

# Midlands pathway to transition



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*October 2020*

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## Disclaimer

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Purpose of this Transition Pathway

The Transition Pathway has been developed to map a process for transition in the Midlands in the short and longer terms. Given the changing policy landscape, it is anticipated that the plan will evolve over time. The pathway will assist partnership working during the region's journey towards a just transition.

More specifically, it is intended that the plan will promote:

- ▶ consensus in the MRTT and with government actors on key transition priorities and actions;
- ▶ optimisation of resource allocation and co-ordination to enhance a just transition;
- ▶ co-ordination and transparency across the MRTT and public actors, and alignment with national, regional and local plans;
- ▶ monitoring of progress and the management of risks over time.

The Pathway was jointly developed by the MRTT and START (Secretariat Technical Assistance for Regions in Transition).

## 1.2 Responsiveness and Phasing

The pathway will be responsive to the dynamic environment in which it is set, one made more uncertain by Covid 19<sup>1</sup>. Crucially, it will need to align with emerging national and EU policies and priorities. The Just Transition Commissioner's Progress Report (April 2020) is a welcome and significant milestone for the region and the Government's response is anticipated. However, other notable national developments - such as the priorities of the new Coalition Government - need to be factored into the future planning of the MRTT. As regards the EU, the EC's Just Transition Fund and related Territorial Just Transition Plan - to be developed

in 2021 by the Irish Government - and other EC policy frameworks (e.g. the Recovery and Resilience Facility and the Multiannual Financial Framework) need to be considered by the MRTT in due course.

EU coal regions that have undergone transition demonstrate that the process is often a long and phased journey (from dealing with the immediate effects of closure through to diversification of the economy). Transition plans need to recognise and respond to the longitudinal reality and the changing environment in which they are set; if not, they will become obsolete.

Therefore, this pathway is a work in progress. Nevertheless, it provides a framework for future development, and a means for informing policy and opinion at the local, regional, national and EU levels.

## 1.3 Structure of the Transition Pathway

The pathway firstly details the context which has informed its design and content, before going on to detail objectives and measures to facilitate a just transition in the Midlands. In turn, the pathway summarises the project projects registered by communities by communities and public, private and third sector organisations, providing an overview of the types and spread of proposals and potential gaps. Subsequently, consideration is given to the capacity and support required for communities to become active agents in the transition process. The pