and communicated for this training methodology.

Considering the programme's newness, and with no awareness of the impact that a global pandemic would have in the early stages of the project, a communications plan was developed that centred on the local promotional power of each LDC. Figure 12 illustrates how participants heard initially about their courses. As can be seen the Local Development Company was the most common source, with word-of-mouth and the local community group coming closely behind. Social media was also used, with Facebook being the most common to be identified.

In focus groups with participants, there was agreement that what had been identified in the initial plan for the IC project was correct, i.e. that getting people involved in the early stages was challenging. This, of course, was not helped by the unforeseen circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic, which direct communication through 'normal / conventional' community development processes being almost impossible. Communications had to take place at a distance, and relying on social media initially did not yield high numbers. As the project continued and became embedded in the everyday activities of each LDC, and as COVID-19 restrictions began to be lifted, particularly from the beginning of 2022, participant numbers increased exponentially.

The LDCs were committed to involving a wide range of rural stakeholders in the training modules. The identification of key stakeholders, in each LAG area, was undertaken at an early stage in the initial roll-out, and continually over the lifetime of the project. The IC Steering Group set out to engage and animate stakeholders and effectively communicate the project objectives and methods. Through local level awareness-raising and animation, the LCDs recruited participants, in line with the thematic foci in each partner area. The initial plan was to focus recruitment efforts on individual contacts, identified by the LDCs, and as the project progressed, they broadened the thematic foci of the training and the range of stakeholders they recruited. This pattern was confirmed by both the Steering Group post-project and the participant/co-trainer focus groups.

Initial stakeholders identified included:

- Local community groups (and initiatives);
- Youth Groups;
- Local Enterprise Offices;

- Local Authorities;
- Academic Institutions;
- Education and Training Boards;
- Irish Farmers Association;
- Innovation Hubs within LAG Areas;
- Tourism Officers;
- Broadband Officers;
- Public Participation Networks;
- Rural Transport Providers;
- Environmental Interests; and
- Political Representatives.

These stakeholders contributed to the training programme by doing the following:

- Identifying module participants;
- Identifying potential co-trainers;
- Promoting the various elements of the training, workshops, events and initiatives
- Engaging with the local community and socialising the programme and its goals – i.e. gaining buy-in from local people and ensuring training workshops are attended by the most relevant participants; and
- General advice and support as needed.

Among focus group participants in respect of how each LDC, and then subsequently, local community groups promoted the course. A number of focus group participants also highlighted that it was often a local champion promoting the course and trying to get people involved who helped with recruitment and getting the word out. These champions were central to the on-going success of a course, and they often ensured that a number of people completed a given course (more on this in Chapter 4).

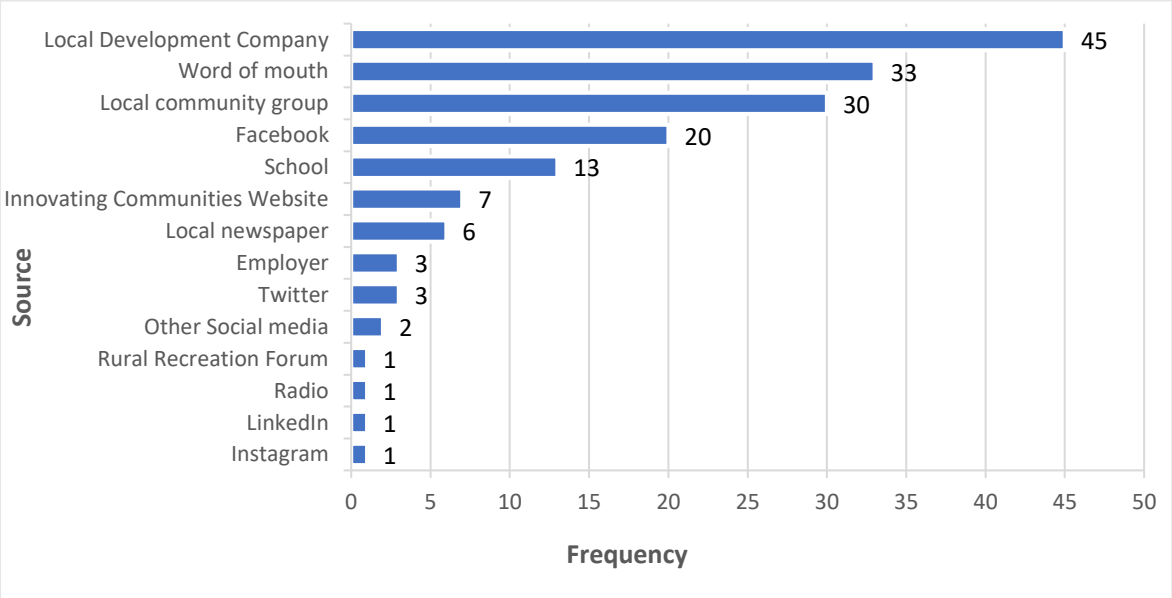


Figure 12: How participants heard about the course

In the end-of-course evaluation, respondents were asked about their perception of the IC project in general. As illustrated in Figure 13, participants reacted positively to the project. Over eighty percent

understood the aim of the IC project, and their roles as participants. Given that over sixty percent found the information provided useful, easy to find and enough for them to understand the project, understanding their role as participants and the overall aim of the project, makes sense. In Figure 14, it is apparent that when asked about the IC project website, while still positive in the majority, participants were slightly less satisfied. For most participants (55 to 65%), the project website was easy to use, and was identified as a useful addition to training. However, many responded neutrally (c. 25% in all cases) about the website. In the open-ended questions in the questionnaire survey and in the participant focus groups, concerns were raised around the website, but these tended to be in relation to accessibility and digital skills. For a number of participants, internet access was a challenge; for both online training sessions and for virtual learning, slow-speed broadband made it difficult to engage. In addition, concerns were expressed around inconsistent digital skills, with some, particularly older people, struggling to engage with the jamboard.

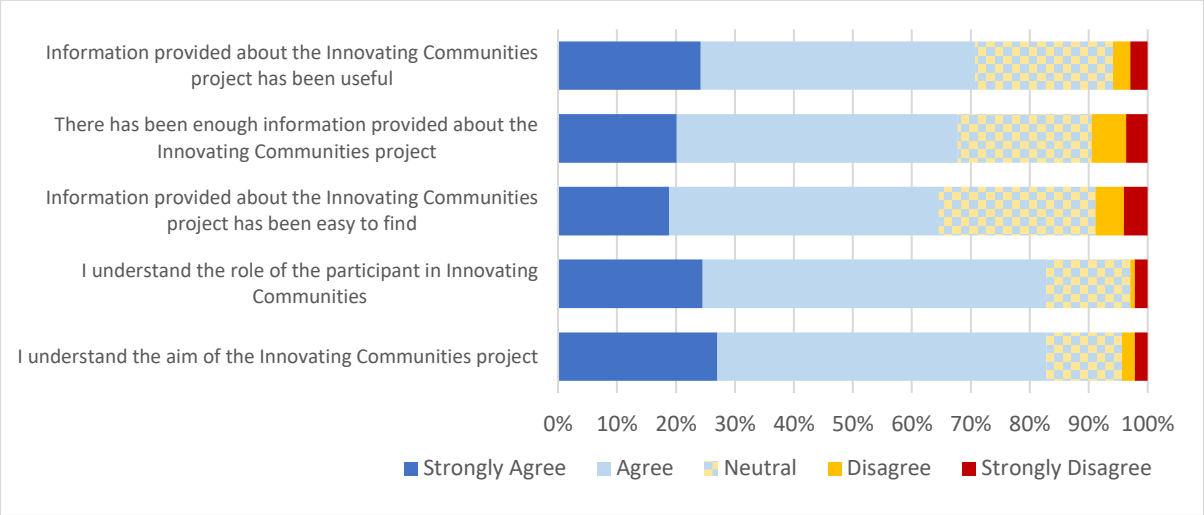


Figure 13: Perceptions of the Innovating Communities Project by Participants

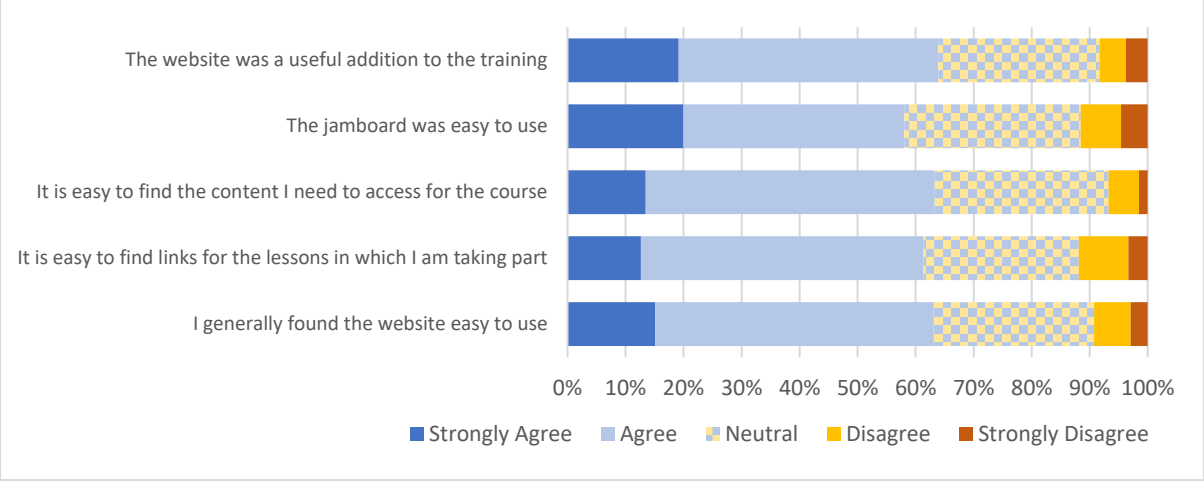


Figure 14: Perceptions of the Innovating Communities website by Participants

Survey respondents comments relating to the website or virtual learning were exemplified by the following quotes:

Not very good on computers so jamboard a little tricky (SurFin2)

It was easy to navigate and understand. I did not like when if you want to use jamboard you connection was lost (SurFin23)

I often find myself thinking generally about any website I use, that it could be simplified. That is possibly a lack of technological savvy on my part (SurFin58)

The website was tricky to navigate and difficult to find where I needed to be at the beginning. It took me a while to figure it out, but when I did, it was fine (SurFin242)

The website is a strong tool to learning the topic (SurFin248)

3.5 Financing and Resourcing

As previously identified, in respect of the nature of the LEADER inter-territorial cooperation project and its economy of scale, the project could facilitate a level of innovation, best practice and value which may not be possible in smaller scale training projects. It was envisaged, from the outset, that the cooperation approach would have an increased impact when compared to a singular approach. As part of this approach, cost savings could be made in areas such as equipment procurement and training design. Additionally, the training delivery partner – Icecream Architecture – was well-placed to share beneficial best practice from its own experience.

The project exceeded its quantitative outputs and value-for-money projections as outlined in Table 5.

	Anticipated Total Project	**Actual Total Project**	**Difference in Anticipated v Actual**
Funding for Project	€1,170,757	€1,170,757	
Total No. Courses	102	133	30%
Total No. Participants	924	1,470	59%
Total Training Hours	6,048	8,302	37%
Cost per course	**€11,478**	**€8,803**	**-23%**
Cost per participant	**€1,267**	**€796**	**-37%**
Cost per Trainer Hour	**€194**	**€141**	**-27%**
Total No. Co-Trainers	24	38	58%

Table 5: Value for Money - Anticipated Vs Actual

Despite challenges posed to the delivery of training for approximately half the lifetime of the project, IC managed to exceed its KPIs. Table 5 outlines the value for money achieved by the project relative to the initial proposal. By comparing this to the actual KPIs achieved, IC had 30% more courses than anticipated (133) in total, compared to the projected 102. This, in turn, meant that it engaged more participants than expected (59% more), and it delivered 37% more training hours. Resultantly, value for money improved across the three KPIs with the cost per course reducing by 23%; the cost per participant by 37%; and the cost per trainer hour 27%.

3.6 Impacts of COVID on Training Delivery

It is important to capture, in some way the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, as the IC project was greatly affected by it. The COVID-19 pandemic and the associated public health guidelines necessitated the on-line delivery of the programme. Furthermore, they delayed the programme's commencement. Thus, IC has been rolled out in a challenging milieu, and it is a tribute to all stakeholders that there was a substantial throughput of trainees during the height of restrictions. In this evaluation, relevant questions were asked in the Interim Report questionnaire survey (see Figure 4 further information), and during reflective focus groups about the impact of COVID-19 restrictions had on the early rollout of training and on any learnings from those impacts for future community collaboration. The impacts of the restrictions related to the COVID-19 pandemic cannot be underestimated or down-played in this evaluation. To that end, the evaluators included a number of questions (in the Interim Report questionnaire surveys) specifically relating to the pandemic's impacts on participation in IC, including the introduction of online learning, the effects on group interactions and the wider learning experience. For the final phase of evaluation, survey respondents and focus group participants inevitably referred to the pandemic and the impact it had on training and interactions within IC and in their communities. From the IC Dashboard in the early stages of the pandemic and the project, participants added comments, which are exemplified by:

> *Due to COVID we are online unfortunately. [The facilitator] is very good at including everyone, but there are strong people in the session, maybe we need some rules about speaking and how everyone contributes.*

> *Still looking forward to the short course summary so I can use / apply it locally within our Community Forum as we reconvene our work after the COVID hiatus.*

When discussed in the Interim Evaluation focus groups, the restrictions related to the COVID-19 pandemic were highlighted as creating problems around communication and promotion of the IC project. As a result of the associated restrictions, there had been a lack of in-person, face-to-face interactions between individuals and communities, and the LDCs. This had hindered, to some extent, the extent to which IC has been promoted, as stakeholders have had to rely more on social media than it may have expected prior to March 2020.

COVID inevitably arose as an issue more strongly in the interim evaluation (than in the end-of-course evaluation) given its timing (February 2022) and due to the then on-line nature of the training, with participants at that time conveying a strong desire to have sessions in person in the near future:

> *There needs to be an in-person element to the course because learning online is limited (SurResE9)*

Specifically related to participation, and as observed above, there is some evidence that COVID restrictions impacted on participation in the online environment. There were high numbers of initial sign-ups to courses, but with a much lower proportion continuing and/or completing a course. Non-completion of courses, or 'drop-out' was frustrating for some participants, for example:

> *Lost most of the attendees along the way (SurResE1)*

> *As time passed, there was noticeable attendance fatigue (SurResE14)*

In the questionnaire survey conducted for this final evaluation report, respondents continued to reflect on the impact the COVID-19 related restrictions had:

Being able to meet on Zoom was great given restrictions of covid times. However, not being able to meet in person in between sessions I feel allowed us to flounder, and probably was a cause in us not actually forming a strong community and purposeful group (SurFin2)

While nothing could have been done about it at the time, given covid restrictions, not being able to meet in person as participants in between sessions hindered the development of the project. (SurFin3)

I will be better able to contribute locally in my community. I've retained detailed notes I made for myself during the course, was keen to learn the methods, and captured ideas that team members expressed. I have the facilitation and community development skills and I believe Design Thinking is a very good process to come back to and use in the community as we gather again (albeit very slowly) after covid. Perhaps I will be able to facilitate some continuity and help hold us to inclusivity and accountability across our wider community - I firmly believe that this is how (my locality) will thrive. (SurFin9)

Notably, as the questionnaire survey continued there were fewer comments about COVID-19 by later respondents (in 2022), while in the end-of-project focus groups participants had to be prompted to discuss their experiences during the pandemic.

As a snapshot of the IC project during the pandemic, it is useful to note the perspectives of the relatively small number of survey respondents and focus group participants in February 2022. At that time, the evaluators used the questionnaire to capture what was then the current thinking on the lifting of public health restrictions and the future for community development training (mid-course evaluation questionnaire only; n=17). Figure 15 illustrates how respondents perceived the impact of social distancing and restrictions on training in Innovating Communities in February 2022. Responses here reflect the broader issues highlighted in the lesson feedbacks and the focus groups at the time. Most participants identified that COVID-19 had been a major disruptor of community development in general (70%, n=12). Positively, most respondents found that the online delivery of Innovating Communities had gone better than expected (94%; n=16). Despite the negative impact of public health restrictions on community development, and as reflected in all strands of feedback and data for this report, there was a sense that community-based training should not necessarily be in-person and hybrid models could be used. This finding is reflected in Figure 16; only 11% (n=2) of respondents state that training should be 100% in person/0% online.

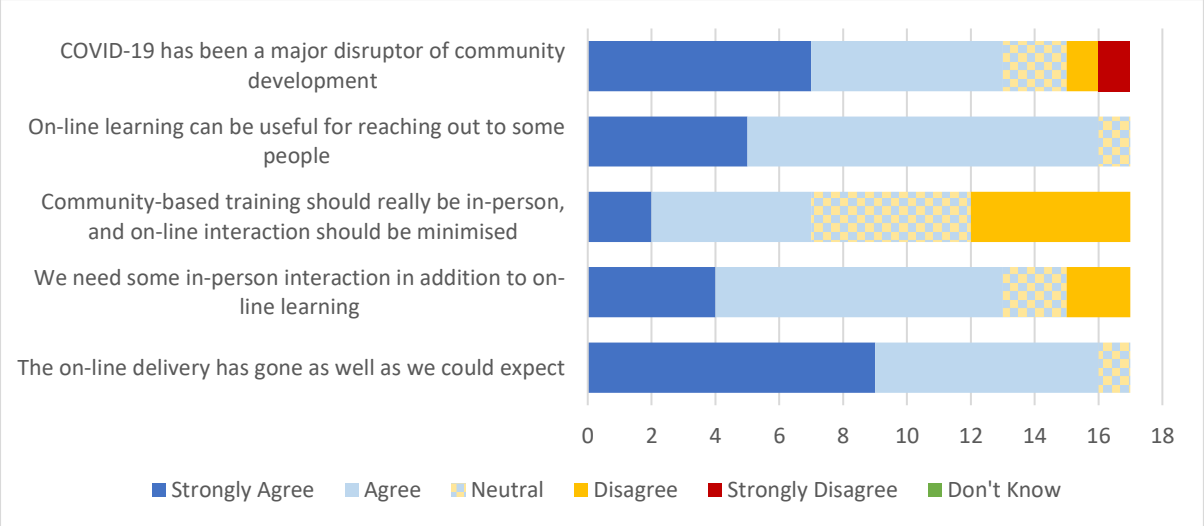


Figure 15: Impacts of COVID on Training (from Interim Evaluation Surveys Feb. 2022)

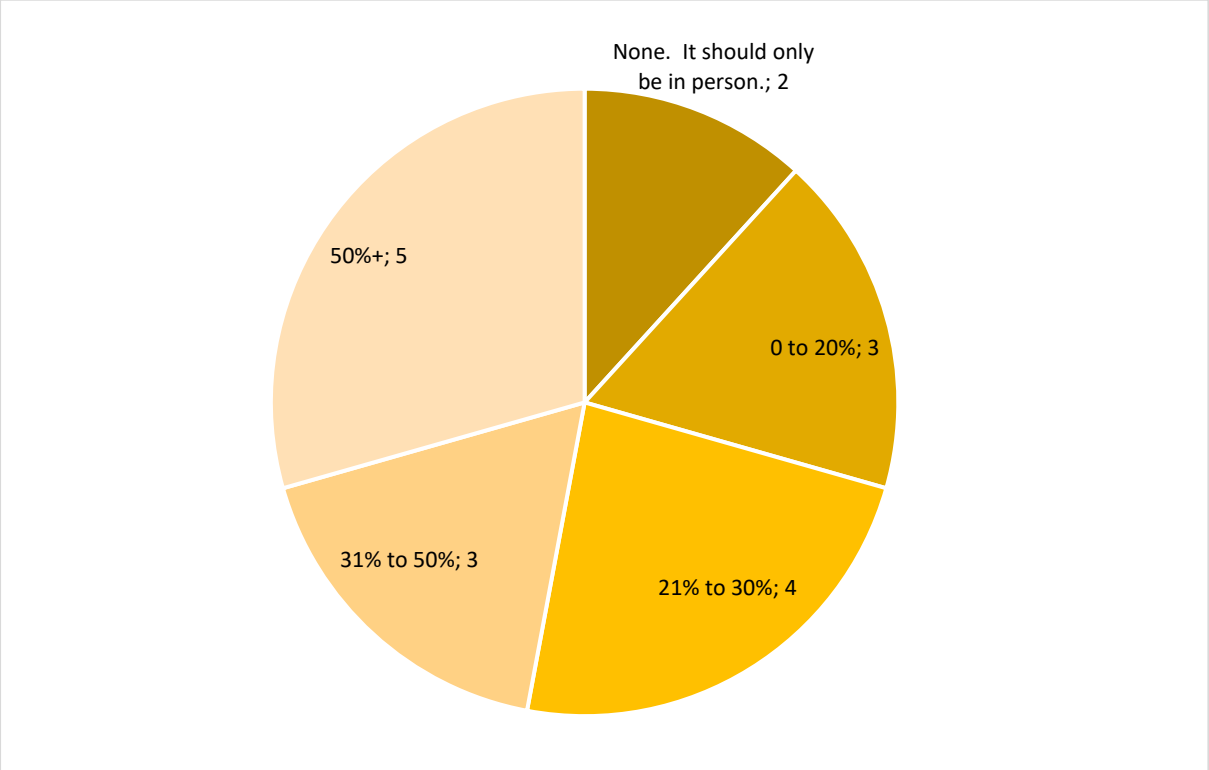


Figure 16: Ideal proportion of online learning for a community development related course (from Interim Evaluation Surveys Feb. 2022)

The end-of-course survey questionnaire asked participants to identify ways in which future IC / DT training could improve on their course. The most frequently cited recommendations were as follows:

- Face-to-face delivery;
- Having fewer and shorter sessions; and
- Better Localisation of the content.

4 Outputs

This chapter presents and assesses the project's main outputs. It begins by looking at the number and profile of enrolments. The chapter then presents data on the numbers and types of courses, challenges, opportunities, themes and groups. Output data are broken down by gender and geography, and the accompanying appendices present county-level data on the various output indicators. This chapter concludes by drawing on both the IC Dashboard and end-of-course survey to present and analyse participants' feedback on their learning experiences.

4.1 Enrolments

According to the Innovating Communities Dashboard, there were 2,898 discrete enrolments in the various courses. As Table 6 shows, the vast majority of participants enrolled in one course, while just over six percent of participants enrolled in at least two courses.

No. Courses	No. enrolments	% of total enrolments
1	2,534	87.44%
2	165	5.69%
3	10	0.35%
4	1	0.03%
Not stated	188	6.49%
Total	**2,898**	**100.00%**

Table 6: Number of course enrolments per participant

Table 7 highlights the following:

- County Donegal had more enrolments than any other county; and
- Most enrolments occurred in 2022 (45% of the total) and in 2021 (39% of the total).

Year	Donegal	Sligo	Cavan	Louth	Monaghan	Leitrim	N/A[10] or N/S
2021	203	187	128	232	184	132	67
2022	329	181	155	165	186	217	70
2023	1	135	137	10	13	34	127
Total	**535**	**503**	**421**	**409**	**383**	**383**	**264**
	17.85%	*16.78%*	*14.04%*	*13.64%*	*12.78%*	*12.78%*	*8.81%*

Table 7: Number of enrolments by year and county

The number of enrolments per capita (i.e. relative to the counties' populations) ranged from 0.01088 (highest) in Leitrim to 0.00293 (lowest) in County Louth. Table 8 presents the number of enrolments relative to population.

[10] Some participants came from outside the six counties, mainly from Northern Ireland.

Year	Donegal	Sligo	Cavan	Louth	Monaghan	Leitrim	Total
Total Enrolments (no. enrolled and % of total enrolments)	535	503	421	409	383	383	2,634
	20.31%	*19.10%*	*15.98%*	*15.53%*	*14.54%*	*14.54%*	*100%*
Population (2022) (no. persons and % of regional total)	125,313[11]	70,198	81,704	139,703	65,288	35,199	*517,405*
	24.22%	*13.57%*	*15.79%*	*27.00%*	*12.62%*	*6.80%*	*24.22%*
Enrolments per capita	**0.0043**	**0.0072**	**0.0052**	**0.0029**	**0.0059**	**0.0109**	**0.0043**

Table 8: Number of enrolments and total population by county

Of those who registered for a course, the majority (57.25%) were female, and as Table 9shows, females outnumber males in each county.

Gender	Donegal	Sligo	Cavan	Louth	Monaghan	Leitrim	N/A, N/S	Total
Female	313	296	242	221	220	210	157	1,659
Male	220	204	176	185	159	170	101	1,215
Not stated	2	3	3	3	4	3	6	24
Total	**535**	**503**	**421**	**409**	**383**	**383**	**264**	**2,898**

Table 9: Number of participants enrolled by gender and county

A total of 1,009 (34.82%) of all enrolments were by second-level students. Table 10 shows the number of students enrolled by county.

Row Labels	Donegal	Sligo	Cavan	Louth	Monaghan	Leitrim	N/A	Total
No. students enrolled	179	171	147	140	127	142	103	1,009
Second-level students as a % of all enrolments	*33.46%*	*34.00%*	*34.92%*	*34.23%*	*33.16%*	*37.08%*	*39.02%*	*34.82%*

Table 10: Number of second-level enrolments by county

Almost forty percent (39.54%) of the second-level students enrolled in their courses in 2021, with a further forty-four percent enrolling in 2022. The remainder (16.35%) of students enrolled in an Innovating Communities course in 2023.

The gender profile among student enrolments was similar to that among the entire cohort of persons enrolled; the majority (54.01%) of students were female.

As the following table shows, the project exceeded its targets (by 61%) and in every county in respect of the number of active challengers. County Cavan attained the highest number of active challengers, and the county exceeded its target by over one hundred percent. The project also exceeded its targets in respect of the number of training hours for group and individual sessions. The output in respect of individual sessions exceeded the project's target by over seventy percent, while the output in respect of group sessions was three percent above the target that had been set.

[11] The population of County Donegal was 159,192 (in 2016) and 167,084 (in 2022). 2016 data (from Pobal) show that the Inishowen Development Partnership (not a partner in Innovating Communities) had a total population of 39,330, which is 25% of the county's population. The figure presented in this table i.e. 125,313 corresponds to 75% of County Donegal's population, which is indicative of the population of the areas covered by Donegal Local Development Company (IC partner) and Údarás na Gaeltachta.

KPI	No. of Active Challengers	% of overall target	No. of Training Hours (Group Sessions)	% of overall target	No. of Training Hours (Individual Sessions)	% of overall target
KPI #	1		2		3	
KPI Target Total	**924**		**3,024**		**6,048**	
Donegal	290	188%	531.5	105%	1,040.00	206%
Monaghan	188	122%	559.0	111%	577.00	114%
Cavan	316	205%	504.0	100%	894.25	177%
Louth	195	127%	511.5	101%	825.25	164%
Sligo	286	186%	505.0	100%	1,062.75	211%
Leitrim	211	137%	500.5	99%	771.75	153%
KPI Per County/ Average	**154**	**161%**	**504**	**103%**	**504**	**171%**

Table 11: KPI Outputs relative to Targets

4.2 Courses, Challenges, Opportunities, Themes and Groups

Over the lifetime of the project, 130 courses were delivered in the six participating counties, as follows:

County	No. Courses
Monaghan	24
Cavan	22
Donegal	21
Sligo	21
Leitrim	19
Louth	19
More than one	4
Total	**130**

Table 12: Number of courses completed by county

In line with the Design Thinking methodology, course participants were facilitated to identify challenges and / or opportunities. By the end of the project, they had identified 227 opportunities and 51 challenges. As Figure 17 shows, opportunities outnumbered challenges in all counties. Monaghan recorded the highest proportion and absolute number of challenges, while participants in County Louth had identified more opportunities than participants in any other county.

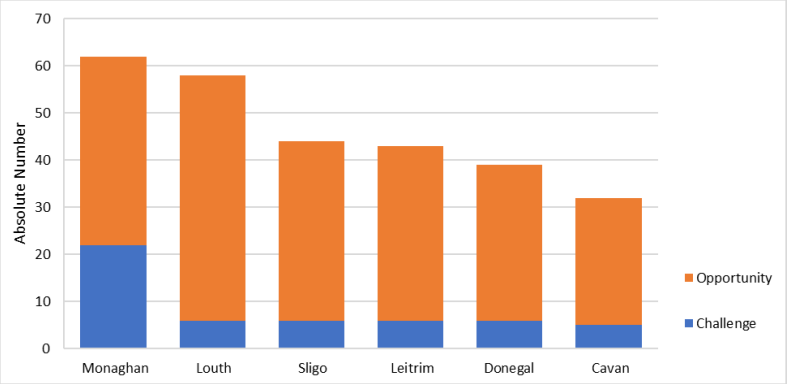


Figure 17: Number of opportunities and challenges per county

Each course focused on one or more themes, and by the end of the project, a total of 22 themes had been explored / pursued, across the 130 courses. As Figure 18 shows, 'health & wellbeing', ' children and families' and 'place & space' were addressed with the greatest frequency.

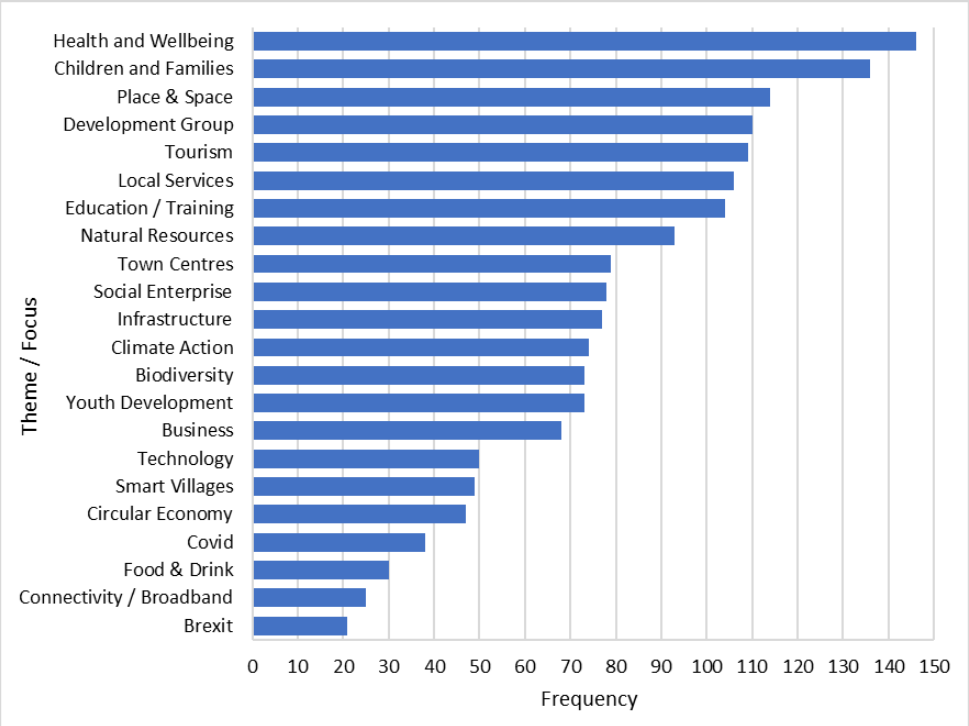


Figure 18: Frequency with which challenges and opportunities focused on a given theme[12]

[12] Frequencies exceed the total number of courses, as each course could identify and address both challenges and opportunities.

Table 13 presents the frequency with which each theme was addressed in each county.

Themes	Cavan	Leitrim	Louth	Monaghan	Sligo	Donegal	Total
Health and Wellbeing	18	18	30	36	24	20	**146**
Children and Families	14	21	27	38	21	15	**136**
Place & Space	11	18	23	31	14	17	**114**
Development Group	9	18	29	23	19	12	**110**
Tourism	9	17	23	30	13	17	**109**
Local Services	10	17	27	22	14	16	**106**
Education / Training	16	15	23	24	13	13	**104**
Natural Resources	12	17	18	18	13	15	**93**
Town Centres	5	13	17	22	11	11	**79**
Social Enterprise	7	9	23	20	11	8	**78**
Infrastructure	8	14	13	20	10	12	**77**
Climate Action	10	11	15	17	11	10	**74**
Youth Development	9	9	15	22	9	9	**73**
Biodiversity	8	9	17	15	12	12	**73**
Business	7	12	14	13	11	11	**68**
Technology	6	9	8	12	8	7	**50**
Smart Villages	6	10	9	10	6	8	**49**
Circular Economy	8	8	10	9	5	7	**47**
Covid	7	5	6	9	5	6	**38**
Food & Drink	4	6	11	4	3	2	**30**
Connectivity / Broadband	3	6	3	7	3	3	**25**
Brexit	4	4	5	3	3	2	**21**
Total	**191**	**266**	**366**	**405**	**239**	**233**	**1,700**

Table 13: Number of themes by county

Appendix 2 presents a county-by-county visualisation of the themes.

4.2.1 Thematic Groups

As part of the knowledge-acquisition process and in order to enable participants to focus on putting their know-how into practice, several groups were formed and / or course outputs were linked to, or associated with, a pre-existing thematic group. In practice, 391 themes were associated with the delivery of Innovating Communities' courses. This figure is greater than the number of courses, as some courses identified with more than one thematic group. The following graph shows the number of thematic groups by type. It reveals that the three most common group types / foci were 'education and training', 'social enterprise' and 'youth development'.

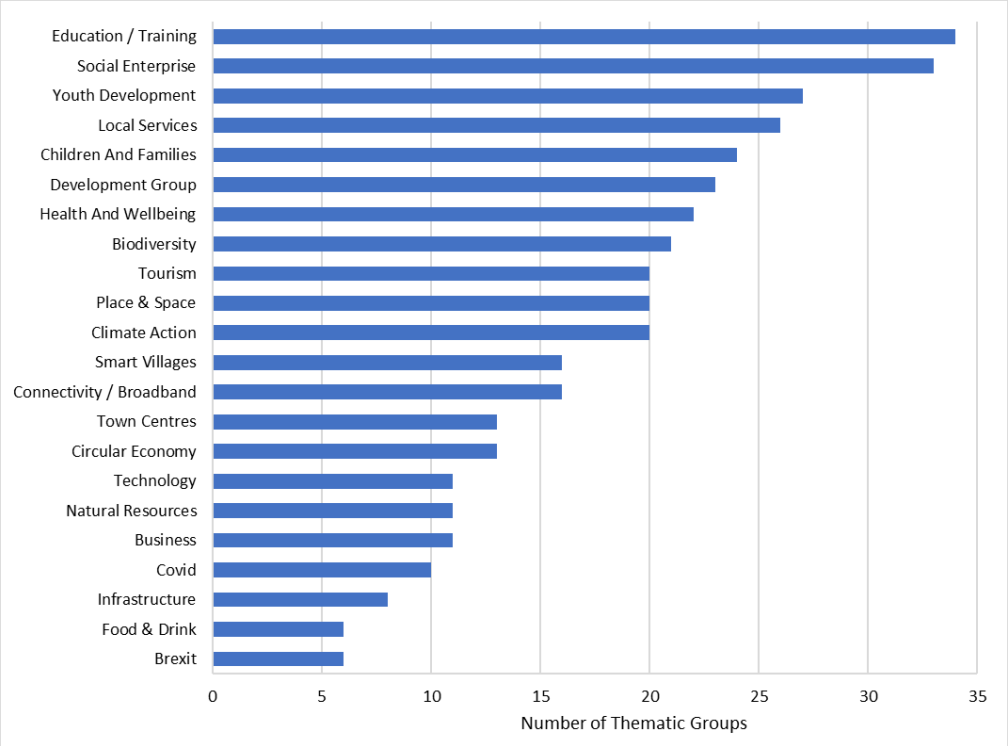


Figure 19: Number of groups by theme

As Table 14 shows, there were some differences between the participating counties with respect to the number and types of thematic groups.

Thematic Group	Cavan	Donegal	Leitrim	Louth	Monaghan	Sligo	Total
Biodiversity	2	2	5	5	4	3	**21**
Brexit	3	0	1	1	1	0	**6**
Business	2	0	4	0	3	2	**11**
Children And Families	4	3	3	5	5	4	**24**
Circular Economy	4	1	1	2	3	2	**13**
Climate Action	2	1	5	6	2	4	**20**
Connectivity / Broadband	3	1	4	1	6	1	**16**
Covid	1	0	4	1	3	1	**10**
Development Group	5	4	4	3	6	1	**23**
Education / Training	4	3	8	5	8	6	**34**
Food & Drink	1	1	0	1	3	0	**6**
Health And Wellbeing	2	4	4	7	2	3	**22**
Infrastructure	2	1	2	0	2	1	**8**
Local Services	2	2	7	6	7	2	**26**
Natural Resources	1	1	3	2	2	2	**11**
Place & Space	2	2	6	3	3	4	**20**
Smart Villages	4	0	5	1	4	2	**16**
Social Enterprise	4	3	8	7	8	3	**33**
Technology	2	0	2	1	4	2	**11**
Tourism	5	3	4	2	4	2	**20**
Town Centres	2	3	4	0	3	1	**13**
Youth Development	6	3	5	5	5	3	**27**
Total	**63**	**38**	**89**	**64**	**88**	**49**	**391**

Table 14: Number of thematic groups by type and county

Appendix 3 presents the number of thematic groups, by type, in each participating county.

4.2.2 Participants' Feedback on Project Processes and Outputs

On-going (internal and external) evaluation was one of the good practice features of Innovation Communities. As noted earlier, the independent external evaluators had access to programme material from the outset, and their inputs contributed to formative learning. In addition, the project had a continuous internal evaluation mechanism, in that course participants were enabled to make observations, and they could give feedback and make suggestions / recommendations (to Icecream Architecture) via the IC Dashboard.

This sub-section presents and assesses participants' feedback on the IC project's processes and outputs. It draws on three primary data sources namely the IC Dashboard, the end-of-course questionnaire survey, and the end of project focus groups

The Innovating Communities Dashboard provided participants with a mechanism through which they could provide comments and feedback on their learning experiences. Trainers and co-trainers advised participants of this facility, and they encouraged them to use it. As a result, 353 participants provided feedback, and this section presents an overview thereof.

As the following pie-chart shows, over ninety-five percent of those who provided feedback described their course as either 'very useful' or 'useful'.

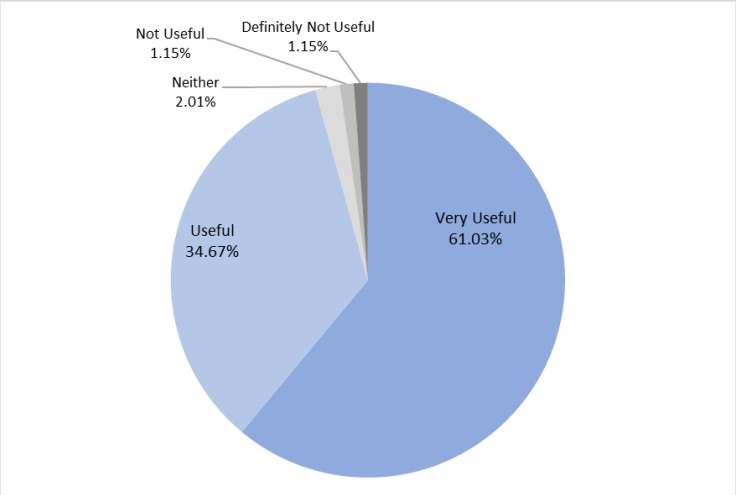


Figure 20: Participants' description of their courses

These data were analysed by gender and county, and no discernible differences were observed; the overwhelming majority of participants, regardless of gender or geography, found their courses to be either 'very useful' or 'useful'.

The dashboard also provided participants with a means of stating with they liked most and liked least; they could simply leave a comment or make a statement (no specific questions were asked). Our analysis of these comments reveals that participants particularly liked the group dynamics, the facilitated discussions and the generation of ideas. They also commented favourably on the IC methodologies, most notably the undertaking of local and project-based surveys, and they mentioned the challenges and opportunities that were generated over the course of the lessons and through the surveys. Participants' comments also noted they appreciated the opportunity to ask questions and engage with their fellow-learners. Figure 21 shows the main likes in descending order of the frequency with which they were mentioned.

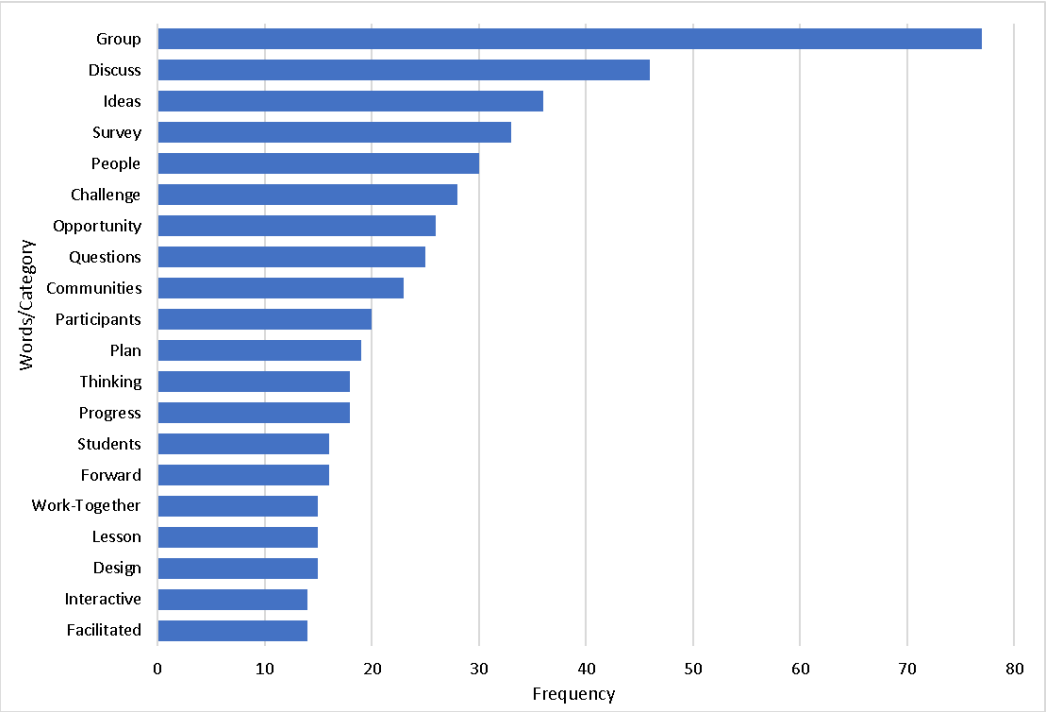


Figure 21:Twenty (20) most frequently occurring responses to 'liked most'

Figure 22 presents a sentiment analysis of all the comments made by participants in respect of what they liked most. It reveals that their comments are predominantly positive. The small number of negative sentiments relates mainly to statements in which participants generally added a recommendation or indicated how things might have been better or could be improved.

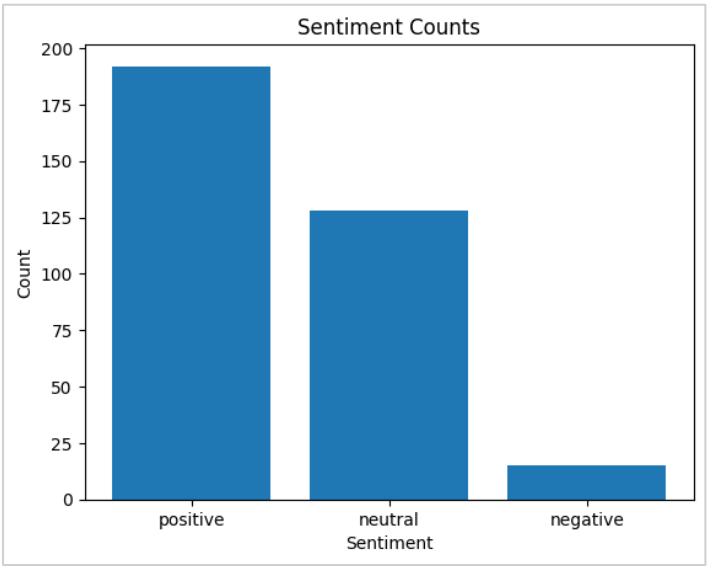


Figure 22: Sentiment count for all responses in 'liked most'

The following comments are emblematic of participants' sentiments in their IC dashboard comments in respect of what they liked most:

- *"Rachael brought the group through Design Thinking, and it was also an opportunity for the group to meet and network and see what commonalities they have and how they can collaborate together in the future";*
- *"Carrin's clear focus and facilitating us through discussions to actions and holding it all together Her capturing the key points on jamboard throughout the discussions that help us keep on track And her Lesson Summaries are great to refer back to. Great engagement amongst everyone and ideas bubbling up into the clear actions we have to do and timelines. Plus access to one on one or small group mentoring process available for following month will be very helpful. Having the videos of lessons is great too as I certainly get caught up in discussions and it's good to be able to go back and type up key points and language used in conversations";*
- *"Contributions and firm gentle direction of tutor";*
- *"Defining the project through discussions and using the exercises to clarify our challenge and themes, catching everyone's feedback and ideas through the process";*
- *"Finding themes in the survey responses was very interesting. Marieke did a great job with the preparation for the course, a lot of work went into it, preview of survey responses was good";*
- *"Gavin created a highly interactive workshop with the group, where the students were facilitated in creative thinking and having fun while working on their exercises";*
- *"Good discussion around the various people/groups who are affected or who might be affected by actions taken to address the challenge";*
- *"Great session where the group had the opportunity to start to define the challenge. Interesting discussion about what is happening on a community level in other parts of Ireland and locally";*
- *"Group discussed and showed their research pictures of their respective areas for improvement";*
- *"I also appreciate the honesty that is being expressed. Being divided into teams shares the workload and allows greater focus";*
- *"Learning about the elements of Design Thinking, the jamboard discussion and getting to know the other participants. interesting group"; and*
- *"The interactions between the attendees was very positive as well as the ideas that we shared. I acquired better understanding about the history of the town which will helps me to come up with supportive proposal in order to achieve this project".*

The following wordcloud provides further insights into participants' likes. It highlights their liking of the group experience, the discussions, engagements with other people / participants, the use of techniques (surveys, challenges, opportunities), asking questions, being facilitated / interactive, thinking and making progress. These observations indicate that community development values and principles were reflected in the ways in which the training was delivered.

It is also worth noting that 'face-to-face' delivery features among the aspects that participants liked. The interim project evaluation had highlighted a strong desire, among participants and co-trainers, to move from on-line to face-to-face engagements.

Figure 23: Wordcloud of most frequently occurring words[13] in 'liked most' responses in the IC dashboard comments

The dashboard also provided participants with a mechanism through which they could indicate what they liked least / disliked. As was the case with 'likes', participants could simply leave comments or make statements (rather than answering any specific questions). As Figure 24 shows, most participants did not have any dislikes; a total of 331 participants had availed of the opportunity to make a statement about the features / aspects they liked most, while just 201 participants commented on what they liked least. Among the latter, the modal comment (n=65) was 'nothing'. Thus, in practice, the total number of participants who availed of the opportunity to say what they liked least was lower again (n=136).

[13] In compiling the Wordclouds that are presented in this report, we have excluded pronouns, conjunctions, definite and indefinite articles and other words that do not convey any meaningful information.

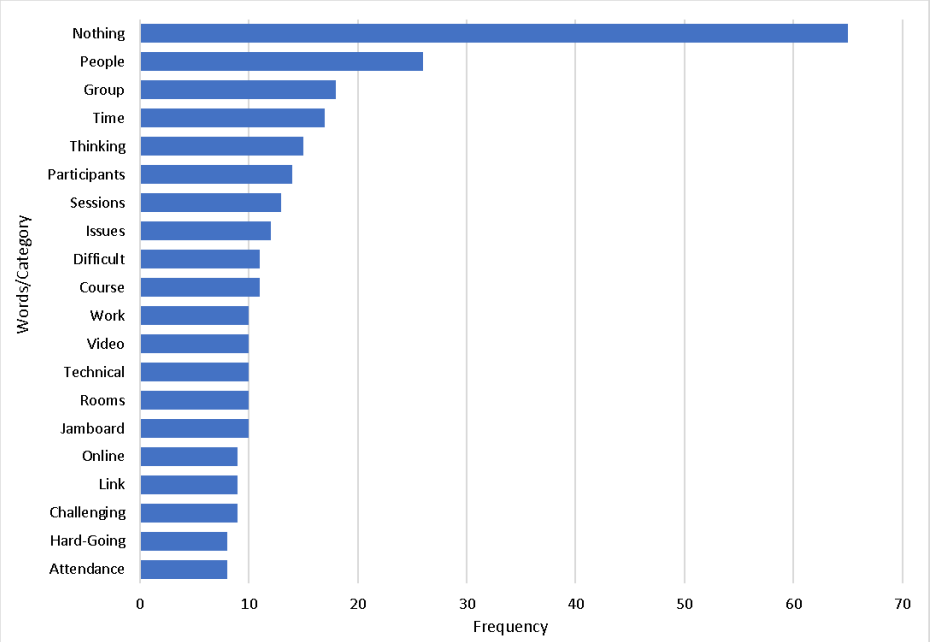


Figure 24: Twenty (20) most frequently occurring responses to 'liked least'

As Figure 25 shows, most of the sentiments people expressed in respect of what they liked least were in fact positive or neutral. Only a quarter (24.9%) of sentiments could be classified as negative. This can be attributed to participants using the 'liked least' option to make suggestions and to put forward recommendations, many of which focussed on how Ice Cream and / or co-trainers could build on positives. Participants' comments also focused on the ICT / technical aspects of on-line learning and knowledge application. Some had connectivity problems, while others had ICT literacy challenges. These problems were highlighted in the interim independent evaluation report, and it is noted that the move to face-to-face learning in 2022 obviated many ICT-related challenges.

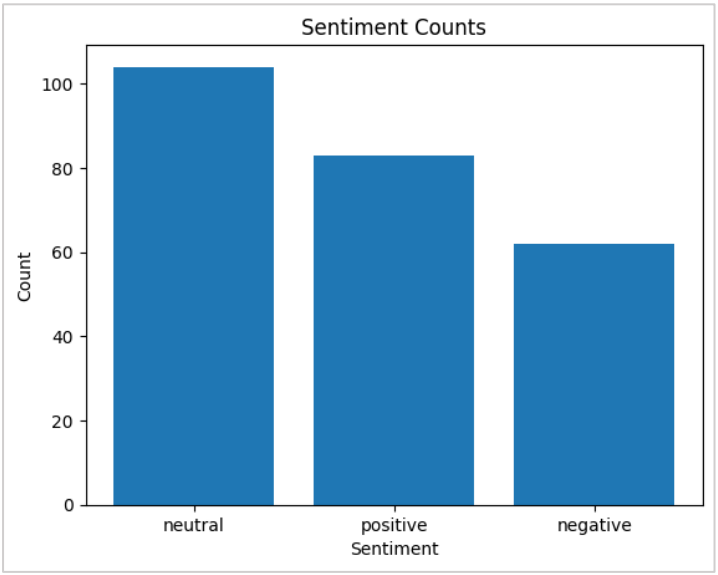


Figure 25: Sentiment count for all responses in 'liked least'

The following comments are emblematic of participants' sentiments in their IC dashboard comments in respect of what they liked least:

- "A few connectivity issues when videos were playing, but nothing at all major";
- "Accessing the website was a little tricky - needed to change my password 2 or 3 times finding the link to access the first meeting was hard. only found it because Bryony sent us all the link. I think some people might be put off by all the technical stuff we seem to need to do";
- "At this stage I have no negative recollection - the lesson was fine really, and nothing stands out as negative. Perhaps, as a group, we stray off the topic in hand, but that is also a positive";
- "It is just an issue for me personally as I don't currently have a laptop. Using the mobile phone means that I can't see or look up certain things & the screen is very small, but Carrin kept things right sharing documents with us";
- "I think it would be better if we discussed these things in smaller groups before talking about it with everyone else";
- "Not enough time to digest what was on jam boards and discuss their significance";
- "Only 10 people on the call (17) in group originally"; and
- "Low attendance meant it was difficult to approach the challenge".

The following wordcloud provides further insights into what participants liked least. It highlights the significance of ICT issues, along with some perceived shortcomings in respect of delivery and participant engagement. As the comments (above) indicate, absenteeism was a challenge on some courses, and participants also mentioned this issue in the focus group discussions with the independent evaluators.

Figure 26: Word cloud of most frequently occurring words in 'liked least' responses in the IC dashboard comments

The dashboard included a facility whereby participants could leave further comments. Figure 27 shows the words that were most frequently contained in their remarks. The words 'good' and 'lesson' were the most frequently cited words; they were more prevalent than all other words. It is notable that most of the words used here are descriptors of the IC process / methodologies. All the words that indicate values / judgements i.e. good, happy, enjoyable and useful are positive.

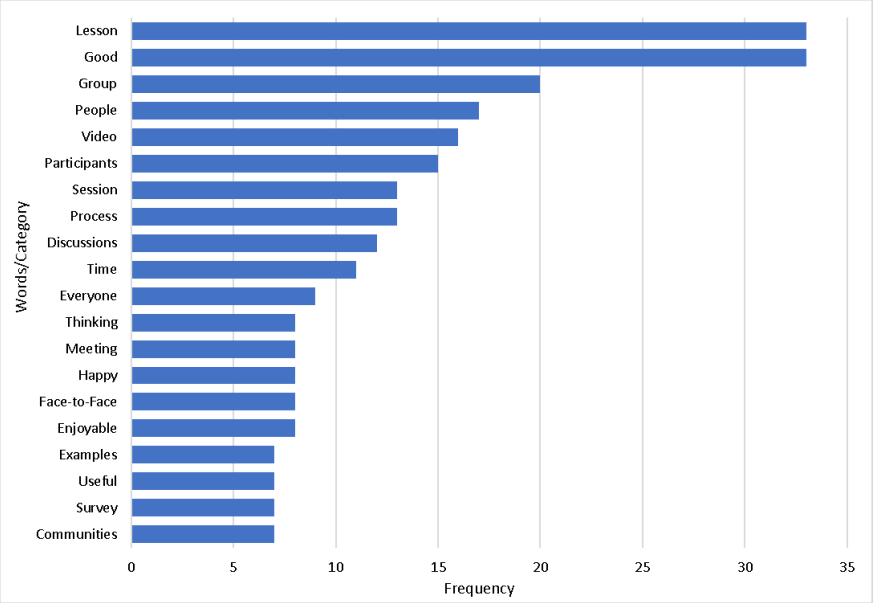


Figure 27: Twenty (20) most frequently occurring responses to open-ended comments section

As Figure 28 shows, positive comments accounted for the modal type (54% of the total), while just over a third (35%) can be classified as neutral.

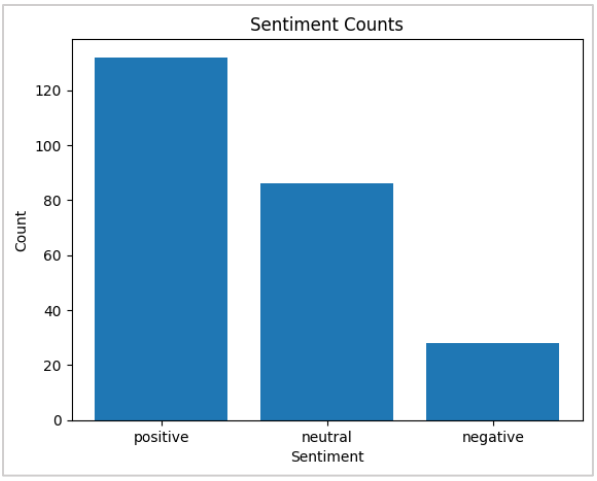


Figure 28: Sentiment count for all responses in open comments section

The following wordcloud visualises all words that were in the 'open comments' section of the dashboard. It reveals an emphasis on processes – indicated by words such as lesson, group, participate, discuss, video, suggest, session, work, people and community. Most of the sentiments / judgements are positive.

Figure 29: Wordcloud of most frequently occurring words in comments section

In the focus groups, some participants identified barriers (or potential barriers) to engagement with the programme. The main barrier to engagement they identified was the mode in which the training was conducted, that is, whether it was online, hybrid or in-person. But this issue is not black and white. For many participants, once COVID-19 restrictions had lifted, the arrangement to run training in a hybrid manner with a mix of in-person and online sessions, worked well. It allowed for flexibility if, for example, they had to manage caring responsibilities, or if they were unable to travel to a venue due to work commitments. Some participants who were uncomfortable with attending online, or using the Jamboard, reported that other group members helped them to engage by talking with them one-to-one prior to a session, or by helping them use the platform. In the focus groups, participants referred interchangeably to using the 'formal' apps and the IC learning platform, as well as personal contact through phone calls and WhatsApp.

For those who enrolled in courses that were fully online, there was a perception that online learning posed challenges in respect of engagement. Participants identified poor broadband, lack of access to appropriate devices and weak digital skills as barriers to fully online training. Giving the timing of the training (during the pandemic), many participants faced unanticipated barriers or challenges to engagement and participation. These included, for example, juggling work and caring responsibilities, in-house competition for access to devices and broadband and the general anguish and strain many households experienced during that time.

Given the need to undertake all learning online in the early days of the IC project, there was a preference for the bulk of community development activities to take place in-person. Some focus group participants voiced a very negative perspectives of online engagement, as they felt it could be exclusive. Having said that, even for those who were negative about online training, there was a sense that there was some role for online interaction with, for example, 'back office' activities such as governance and finance tasks for community groups. As a participation tool and to encourage engagement, particularly where their activity relates to local or place-based training, the strong preference was for in-person or hybrid interactions.

The end-of-course questionnaire survey provided a mechanism through which participants could provide further information in respect of their experiences. Chapter 3 has already presented some of their feedback in respect of the IC process, and in particular the training interfaces and effects COVID-19 public health restrictions had on delivery and interactions. This section focuses, therefore, on project outputs, and specifically participants' motivations, the know-how they acquired, perceived benefits and the application of design thinking.

4.2.3 Motivations and Know-how Acquisition

The end-of-course questionnaire survey asked participants to identify their reasons for signing-up for an IC course. Their responses revealed that 'interest in the topic' was the modal motivating factor. Almost two-thirds (64%) of adult learners listed it among their reasons, while a further thirty-eight percent reported they 'wanted to learn about design thinking as a process'. Thirty percent stated that they had an idea for their community, while just under a quarter (23%) reported that they wanted to improve their skills / know-how[14].

Among the survey respondents who registered for a course, almost ninety percent completed it in full, or they attended most sessions. The completion rate was higher among second-level students than among the 'adult' participants (63% and 51% respectively). A further thirty-six percent of participants reported that they attended most sessions (32% of students and 36% of adults). Eight percent of the adult participants stated that they did less than half the course, while four percent of both cohorts (students and adults) reported that they dropped out (see Figure 30).

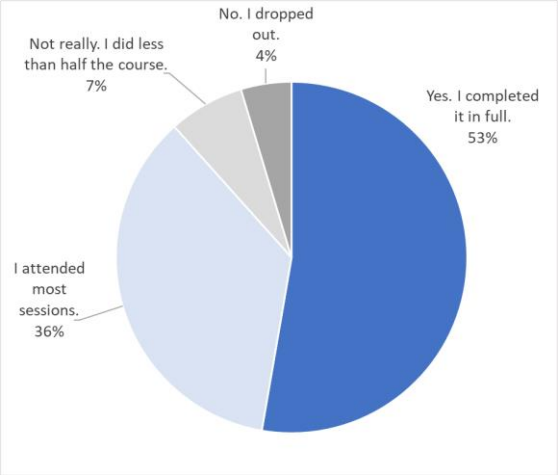


Figure 30: Participants' levels of course attendance

Of those who either dropped out or did less than half their course, almost half (46%) reported that they could not complete their course due to 'other commitments', while almost a quarter (23%) reported that the course time was not suitable.

For some of the survey respondents, there was uncertainty at the beginning of course enrolment but they were willing to engage and learn as the process continued:

> *I really was not sure of what the process was going to be until we got started but learned as we went along (SurFin11).*

[14] The cumulative of these values exceeds 100%, as respondents could choose more than one motivating reason.

I think there is always something to learn that is useful if one is paying attention and open to it (SurFin58)

4.2.4 Perceived Benefits – individual and community

The majority of course participations reported that they and their communities had benefited from the training in design thinking, and as Figure 31 illustrates, adult learners were more likely than students to report that the course has definitely been of personal benefit to them.

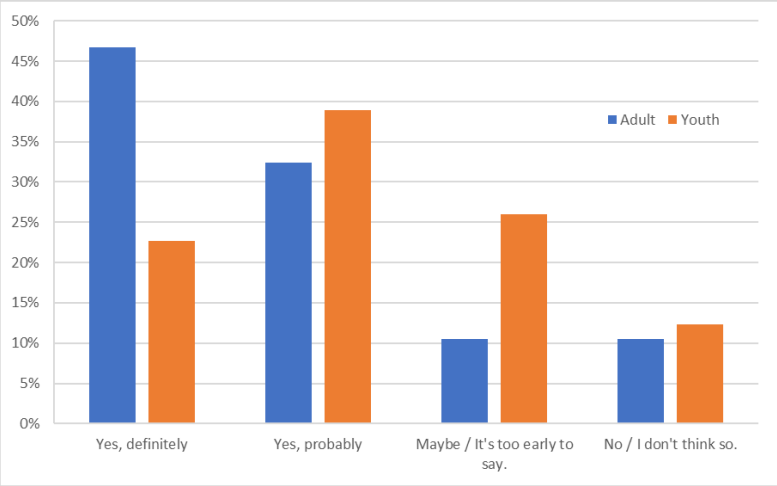


Figure 31: Extent to which participants believe the training has been of personal benefit to them

When asked to identify the benefits they had derived, participants referred to the following:

- Interactions with fellow participants;
- Idea generation techniques;
- Hearing about, and learning from, experiences in other communities;
- Problem-solving;
- Hearing other voices e.g. service users;
- New skills acquisition;
- Teamworking;
- Confidence-building; and
- Increased motivation to promote community development.

When asked to identify the most useful aspect of the course, participants referred to brainstorming, groupwork, learning about design thinking and interacting with fellow trainees. Survey respondents were also asked to identify the least useful aspect of the course. They referred to the course being time consuming, the aforementioned technological / connectivity difficulties and low participation / drop-out.

Survey respondents provided additional information on their personal benefits, for example, one respondent mentioned the mental health benefits while doing a course during public health restrictions:

Moreover it was very interactive. It helped my state of mental health through the interactions I had with other people. Even though it was on zoom. I never regretted doing the course (SurFin65)

4.2.5 Design Thinking Application

The survey findings indicate that the majority of course participants believe they have acquired new know-now and / or skills that will be useful for their groups / communities. As the following graph shows, almost seventy percent of respondents either agree or strongly agree that they have learned about tools for idea generation, while over three quarters of them agree that the training has assisted them or their group(s) with generating new ideas.

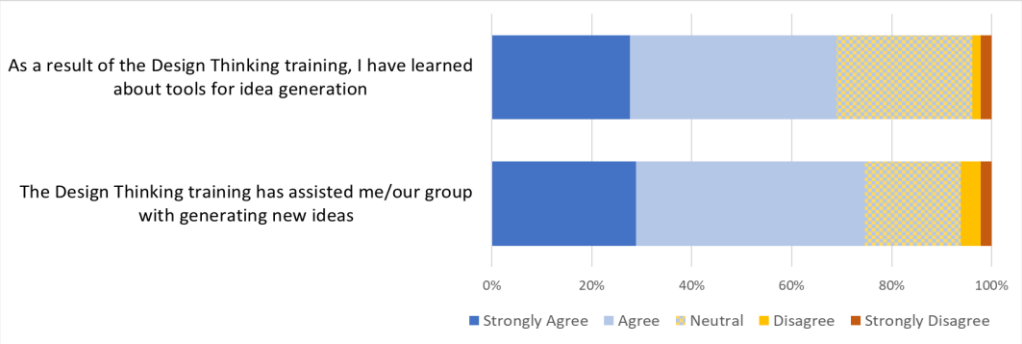


Figure 32: Extent to which participants have learned about, and applied, design thinking

When asked to identify the specific topics or themes they have explored in respect of idea generation, participants listed the following. These themes are listed here in descending order, beginning with the most popular.

- Social Enterprise;
- Climate Action;
- Biodiversity;
- Retaining young people in rural areas;
- Natural Resources;
- Physical Infrastructure; and
- Transport.

Design Thinking methodologies involve five stages or steps – from identifying challenges to applying solutions. The end-of-course survey questionnaire asked respondents to indicate, on a scale from 1 (low) to 5 (high) the extent to which the IC training project had provided them with experience of each of those five stages / steps. As Table 15 shows, the mean score (across all five stages) was 3.6. Values ranged from 3.5 to 3.72.

	Mean	**Mode**
Empathise	3.52	4
Define	3.74	4
Ideate	3.63	4
Test	3.50	3
Materialise	3.62	4
Overall	*3.60*	*4*

Table 15: Design Thinking - scoring of the five stages

Qualitative data from the survey and the focus groups, highlighted that Design Thinking as a methodology for community development worked well for many. The following quotes exemplify this:

Design thinking was a beneficial tool to use in this learning process (SurFin61).

Yea definitely the innovating communities got us to a place we wouldn't have got to with it I'd say. And it does deal with what they call wicked problems. So these are the things that are not easily solved. And it finds ways around that. And explores all the options (FGPart2.4)

The people in the group and I think there's about eight of us, are moving forward to form a committee and apply for funding for a feasibility study ... And all of these things, they were kind of ideas. But they've been brought together, not just by the trainer, but by … design thinking. … And I think for a group of disparate people, our group is very different. And we don't all come from similar backgrounds and we've not all step projects like this. It has been great and we're on a real good kind of starting point for moving things forward from here (FGPart1.3)

For a number of the focus group participants, there was a strong sense of process learning. For those who completed one training course, there was a feeling that what was learned the first time round, could be applied in the second. For many that iterative process of DT meant that they learned from each other, what they would do differently in the future, and what worked well and could be repeated.

4.3 Case Studies

The Innovating Communities Learning Showcase included fourteen case studies, and twelve case studies are elaborated on the project's website (https://www.innovating.ie/showcase). Appendix 4 of the report provides a summary descriptor of each case study. Participants' voices are to the fore in the case study vignettes that have been posted online, and in those videos, they speak about their experiences of the training courses, their knowledge acquisition and the learnings they are applying in their communities. The case studies feature participants from each county, and they generate insights into a range of project types. The case studies provide evidence in respect of process, output and impact indicators. The following observations can be made in respect of the case studies:

- IC participants have dealt with a wide range of social and environmental issues, and there is considerable diversity in respect of the content of training and the types of projects that have emerged;
- Males, females and people of all age cohorts feature in the promotion of development projects associated with IC;
- Social and ecological objectives have been integrated in the formulation of challenges and solutions;
- Community development principles have been applied locally. Stakeholders have been empowered to identify challenges and solutions;
- Trainers and co-trainers have acted as facilitators of stakeholder engagement and empowerment, rather than simply being transmitters of knowledge;
- Economic development does not feature as strongly in the case studies as do the other dimensions (social and ecological) of sustainable development;
- IC themes and foci are generally place-based, and work programmes take cognisance of local conditions, features and resources, and there is, therefore, the potential to increase stakeholders' awareness of place-making and its role in enabling sustainable territorial development;
- While the methodologies applied are similar to those that are integral to the Smart Village approach to local development, the language participants use differs from that advocated by the ENRD and other champions of smart villages; and

- The local development companies' relationships with IC participants and their communities have been an enabling factor in project development, and growing and sustaining those relationships will be integral to sustaining the momentum that IC has generated.

Appendix 4 presents further information about each of the case studies that were highlighted at the end-of-course learning showcase.

5 Impact

This chapter presents and assesses the project's impacts. It looks specifically at the application of know-how and skills, particularly in respect of design thinking. This chapter looks at the extent to which stakeholders perceive the project has generated, or is generating, innovation. It also examines impacts in respects of CLLD and associated factors, such as social capital, volunteerism and community capacity.

5.1 Implementation and Follow-up

The Innovating Communities model is based on trainees / participants working with co-trainers from the partner local development companies, whose roles include ensuring that ideas generated during the training are explored and, where feasible, pursued. According to the IC Dashboard, as of July 2023, a fifth of project ideas were deemed to be 'already active', and 'planning was underway' in respect of a further twenty-five percent. Over half (55%) of ideas remain at the concept stage i.e. they are 'just an idea'. Figure 33 shows the breakdown of project ideas, by status and county.

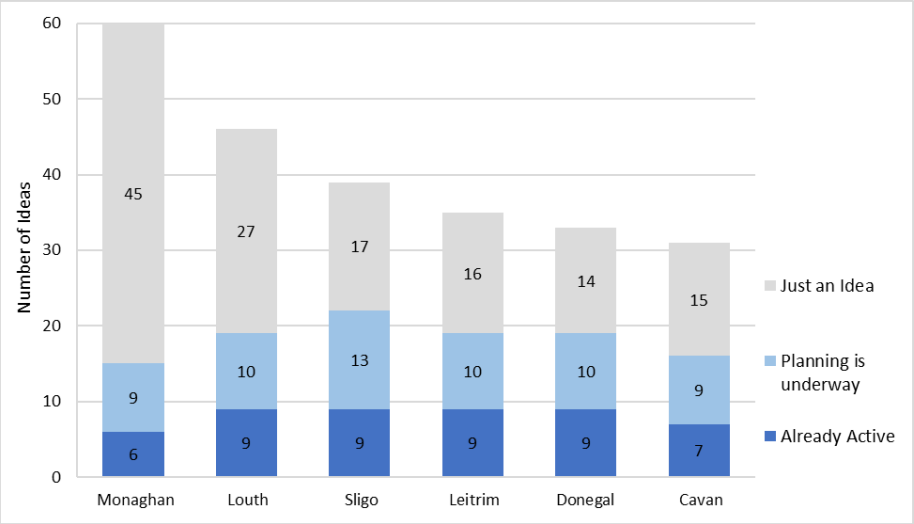


Figure 33: Status of project ideas (July 2023)

As Figure 34 shows, almost half of all survey respondents either agree or strongly agree with the statement 'I would do a similar course again'. Over a third of respondents are neutral or ambiguous about doing a similar course again (they neither agree nor disagree with the given statement). Meanwhile, almost a fifth (19%) of respondents disagree that they would disagree with doing a similar course again.

Exactly half the respondents agree or strongly agree that they will be listened to if they have an idea for their community, while a much smaller percentage (17%) disagree with this notion. Over one in six respondents state strongly agree with the statement 'I want to be more involved in my community', while a further forty percent them agree with it. If this level of agreement indicates an increased disposition to civic participation / volunteerism, it would be a notable project output, and one which could be further harnessed in order to generate CLLD and design-thinking impacts in communities. Such impacts have the potential to be significant in communities, especially given the declining levels of community activity and volunteerism in Irish society.

Just over half (51%) of survey respondents either agree or strongly agree that they are more interested in the place in which they live. This indicates further potential to harness local social capital in order to promote place-making, and the forthcoming LEADER programme can potentially provide financial supports to enable place-making projects to be realised.

The survey findings also reveal that over seventy percent of course participants agree or strongly agree that taking part in the course has given them ideas for their communities, while just under eight percent disagree. This finding provides further evidence of the potential to further promote CLLD. In general, this set of survey findings reveal positive dispositions to the learning experience. They also provide evidence of knowledge acquisition, in line the project's stated objectives.

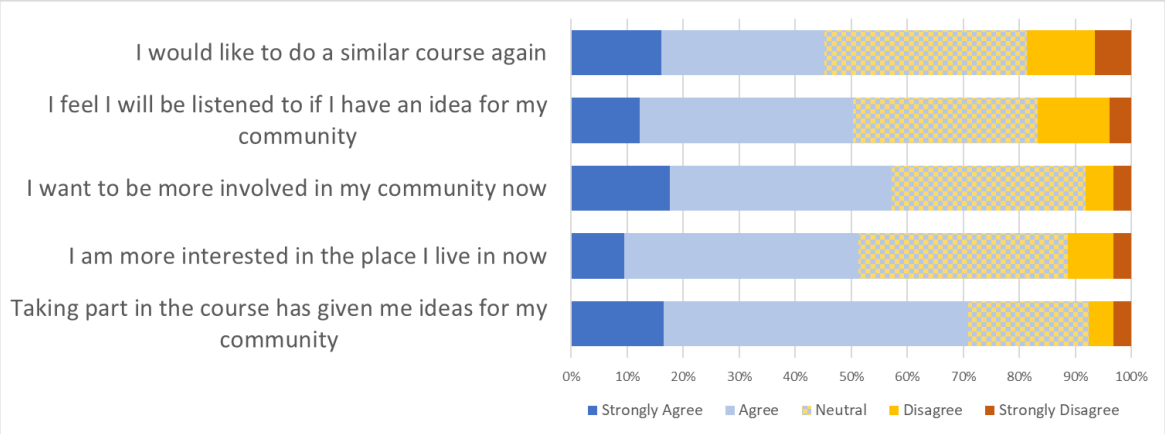


Figure 34: Survey respondents' levels of agreement / disagreement with given statements about learning outputs

Figure 35 presents survey findings, from youth participants. It reveals high levels (70%+) of agreement with affirmative statements about the project's outputs and potential impacts in respect of youth-specific performance indicators. Over seventy percent of youth respondents either agree or strongly agree with the statement 'young people understand the challenges of the future'. Just over a fifth (22%) are neutral or ambiguous about this statement. Almost three quarters of respondents agree or strongly agree that 'young people can lead change and innovation in their local areas'. While only a handful of respondents disagree with this statement, over a fifth of them are neutral or ambiguous about it. Harnessing the potential, (as indicated by almost three quarters of respondents) could potentially be transformative for rural communities. This project catered specifically for youth participants from second-level schools and third-level institutes (DKTI and St Angela's College), there is potential to nurture further linkages between education providers and civil society across the region. All HEIs have an obligation to promote civic engagement and linkages with communities, and local development companies can play enabling and facilitative roles in that regard.

The survey findings reveal that the vast majority (85%) of respondents either agree or strongly agree that young people should be involved in developing ideas for their local areas. Considering that 'idea generation' is integral to the IC methodology and is evident in the project's outputs, this survey finding indicates that respondents perceive scope for further and follow-up engagement with young people as well as for further IC training programmes in the region.

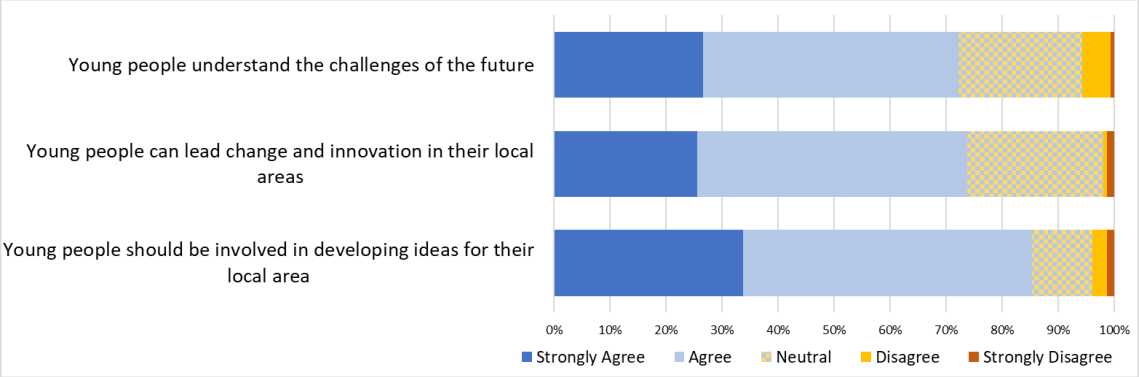


Figure 35: Youth participants' perceptions of potential impacts

As indicated earlier in this report, the IC project sought to promote innovation and problem-solving and to increase communities' and local development companies' capacity to deal with challenges and so-called 'wicked problems'. The case studies that were referenced in the previous chapter provide evidence that indicates positive impacts in these respects, and the following set of survey findings indicates that participants generally perceive positive impacts in their communities as a result of the IC training programme; over sixty percent of survey respondents either agree or strongly agree with affirmative statements about the project's impacts on their communities. Almost two thirds of respondents agree or strongly agree that the training has enabled their group to become more innovative, and a similar proportion report that their groups are better at creating solutions with a longer-term impact on innovation. A slightly higher proportion (68%) of respondents agree or strongly agree that their group is better at analysing problems, while most of them (69%) agree or strongly agree that their group is more capable of addressing challenges. Just under two thirds of respondents agree that their group members are more confident in tackling challenges. As Figure 36 also shows, fewer than ten percent of respondents disagree with the affirmative statements that were presented to them.

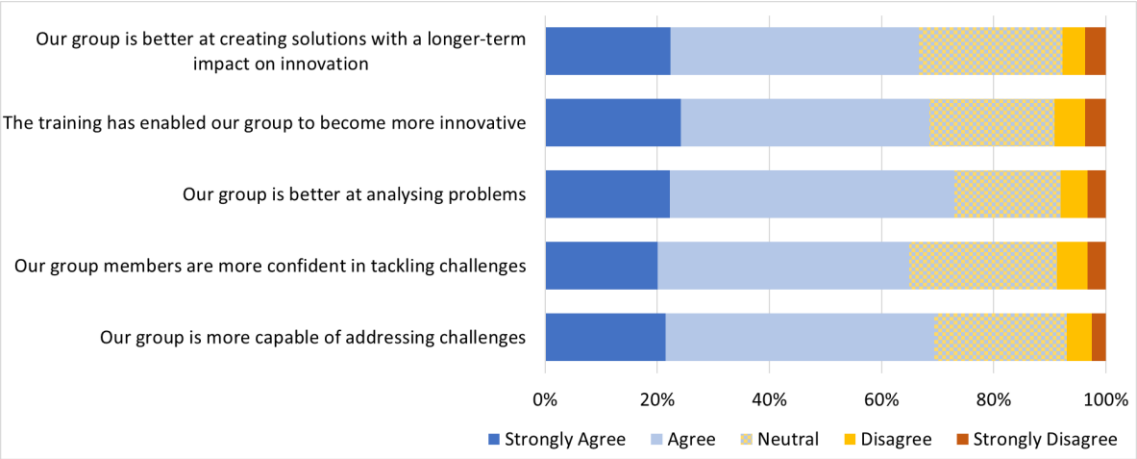


Figure 36: Participants' perceptions of impacts on their groups

In order to further gauge impacts and potential impacts, the survey questionnaire asked 'has (or will) your group put into practice any new tools or methods as a result of the IC training'? Almost one third (32%) of respondents reported that their group had applied or is applying at least one tool or method as a result of the programme. A further forty-eight percent of them responded 'not yet, but very likely to happen, while the remainder (20%) reported 'no'; they are not applying a new tool and do not

envisage that this is very likely to happen. Thus, eighty percent of respondents said that their community groups were already applying some of the tools or methods from the programme, or were very likely to do so.

5.2 Participant Reflections

The impacts of engagement with courses in the IC project were a strong feature of discussion in the focus groups. For a number of FG participants, there was agreement that although it may be too soon to confirm the outcomes of individual training programmes, they could identify that there has been positive impact initially. In terms of the affect it had on individuals, groups and /or places, one of the positive aspects was courses being a means of bringing people together with a common cause.

Figure 37: Key words used in Focus Groups

Figure 37 highlights the key words used in the focus groups held with participants and co-trainers in March 2023. For those who attended the focus groups, there was a sense of positive impact, exemplified by:

Perspectives on the Trainer/Co-Trainer:

> *without his input it wouldn't have been probably as successful as it was (FGPart1.1)*

> *our trainer played a really great role, … all the participants came from one area. But because of her local links to the area she helped us reach out to more people and groups to get them kind of back into the project. And I don't think we would have had anyone within the group with those skills and knowledge. So her being so incredibly local to where the project was, was a really great asset I would say. (FGPart 1.3)*

> *the coordinator was very good in the sense of bringing I guess a diverse group of individuals that turned up for the meeting together. And getting them all thinking together and … guiding us along into different possibilities and guiding us towards solutions for different outcomes. So I guess that was good. (FGPart 1.2)*

Working together:

got us working on different groups. And took us through the structured approach to looking at getting a favourable outcome. So definitely in our case yes. (FGPart1.1)

our group was made up of very highly motivated people. So that was another challenge I think. It was fantastic because a lot of them were able to work from home and had come home during Covid. And they brought all their skills and learning from a variety of careers and it was just fantastic to be part of that group as an older person. These are all sort of thirty, forty something's. And at the top of their career you could nearly say. And so there was loads of ideas and we tried to channel them in a way that would be helpful for our community. And we made progress on certain aspects. (FGPart1.6)

And what we found with innovating communities. And I think maybe because we were very lucky that it happened during Covid. Because it was a very, it was an easy way for us to try and kind of keep the group together. I don't think we would've found the studio spaces without it. Because it solidified our relationship with each other. And our drive to go forward. (FGPart2.1)

Generating Evidence:

we've used this piece of work in umpteen funding applications since. It's been great. (FGPart2.4)

we had a very good survey done and we did a follow up survey. And they were good in giving us lots of information. And that information has been used in some of the community fund applications. And so that's been a great help. And I think we will continue to benefit if we can get the group back together again. And if we realise the sort of, the pot holes we got into and avoid them for the next time. (FGPart1.6)

the innovating communities course only sped that process up a bit. In terms of getting the survey done and the facilitating of that. … (the) survey was used for funding, evidence for funding applications. The good thing that did come out of that is that the survey was used then for supporting evidence for going to pursue something (FGPart1.7)

we focused on one project to give us, to learn how to use the process. So it was very, very useful (FGPart2.2)

I feel that what we did was we went out and I suppose brought the community together and share the message about innovating communities. But I felt that you know to get something productive out of it that we didn't to the survey part (FGPart3.2)

5.3 Summary Remarks

The evidence provided by the participants' survey, IC Dashboard and stakeholder consultations indicates that the IC project has already had notable impacts for the participants and for their communities. According to the majority of participants, the project has succeeded in generating new ideas and in promoting innovation and problem-solving. Participants report they are applying course learnings in their communities, and most of them indicated an increased motivation to be more involved and engaged in their communities. Thus, the project is having local-level impacts in line with the objectives that were presented in the partners' business plan. As indicated in this chapter, there is potential to enhance and build on those impacts by further harnessing social capital, especially among young people. The forthcoming LEADER programme can potentially contribute to the realisation of further positive outcomes in respect of social capital, the application of course learnings and the provision and leverage of the capital investments that will be required to realise the delivery of projects that have emanated, are emanating or will emanate from the various training programmes, participant networking and LDC inputs. The evidence to date also points to the merits of re-running and expanding the IC project.

6 Conclusion, Lessons and Recommendations

This is the second of two external, independent review reports on the Innovating Communities inter-territorial project. Both reports verify the following:

- The project has attained and generally exceeded the key performance indicators (KPIs) that were presented in its original business plan;
- The project partners have taken on board the recommendations that were presented in the interim review report (February 2022), and, as a result, the project has experienced improved delivery over the past year and a half;
- Innovating Communities embodies LEADER principles, and it is complementary to the delivery of CLLD and the LEADER methodology;
- The project partners have worked well together, and the leadership and coordination provided by Monaghan Integrated Development Partnership have been constructive and enabling factors in the project's effective delivery;
- The LEADER transnational and inter-territorial measures have been enabling factors. The lessons garnered from LEADER in Styer (Austria) have been applied in Ireland's Southern Border Region, and LEADER has enabled a regional level pooling of resources and sharing of know-how; and
- While this is an end-of-project review report and the project has technically ended, the momentum it generated are still evident in the participating communities, and it is essential that the project partners, individually and collectively, continue to harness and build on that momentum and ensure that the project continues to generate outputs and be impactful.

6.1 Process

Processes-oriented observations and learnings

Innovating Communities was devised, promoted and delivered as a training project. In practice, however, it exhibited several features that go beyond those that are generally associated with training projects, and these additional features are associated with the LEADER methodology / approach.

- As would be the norm in any effective training programme, Innovating Communities had a curriculum and clear pedagogical approach. In addition, however, the curricular content was bespoke – tailored to local needs (in line with LEADER's area-based principle) and shaped by participants (in line with LEADER's bottom-up principle);
- The programme's thematic content was broad, and it has encompassed several of the issues, challenges and opportunities that are relevant to rural communities, including those that are referenced in the OECD's *Rural 3.0* and current EU and national policies. Content has also taken cognisance of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDGs), and the methodologies have ensured programme participants have, to some extent, been encouraged and enabled to appreciate and identify linkages between local-level community development and the policy and practice milieu in which rural development takes place. The range of topics / issues and their integrated presentation and elaboration take cognisance of the importance of avoiding silos and / or exclusively sectoral approaches to rural and territorial development, thereby reflecting the LEADER principle of 'integration and multi-sectorality';

- The content has increased participants' awareness of the importance of creativity and innovation, and there is evidence (e.g. from the case studies) of innovative practices emerging that can be directly attributed to the project (in line with LEADER's innovation principle);
- The project partners have also demonstrated a capacity to innovate, as they responded well to the challenges posed by COVID-19. Their systematic approach to project governance and oversight has been an enabler of their adaptive capacity, and an inter-territorial governance structure is in place that can facilitate further collaborations (in line with the LEADER inter-territorial / networking principle);
- The project's delivery, especially at county and sub-county / local levels exhibits evidence of horizontal partnership (in line with that LEADER principle), as actors from civil society, the social partners and statutory agencies worked together, either through their participation in training programmes and / or the application of know-how that emerged from the training;
- The project made particular efforts to engage young people – responding to local needs in respect of promoting youth engagement and volunteerism and in giving effect to national, and in particular EU policy objectives in respect of enabling rural youth to be more involved in local decision-making and territorial development. While young people aged c.13 to 21 have been engaged, there are no records on the level of engagement by people in their twenties and thirties – a cohort that is highly relevant given the European Commission of rural youth as persons aged up to 40; and
- The IC project has promoted processes that are distinct from, yet complementary to, animation and capacity-building and which lead to enhanced social and cultural capital. While they are similar to the approaches that are associated with smart villages, the terminology and pedagogical methods differ.

Process-oriented recommendations

Drawing on the evidence in respect of IC's processes, this report recommends the following:

- Project partners should continue to meet systematically, as they did throughout this project, so they continually identify regional and local needs and potential and seek to leverage means of leveraging resource for nexogenous development;
- Co-trainers have an important role to play in building on IC's processes, and they ought to be enabled to continue to liaise with, and support, IC participants and their groups and communities;
- Co-design methodologies, within a structured framework, can be applied more widely in local development;
- The range of issues / topics covered in the project relate to all dimensions of sustainable development and several of the UNSDGs. It is important, therefore, that the project and its methods are not exclusively associated with LEADER (or the LEADER Programme), but are embraced, pursued and promoted universally by all in the local development companies and their strategic partners;
- Partners should seek to bring about greater engagement on the parts of social partners and the statutory sector and ensure they embrace design thinking methodologies more universally;
- Training LDC board and sub-committee members in RSI and design thinking should be promoted in order to enhance their leadership capacity and the ability of LDCs to act as development agents; and

- Regional / county / local youth organisations and education providers should build on and mainstream the youth engagement methodologies that IC has enabled.

6.2 Outputs

Output-related observations and learnings

The IC project has generated a number of tangible and intangible outputs that are contributing to regional and territorial competitiveness:

- It is probable that the figures presented in this report in respect of the project's outputs are understated. Any understatement can be attributed, in part at least, to a failure to ensure systematic use of the IC Dashboard (or similar interface);
- The project records fail to capture data on key independent variables such as gender and age cohort;
- There is an anomaly between the survey data and the perceptions of focus group participants with respect to the level of course completion and drop-out;
- Course participants have identified challenges, and they have devised what they and their trainers and co-trainers perceive to be appropriate local responses and / or solutions;
- Participants have acquired skills and know-how that can be applied in their communities / organisations. Indeed, some communities are already putting learnings into practice;
- Course participants and their communities have, in most cases, garnered data that can potentially be used to inform project development and community planning;
- The project has engaged young people in local development who might not otherwise have been aware of rural development, LEADER and CLLD;
- The LEADER methodologies and principles are more visible in the participating communities;
- Inter-community and inter-group networks have been put in place, and these have enabled information-sharing and knowledge transfers; and
- Co-trainers have been provided with continuous professional development (CPD) that can potentially strengthen their capacity to facilitate groups, animate developments and build local capacity.

Output-related recommendations

Drawing on the evidence in respect of IC's outputs, this report recommends the following:

- The IC Dashboard (or similar interface) ought to be systematically used in the recording and monitoring of outputs. It should be used as the course registration portal and as the platform through which students submit assignments. The Dashboard should accurately record course completions and exits, so that each student's learning journey and experiences are systematically documented;
- The LDCs and HEIs ought to continue building on the linkages they have developed with a view to mainstreaming IC learnings and graduates' capacity to engage in CLLD;
- Place-making is a potential project output, and actors need to work towards building on current outputs, so they can contribute to place-making; and
- Project partners need to ensure clarity in respect of processes and outputs in respect of IC and smart villages.

6.3 Impacts

Impact-related observations and learnings

While IC, as a LEADER project, ended in June 2023, it continues to have impacts in the participating communities and across the Southern Border Region. Indeed, the project's impacts are likely to be evident over the coming years – particularly if the LDCs continue to nurture the relationships that have been developed over the past three years. In terms of impacts, it is evident that:

- Several communities have either devised or are devising plans that promote place-making and the content and underpinnings of those plans can be directly attributed to IC, and the absence of baseline indicators makes it difficult to measure the extent to which this has taken place;
- Course participants report an increased interest in volunteering, and they are more motivated to get involved in, and lead, community development;
- Project stakeholders have devised and demonstrated means of getting young people involved in local development;
- While the learning showcase (April 2023) provided an opportunity for networking at the regional level, there has been little evidence of external stakeholder networking; and
- While the training content has been relevant to CLLD and territorial development, there has been no formal accreditation of learnings, and South West College's role in the project does not appear to have materialised to the extent that was envisaged in the business plan.

Impact-related recommendations

Drawing on the evidence in respect of IC's impacts, this report recommends the following:

- The six local development companies ought to reflect / include the learnings from IC in their LEADER strategies for the period 2023-2027, and they should explore mechanisms that will enable the project to be continued and mainstreamed. Innishowen Development Partnership, Údarás na Gaeltachta and Comhar na nOileán ought to be invited to participate in conversations about ensuring IC's continued presence across all of the Southern Border Region;
- ILDN members ought to be made more aware of the IC project, design thinking and rural social innovation, so that the associated methodologies are more widely applied in rural and territorial development;
- Strive for accreditation of any future training on this level and scale;
- The bureaucratic burden with which LEADER in Ireland has come to be associated, especially over the past decade, ought to be reduced, so that the concepts and ideas that have been generated through IC can be brought to fruition;
- Local development companies ought to have sufficient resources to enable IC stakeholders to pursue the projects that have emerged, and are arising, from the project, thereby maximising the potential for place-making and active citizenship; and
- Project partners should share their experiences and learnings with their colleagues in Austria and with the ENRD, so that other local action groups promote design thinking and rural social innovation.

6.4 Rural Social Innovation

In our summary remarks in Chapter 2,we outlined Neumeier's (2017) 'six factors for success' in Rural Social Innovation (RSI). As part of this evaluation's response to those factors, and in summarising the role that other similar projects may have, we outline in Table 16 how 'Innovating Communities' addressed the six factors.

Neumeier's Top six factors of success in RSI	**How well did IC do in meeting these factors?**	**Key Findings**
Commitment of the participating actors	Encouraging commitment from participants.	There were opportunities for people who may not have previously engaged with community development, to participate based on a place-based topic or idea, hence leading to collective action, or at least, the foundation for collective action. For example, young people living in rural areas were included in a meaningful way in the IC project. Widened participation is identified by Bock (2016) as a central characteristic of social innovation; and by Neumeier (2017) as one of the top six factors for success of social innovation mechanisms.
Abilities of the participating actors	Harnessing the skills already available in the community and training them where needed.	This factor refers, for example, to specialist know-how, social competencies and actors' willingness to innovate. A key issue highlighted in the literature on RSI is 'skills' - identifying the existing capabilities in communities and participants and applying these to the 'mechanism', which in this case, were the training courses conducted under the IC project. A common thread in both the survey and the focus groups was that it is apparent that many of the volunteers and participants who engaged with IC, had a wide range of skills and experiences that could be applied to the process, regardless of the topic at hand. This is an important element of the RSI process.
Organisational structure	Establishing a mechanism through which citizens could engage in local decision-making.	This is important to ensure coordinating processes and communication. The LEADER cooperation funding mechanism was an useful and constructive structure and support for the lead and partner organisations involved. Coordination within the project was led by a competent individual who had the trust of participants, and for many, she was the public face of IC. This role was supported well within the organisational and governance structures.
Quality of the functional concept	Identifying appropriate challenges and ideas for their localities.	This factor refers especially to the definitions of targets and measures, which can motivate the actors involved, by providing a common vision. It is apparent from this evaluation that if the rationale for participating and the parameters for the course were clear from the outset. This clarity resulted in a stronger sense of relevance for communities.

Climate of acceptance/co operation	Developing collaborative environments that met the needs of those involved, and wider society.	This factor implies the acceptance of the concept and processes to be followed by the actors, as well as their willingness to cooperate fairly and constructively. For many participants, the environment in which the training took place was one of the biggest influences of success. The public health restrictions related to Covid-19 meant that there was a much higher amount of virtual interaction and learning than had originally been intended. A fully online environment for place-based community development is not successful, with in-person or a hybrid approach being deemed more appropriate.
Access to financial resources:	Setting-up community groups to access funding.	This factor refers to both the resources of the actor network on which the social innovation process is based and to external support. For many of the groups, the initial injection of resources through the IC project, which facilitated the courses, provided the first step in RSI. Some groups have reached a stage where they can now access/apply for further grant aid based on the ideas generated and evidence collected during IC.

Table 16: 'Innovating Communities' contribution to Neumeier's six factors of success in RSI

6.5 Concluding Remarks

The IC project partners have already disseminated findings from the independent external evaluation of the project. They presented the learning at a panel discussion at the Ploughing Championship in September 2023, and the partnership chair (the CEO of Monaghan Integrated Development) made a presentation about the project's outputs, impacts and key learnings at a high-level policy forum in Siguenza (Spain) entitled: *Shaping the future of rural areas*, organised by European Commission under the Spanish Presidency. The independent evaluators made a presentation and participated in the panel discussions at the project's Learning Showcase that took place on April 21, 2023. That presentation concluded with the following points:

Design Thinking works!	This project has delivered on its stated objectives, and it has enhanced the capacity of civil society in the Southern Border Region to promote territorial development. The methodologies have been effective in ensuring an effective response to local and territorial needs and potential.
Evaluation helps	The consortium's decision to embed evaluation into the project from the outset has contributed to a formative approach and the project's progressive evolution. On-going evaluation has assisted partners in responding to challenges and opportunities over the project's lifetime.
Investment in animation capacity building (A&CB)	Animation and capacity-building are integral to community / territorial development. By investing in social and knowledge capital, this project has contributed to ensuring that community projects are rooted in local needs and potential (in line with OECD recommendations), and that actors have increased capacity to deliver them. Moreover, by linking training to A&CB, this project ensures that funders avoid the so-called 'shovel-ready' approach to projects, and instead promotes a more sustainable trajectory.

Investing and supporting rural youth	Promoting rural youth's participation in community development is a core objective of EU and national rural development policy, and IC has contributed to the attainment of those objectives.
Usefulness of local data	The project has sought to enable course participants and their communities to pursue evidence-based approaches to local development; it has equipped them with skills in data collection (e.g. undertaking local surveys). Local data collection is necessary to complement data from official sources (e.g. CSO), and it affords opportunities to engage local citizens in local development.
Place matters	While there are common trends and experiences across rural Europe, there is a significant diversity of rural area types, and harnessing such diversity is integral to the sustainable development of rural regions. While Innovating Communities enabled a level of information-sharing and networking at the regional level, actors were empowered to pursue place-specific development trajectories. Place-based development and place-making enable actors to coalesce around shared interests and to promote integrated approaches to development that avoid the silos that tend to be associated with sectoral-led development.
Community-Led Local Development (CLLD)	CLLD and LEADER principles have shaped the formulation and delivery of the IC project, and they are drivers of its distinctive features. As CLLD is an ongoing and iterative set of processes, it is essential that partners continue to invest in projects (including a successor to IC) that continually promote CLLD and the innovative capacity of local actors.
LEADER Methodology	Local development companies promoted and delivered this project, and the project demonstrates the merits of LDCs acting as development actors, rather than simply being programme administrators or delivery bodies. This promotive approach is one of their distinguishing features, and it can add value to bottom-up development and engender nexogenous development.

References

Bhattacharyya, J. (2004). Theorizing Community Development. *Journal of the Community Development Society*, *34*(2), 5-34. https://doi.org/10.1080/15575330409490110

Bock, B. B. (2012). Social innovation and sustainability; how to disentangle the buzzword and its application in the field of agriculture and rural development. *Studies in agricultural economics*, *114*(2), 57-63.

Bock, B. B. (2016). Rural Marginalisation and the Role of Social Innovation; A Turn Towards Nexogenous Development and Rural Reconnection. *Sociologia ruralis*, *56*(4), 552-573. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1111/soru.12119

Borzaga, C., & Bodini, R. (2014). What to make of social innovation? Towards a framework for policy development. *Social Policy and Society*, *13*(3), 411-421.

Brennan, M., Barnett, R. V., & Lesmeister, M. K. (2007). Enhancing local capacity and youth involvement in the community development process. *Community Development*, *38*(4), 13-27.

Brown, T., & Wyatt, J. (2010). Design thinking for social innovation. *Development Outreach*, *12*(1), 29-43.

Dargan, L., & Shucksmith, M. (2008). LEADER and innovation. *Sociologia ruralis*, *48*(3), 274-291.

Edwards-Schachter, M., Alcántara, E., & Matti, C. (2011). *Fostering quality of life through Social Innovation: A Spanish case-study*. Retrieved 12th June 2023 from https://digital.csic.es/bitstream/10261/108408/1/life%20through%20social%20innovation.pdf

European Commission. (2011). *Empowering people, driving change: social innovation in the EU*. Bureau of European Policy Advisers.

Flannery, S., Keaveney, K., & Murphy, F. (2022). 'It's solely for the "Green Cert"': understanding young peoples' motivation for engaging in agricultural education. *The Journal of Agricultural Education and Extension*, 1-20. https://doi.org/10.1080/1389224X.2022.2138928

Kenny, S. (2019). Framing community development. *Community Development Journal*, *54*(1), 152-157. https://doi.org/10.1093/cdj/bsy034

Ledwith, M. (2020). *Community development: A critical approach* (3rd ed.). Policy Press.

Lønning, D. J. (2018). The power of human agency: Successful community development strategies in Norway's rural northern margins. *Community Development Journal*, *53*(3), 518-536. https://doi.org/10.1093/cdj/bsy024

Neumeier, S. (2012). Why do social innovations in rural development matter and should they be considered more seriously in rural development research?–Proposal for a stronger focus on social innovations in rural development research. *Sociologia ruralis*, *52*(1), 48-69.

Neumeier, S. (2017). Social innovation in rural development: identifying the key factors of success. *The geographical journal*, *183*(1), 34-46.

OECD. (2000). *Social Innovation*. Retrieved 9th June, 2023 from https://www.oecd.org/regional/leed/social-innovation.htm#:~:text=Social%20innovation%20refers%20to%20the,wellbeing%20of%20individuals%20and%20communities.

OECD. (2020). *Policy Implications of Coronavirus Crisis for Rural Development*. http://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/policy-implications-of-coronavirus-crisis-for-rural-development-6b9d189a/

Panke, S., & Harth, T. (2019). Design thinking for inclusive community design:(How) does it work? *Journal of Interactive Learning Research*, *30*(2), 195-214.

Rittel, H. W., & Webber, M. M. (1973). Dilemmas in a general theory of planning. *Policy sciences*, *4*(2), 155-169.

Shucksmith, M. (2000). Endogenous development, social capital and social inclusion: Perspectives from LEADER in the UK. *Sociologia ruralis*, *40*(2), 208-218. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9523.00143

Shucksmith, M. (2004). Young people and social exclusion in rural areas. *Sociologia ruralis*, *44*(1), 43-59.

Shucksmith, M. (2010). Disintegrated rural development? Neo-endogenous rural development, planning and place-shaping in diffused power contexts. *Sociologia ruralis*, *50*(1), 1-14. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9523.2009.00497.x

Summers, G. F. (1986). Rural community development (USA). *Annual Review of Sociology*, *12*, 347-371.

TEPSIE. (2014). *Social innovation theory and research: a summary of the findings from TEPSIE. A deliverable of the project: 'The theoretical, empirical and policy foundations for building social innovation in Europe' (TEPSIE) European Commission – 7th Framework Programme* European Commission - DG Research. Retrieved 12th June 2023 from https://iupe.files.wordpress.com/2015/11/tepsie-research_report_final_web.pdf

van der Ploeg, J. D., & Long, A. (1994). *Born from within. Practice and perspective of endogenous rural development*. Assen. https://doi.org/https://edepot.wur.nl/358326

van der Ploeg, J. D., & Renting, H. (2000). Impact and potential: A comparative review of European rural development practices. *Sociologia ruralis*, *40*(4), 529-543. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9523.00165

Westoby, P., & Harris, V. (2020). Community development 'yet-to-come' during and post the COVID-19 pandemic: From Derrida to Zuboff. *Community Development Journal*, *55*(4), 553-569. https://doi.org/10.1093/cdj/bsaa026

Woods, M. (2015). Territorialisation and the assemblage of rural place: Examples from Canada and New Zealand. In E. B. a. L. H. J. Dessein (Ed.), *Cultural sustainability and regional development* (pp. 29-42). Routledge.

Zagata, L., & Sutherland, L.-A. (2015). Deconstructing the 'young farmer problem in Europe': Towards a research agenda. *Journal of Rural Studies*, *38*, 39-51.

Appendix 1: Glossary of Terms

IC Project – Innovating Communities Project

Title for this piece of work in totality

Module

A set of training workshops delivered within a LAG area with a focus on a particular thematic issue. Can be either a Design Sprint Module or Full-Scale Module

Design Sprint Module

Shorter variant of the Design Thinking training modules to be delivered – 63 hrs of direct training delivery per module.

Full Scale Module

Longer variant of the Design Thinking training modules to be delivered – 126 hrs of direct training delivery per module.

Lead Partner

The partner who assumes overall project responsibility, in this case Monaghan Integrated Development CLG.

Implementing Partners

Local Development Companies including the Lead Partner, with responsibility in implementing the LEADER Programme on behalf of their respective LAGs, representing each of the 6 border counties.

Academic Partner

Academic stakeholder with an advisory role in terms of the project design, processes and its evaluation

Steering Group

Governance body comprised of implementing partners and academic partner

External Contractor

The organisation responsible for training delivery including Senior Training Specialist, Trainers, marketing and communications

Senior Training Specialist

The project manager / lead trainer within the external contracting organisation

Trainer

Member of the training team appointed by the Contractor, working alongside the Senior Training Specialist and the Co-Trainers

Co-Trainer

Local community representative, trained in Design Thinking, working with the Contractor and providing longer term capability in the local area.

Design Thinking

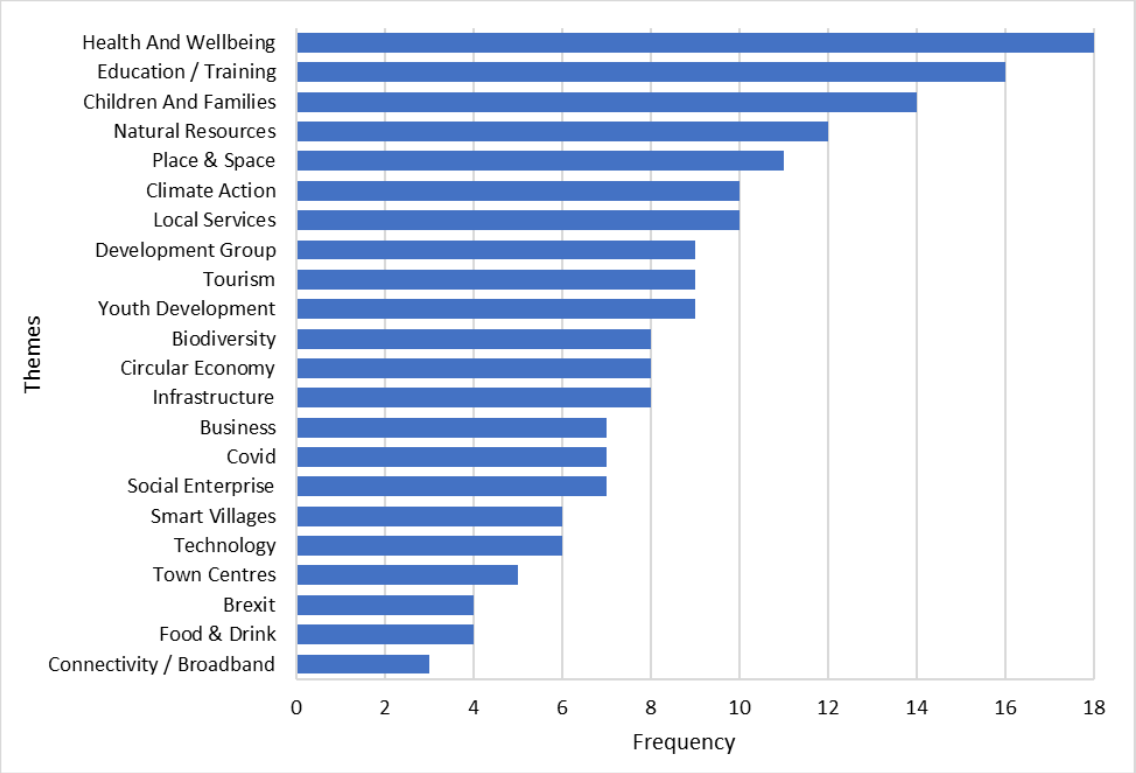
A human centred design approach to problem solving which gives structure and guidance to the innovation process

LEADER Learning Lab

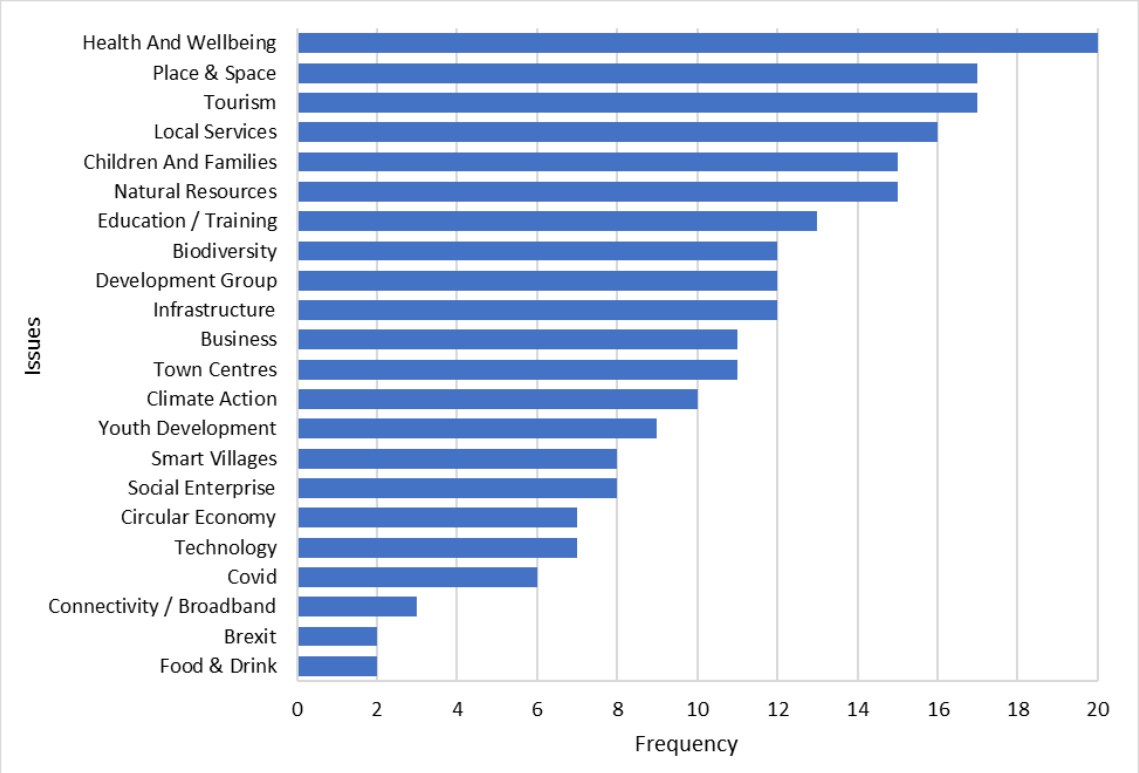
Local focal points in each area where innovation is fostered. There will be 2 Learning Labs per local area.

Appendix 2: Number of themes explored in all courses, by county

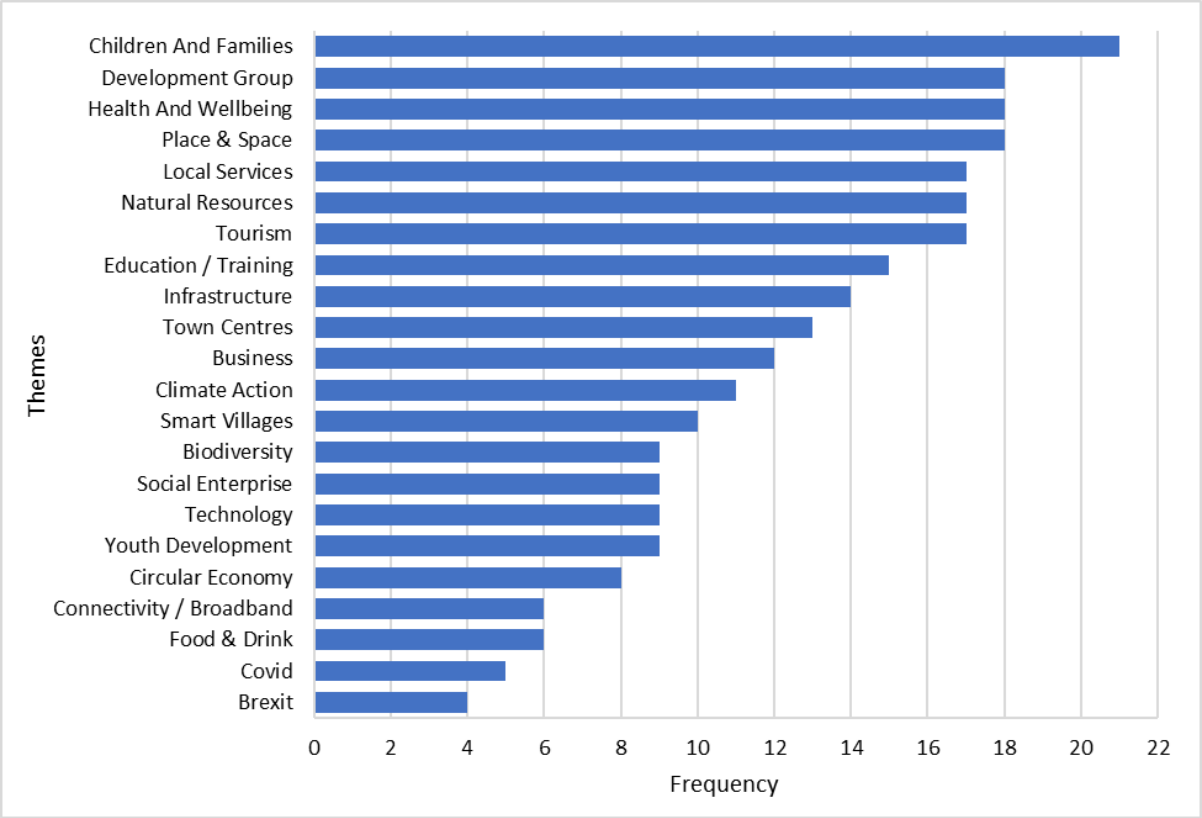
Cavan



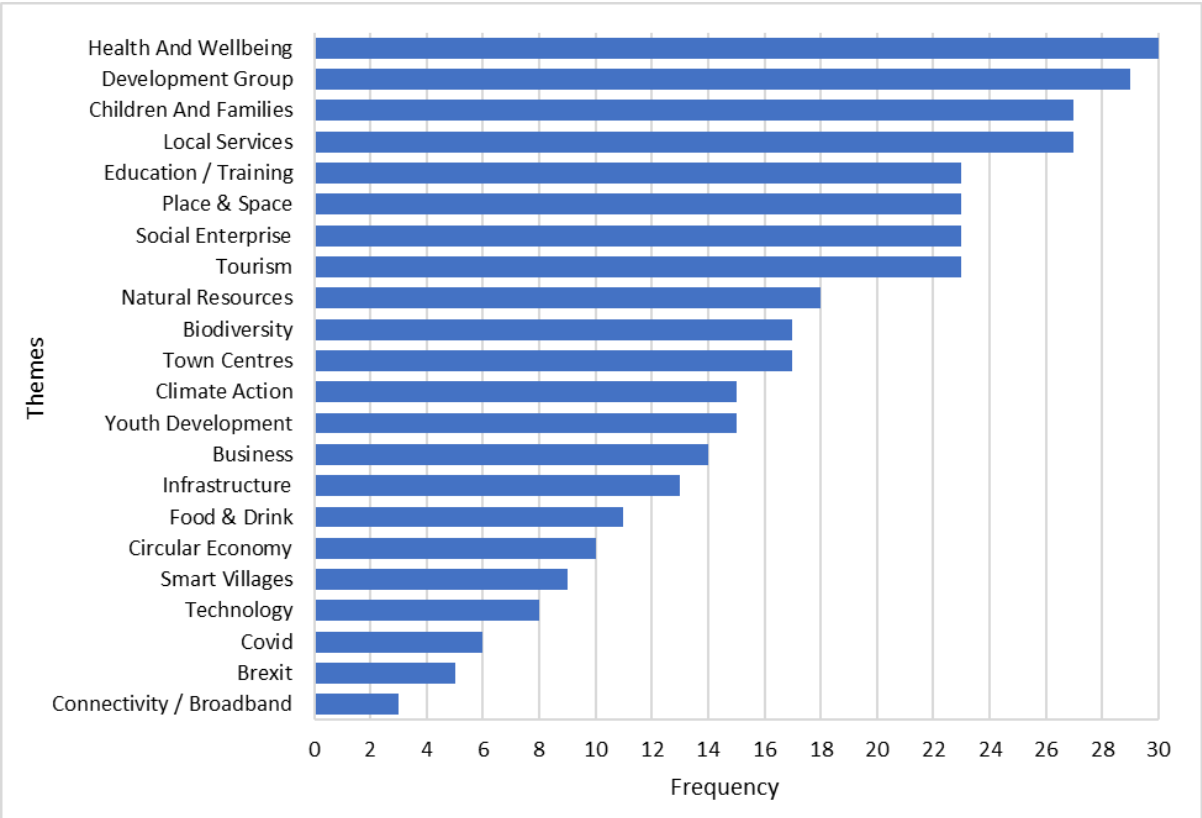
Donegal



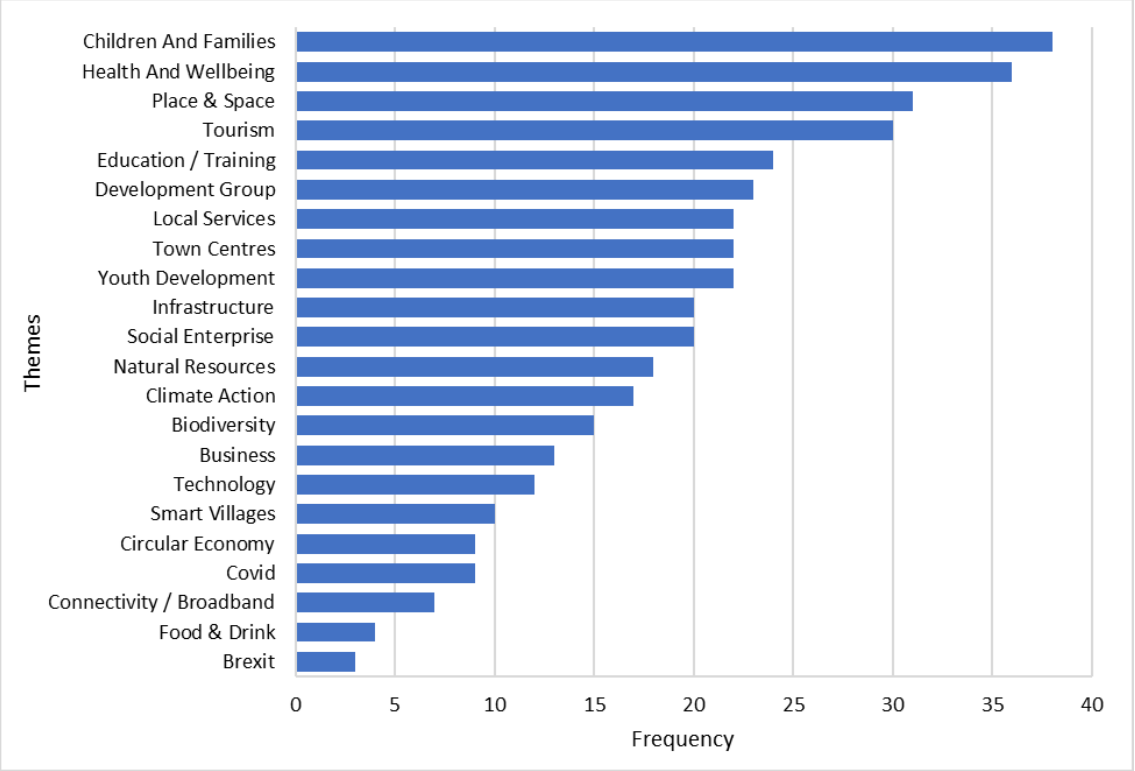
Leitrim



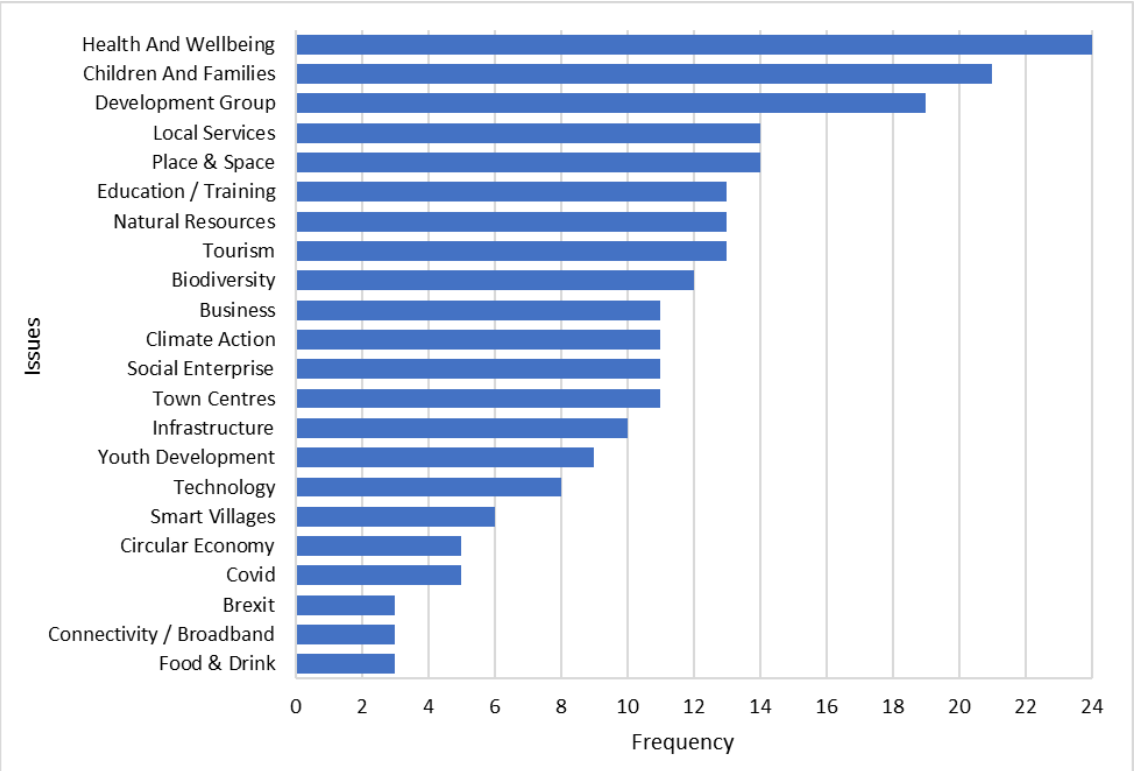
Louth



Monaghan

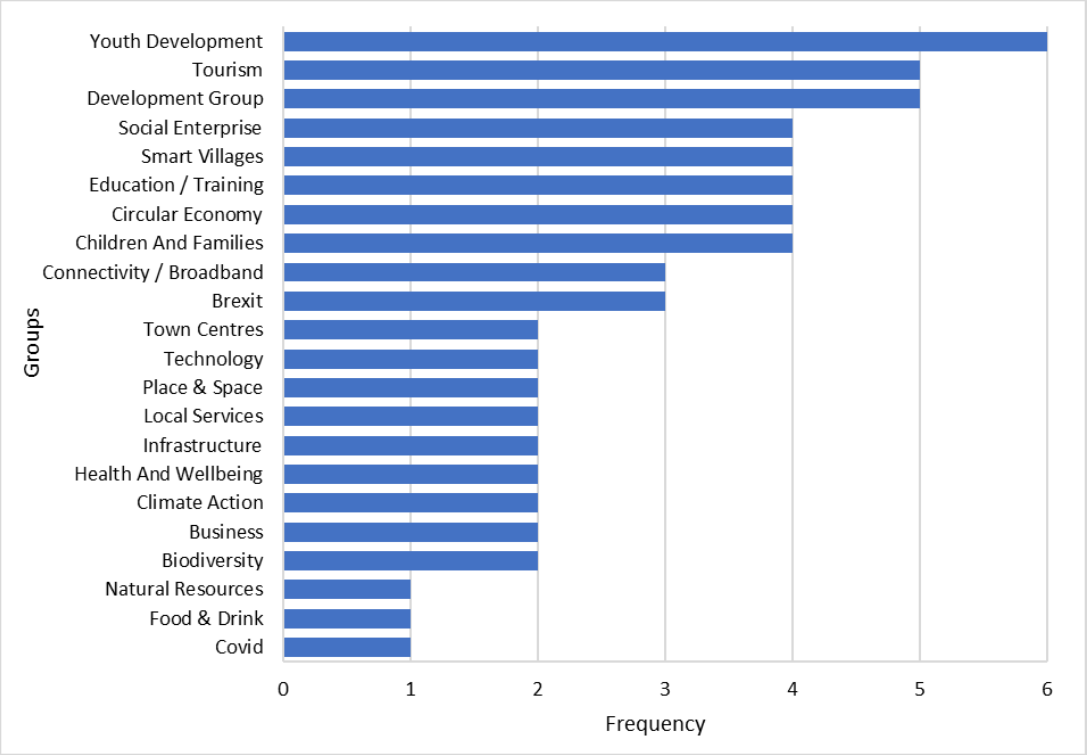


Sligo

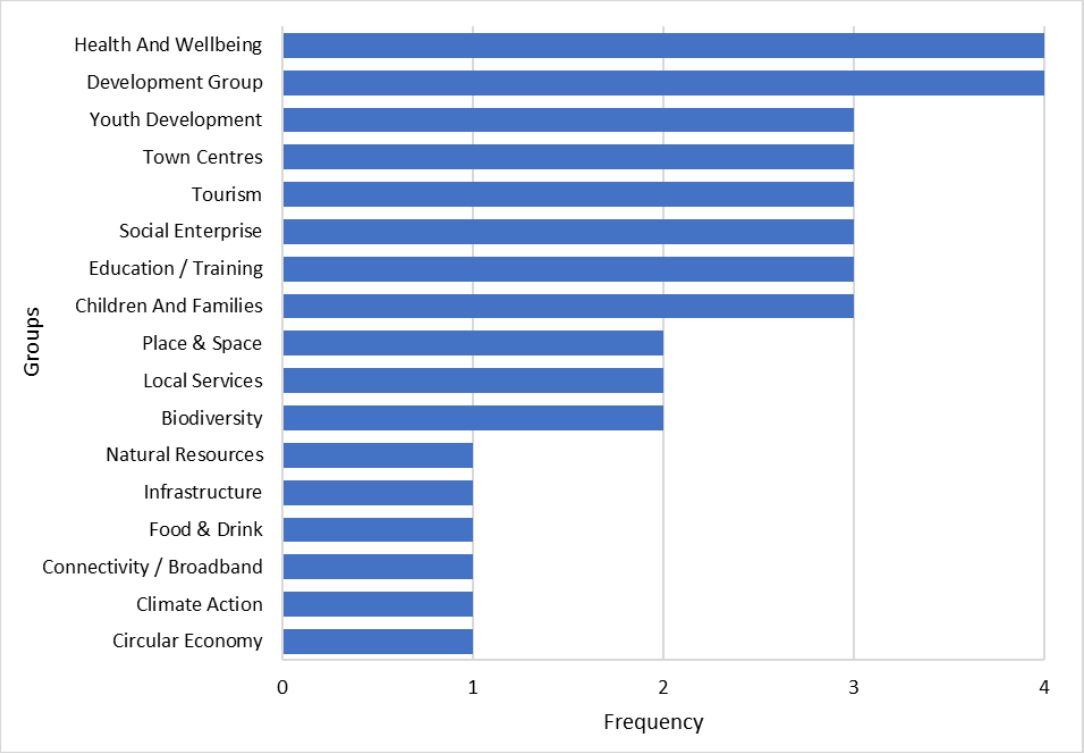


Appendix 3: Number of thematic groups by county

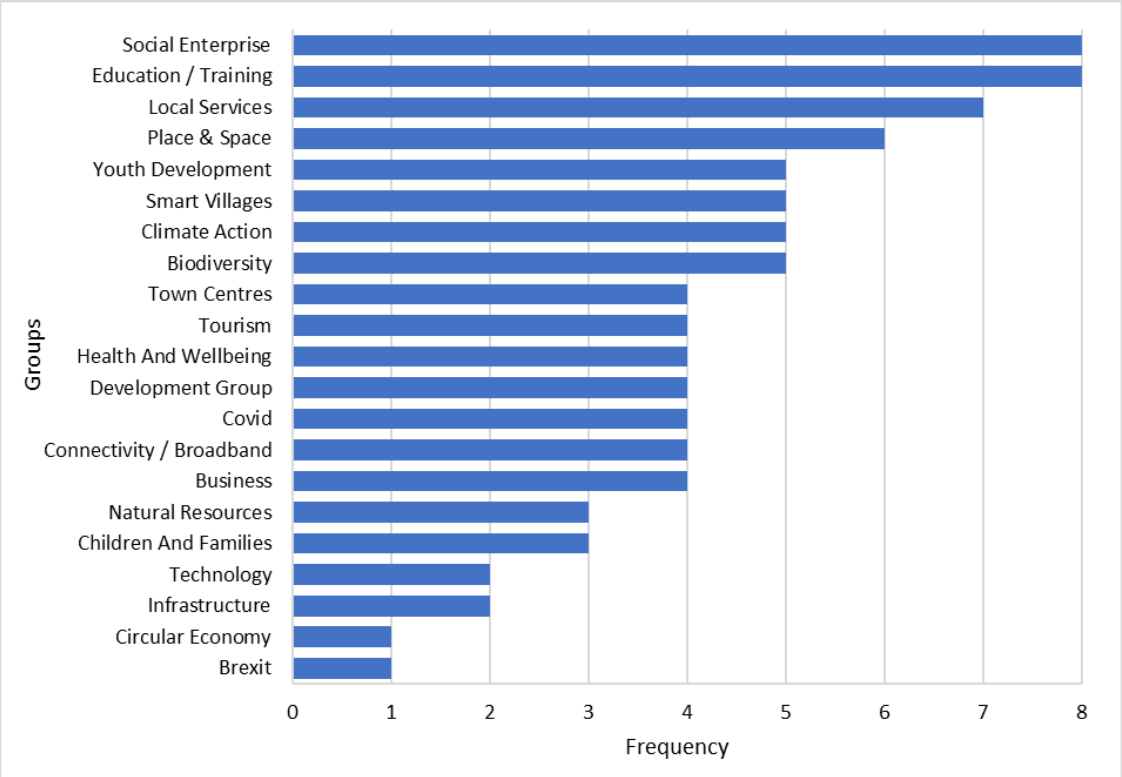
Cavan



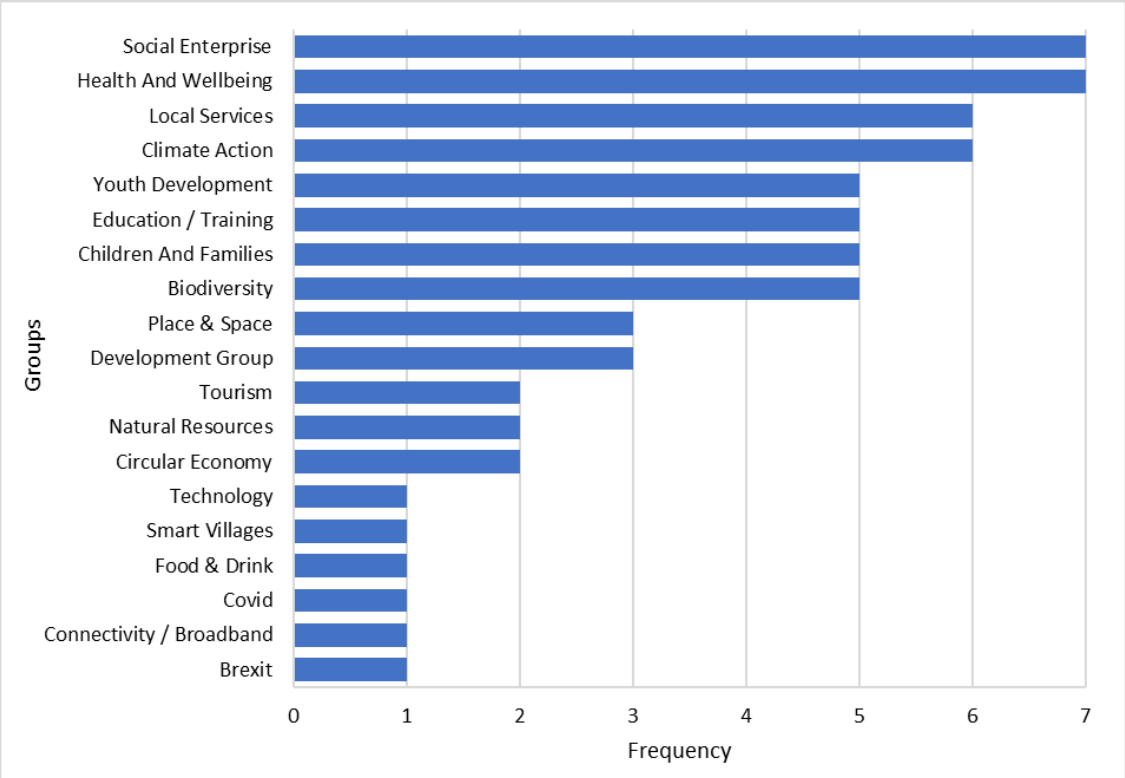
Donegal



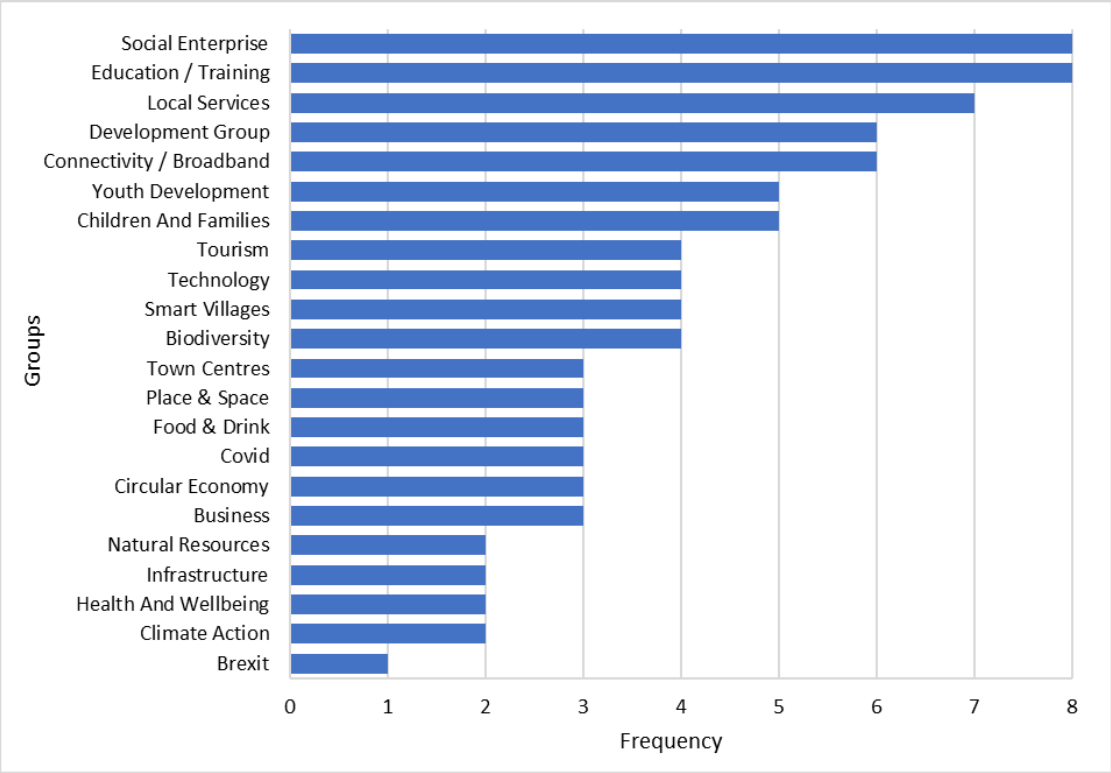
Leitrim



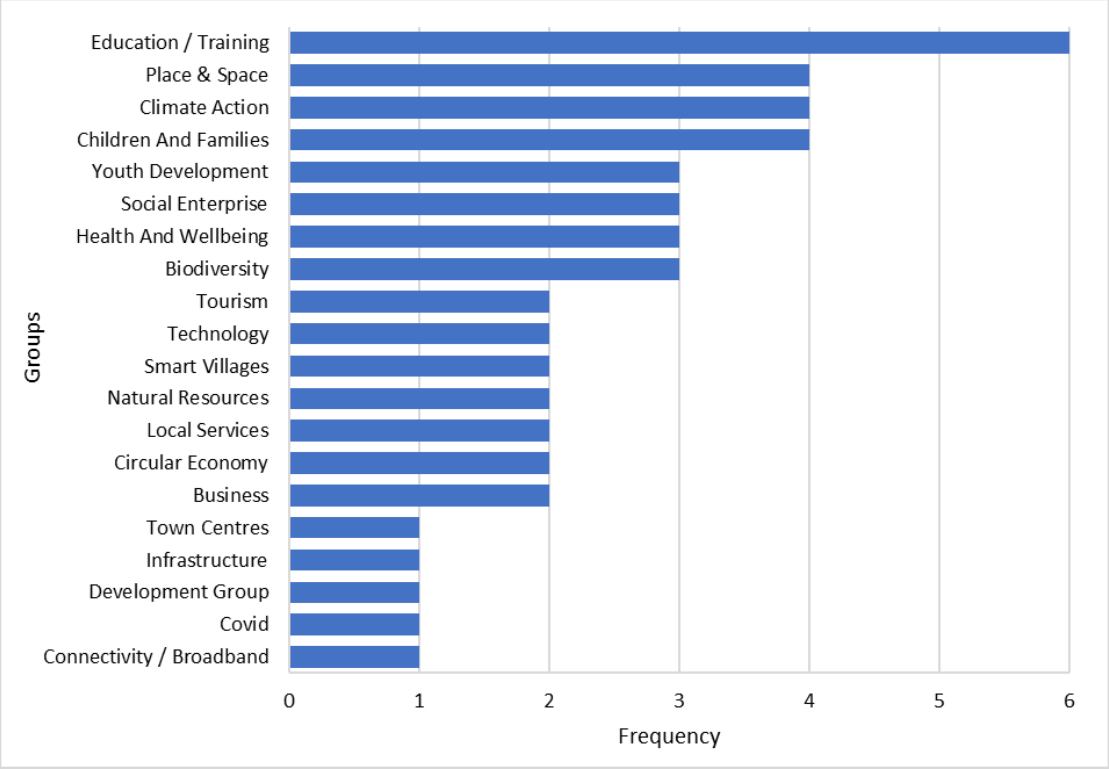
Louth



Monaghan



Sligo



Appendix 4: Case Studies that were presented at the Learning Showcase

McGahern experience / Cavan Leitrim Rail Trail

This course explored the revival and development of the former narrow-gauge railway in Ballinamore, Co. Leitrim. This group initially intended to pursue a greenway along the narrow-gauge, however, through their community consultation and community-led engagement events, they found that there were many other possibilities for the trail. Heritage preservation was one of the strong themes that emerged from consultation, with many community members reminiscing features of the former facility including the sound of the whistle blower to alert people that the train was coming. This group conducted user centred research surveys at a Christmas market to understand how young people and children would like to see the trail developed - they found that, overwhelmingly, the children would like to cycle along the route, which encouraged further research into a cycle trail along the route. Among other ideas were repurposed telephone boxes which could be used as audio installations, playing recorded oral histories about the railway by community members.

Attracting People to Live and Work in County Monaghan

This group delivered in-depth and representative research into issues in the community around services, facilities and opportunities in an attempt to understand where Monaghan could improve its appeal as a place to live and work. Many new community members who had never had the opportunity to connect with neighbours began a network to explore viable options to improve life in Monaghan. Following public surveys, and guest talks delivered by MID representatives about the LEADER Smart Villages framework, this group decided to focus on rural enhancement, specifically, a marketing campaign for the area to encourage people to live and work. The group concluded that a series of video testimonials were the best route to achieve this and could be representative of the many beautiful and unique amenities that Monaghan has to offer.

Designing Kiltyclogher's Future

This group in Kiltyclogher decided to explore and develop a wishlist for different areas of development that could be motivated in the town. Each individual in the group had a different knowledge or skill about how they could improve local wealth and civic pride and these ideas ranged from utilising derelict buildings to painting local shop fronts.

The Journey: The group collectively agreed that highlighting the existing facilities and amenities in Kiltyclogher would enhance the appeal to visit and invest in the Kiltyclogher community. They began a research campaign to gather information on what strengths and features could be promoted.

Next Steps: The group developed a short promotional video clip that portrayed footage of Kiltyclogher's local community and the surrounding landscapes with a narrated voice describing the best amenities; promoting and appeal for tourism and social enterprise investment.

Establishing Independent Artist Studios in Drogheda

Group consisted of members from the pre-established Artists' Collective, Borrowed ground, based in County Louth. They came together to tackle the challenge of 'Establishing Independent Artists' Studios in Drogheda'. The space would allow members of the group to work, develop their practice and contribute to the vibrant local art scene.

The Journey: The Group broke down their challenge, established their hopes and fears, big ambitions and realistic outcomes. Established what the studios needed; An Affordable Artists studio with spaces to chat and hold workshops. Users were established, including: Artists and Creatives, County Council, School Children, Galleries and other local organisations. Group explored the possibility of leveraging

social media to build an identity and voice. Explored how to refresh their current identity and commitment of time and money.
Next Steps: The goup secured funding for their space during the course. Course helped the group to identify the key features of the space they needed. Have now secured a studio space on Fair Street in Drogheda.

Breathing Life Back into Ballymote

The expected outcome of this course was to find a way for the various groups within Ballymote to work together towards a common goal. The working group identifies various goals but realised a representative structure would need to be put in place first. The outcome of the innovating communities course was the group held a town hall event to understand how a representative and inclusive community council should be established.
The Journey: Throughout the process the group faced challenges of their own, one being the town politics and not wanting to miss-represent any individuals or groups in the community.
Next Steps: The town have continued to meet, and recently had another public meeting which was well attended and was more focused lead.

Patrician High School Innovating Communities

This group of students split into three groups; one group explored gender inequality among same sex schools. This group is an all-boys' school but they collaborated with a local all-girls school and expressed interest that this was something they thoroughly enjoyed as a more fruitful experience. The second group explored discrimination and how to ensure maximum inclusivity in their local area. They created a town model called Tilted Towers, which exemplified personas of people who may encounter discrimination. Both groups circulated surveys and created to Graffiti walls to gather user research and collected data and feedback from community members. The fictional town also identified amenities and facilities that are wanted by the community of Carrickmacross including; a hospital and a doctor's office.
Next Steps: All students who took part in the project described the collaborative process as enjoyable and stated that they would most definitely enjoy future projects that incorporate collaborative dynamics and encourage working alongside the all-girls school.

Innovating Communities: Loreto School Group 2 - Healthcare and Costs

A group of Transition Year students in Loreto School, Letterkenny, Donegal, came together to undertake the Innovating Communities Design Thinking course. The group began without a clear challenge in mind, but with lots of ideas. Through the first few lessons, the group narrowed down their Challenge focus to that of Healthcare and Costs (financial, emotional, mental). The group were incredibly knowledgeable and passionate about their Challenge focus, many having lived experience of the Irish healthcare system and frustrations with it. The group chose this challenge theme as their focus, with the aim to enact change and raise awareness around the topic.
The Journey: The group established their Users and Stakeholders, discussing a wider group before narrowing their focus down to fellow school students who may be facing struggles around Physical and Mental health. The group were keen to find out how other students were feeling about their mental health in particular, and what support systems they used. They used the community engagement method of Graffiti Walls to reach out to their users. The insights they gathered from this were then used to inform a list of support resources that could be attached to a QR code on a poster and placed around the school.

Next Steps: The group's poster concepts were finalised and are still to be printed. These will then be placed around the school and the group hope that the resources linked by the QR code will be used by students to support future students' mental health. they are keen that discussion continues to open up around mental health and removes some of the stigma surrounding it.

Innovating Communities: Loreto School Group 1 - Environment and Recycling

A group of Transition Year students in Loreto School, Letterkenny, Donegal, came together to undertake the Innovating Communities Design Thinking course. The group began without a clear challenge in mind, but with lots of ideas. Through the first few lessons, the group narrowed down their Challenge focus to that of Environment and Recycling. From the beginning, they were clear they wanted their efforts toward the Challenge to be visible and to have an effect on others, encouraging them to form more sustainable daily habits.

The Journey: The group narrowed their Challenge focus to 'Environment and Recycling'. From here, they established their Users and Stakeholders before moving into User-Centred research to be carried out within their school. This included a Survey sent around the school, a curious object named 'Yoshi' to gather feedback from students within school, and a discussion with the School Maintenance man, John, who keeps track of materials being disposed of, how much, and what could be recycled. The group took the results of their user-centred research and narrowed their project focus to look at tackling littering and proper waste disposal within the school. They developed poster designs to encourage students to dispose of waste instead of littering, as well as a bin proposal to pass on to the school, encouraging the introduction of segregated recycling bins.

Next Steps: The group's poster concepts have been finalised and will the printed. The group will place these around the school. Their Bin Regeneration proposal has also been turned into a graphic and can be submitted to the school. They hope that their work can begin to change daily habits in fellow students and create a cleaner and more environmentally sustainable school environment.

Universal Design Community Gardens and Allotments in North County Louth

Group consisted of community members from Dundalk, Co. Louth. They came together to tackle the challenge of creating an inclusive community garden for all of Dundalk.

The Journey: The group carried out user-centred research, including engaging with a member of Mud Island Community Garden in North Strand, Dublin and a digital survey to gather feedback from their Users/Stakeholders. They collated potential locations for the community garden. Held and in-person community engagement event at the Marshed Shopping Centre in Dundalk to gather feedback and raise awareness about their challenge. They then formed a committee, assigning roles and responsibilities - format explained by group co-trainer, Dara. They created social Media accounts, draft funding proposal, research portfolio and bank accounts created alongside an official mission statement.

Next Steps: This group received land in Dundalk from the County Council. Have now been put in touch with Garden Designer, Peter Donegan of RTE's TV series: DIY SOS The Big Build Ireland. Peter will support group and offer help with garden designs.

St. Angela's College

The students are first year home economics students. They chose food waste as their research area. They cook in class multiple times a week and their brief is usually to cook for a family of four. The course took the issue of food waste and the impact that food waste has on our environment, particularly the carbon emissions of food waste and the implications of this. We looked at the common

assumption, for example a perception that if you are composting your food waste you are doing less harm.

The Journey: As part of the course we surveyed students and staff in the canteen and the college campus. The group collected considerable data and organised this qualitative information according to the themes that emerged. The class were great to work with and shared their experience openly. Many of the students spoke about previous generations and how food waste is a relatively new issue.

Next Steps: The students worked on posters which are going to be put up in common areas of the college. The participants said that the course ties in well with their other courses and that they will be able to apply what they learned to other subject areas, particularly their sustainability course.

Climate Action, Biodiversity and Sustainability

Challengers arrived at this course with an extensive range of interests and expertise in the wider Challenge theme of Climate Action. Some had a keen interest in food waste and recycling, others with a focus in water management. While their specific focuses varied, What brought the Challengers together was their passion for a better and sustainable planet.

The Journey: Later in the process, they developed those three themes into a Mission Statement and drafted a Sustainability and Biodiversity calendar prototype. The team thought carefully about how their prototype could work digitally on a website, using feedback from the public to improve the proposal.

Next Steps: To bring the idea to the community, the team tested physical ideas like community mural calendars and a calendar portal. They chose Pecha Kucha format for a memorable presentation , carefully selecting themes and images to showcase user-centred origins and community needs. The team want to use their design thinking skills to emphasise skill-sharing, knowledge-sharing, and a coming together for impact.

Ecological Survey of Ardee Bog

From February to June 2022, community members and a pre-established group called 'Friends of Ardee Bog' came together as Challengers. The Group aimed to tackle the Challenge of completing an ecological survey of Ardee Bog and to raise awareness around the Bog's importance to the wider community.

The Journey: In the Empathise stage, the group undertook multiple Community Engagement events to gather feedback and raise awareness. This included a St. Patrick's day parade and consultation with ecologies, Kate Flood. In the Ideate phase, the group then developed the concepts of a Bog Café, School Workshops in Educate Together, Street Fest Bog BBQ and a guided walk on the Bog with Kate Flood. The group held all events and developed all ideas with the community in mind at all times, keeping them informed and included.

Next Steps: After all of their hard work and commitment, the group went on to form a conservation committee which helped them to secure €16,000 in funding under the Peatlands Engagement Scheme alongside a mentor and ecologist to audit the bog. The group has also used their funding to audit the bogland and to host a series of initiatives including the bog café, musical event inspired by the bog and site visit.

Monaghan Integrated Development

Louth Leader Partnership
Building Community & Enterprise

Leitrim Development Company

Cavan County Local Development

Sligo Leader Partnership

Donegal Local Development CLG
Forbairt Áitiúil Dhún na nGall

Comhairle Contae Mhuineacháin
Monaghan County Council

Comhairle Contae Lú
Louth County Council

Comhairle Chontae Liatroma
Leitrim County Council

Cavan
Comhairle Contae an Chabháin
Cavan County Council

Sligo County Council

Comhairle Contae
Dhún na nGall
Donegal County Council

LCDC
Coiste um Fhorbairt Pobail Áitiúil
Mhuineacháin
Monaghan Local Community Development
Committee

LCDC
Coiste um Fhorbairt Pobail Áitiúil Lú
Louth Local Community Development
Committee

LCDC
Coiste um Fhorbairt Pobail Áitiúil Liatroma
Leitrim Local Community Development
Committee

LCDC
Coiste um Fhorbairt Pobail Áitiúil
an Chabháin
Cavan Local Community Development
Committee

LCDC
Coiste um Fhorbairt Pobail Áitiúil Shligigh
Sligo Local Community Development
Committee

LCDC
Coiste um Fhorbairt Pobail Áitiúil
Dhún na nGall
Donegal Local Community Development
Committee

MANNOK

COMBILIFT
LIFTING INNOVATION

SouthWest College
InnoTech
Centre

Innovating Communities

Rialtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland

Tionscadal Éireann
Project Ireland
2040

Ár dTodhchaí
Tuaithe
Our Rural
Future

LEADER

The European Agricultural Fund
for Rural Development:
Europe investing in rural areas

Funded by the Department of
Rural and Community Development

LEADER 2014-2022 Programme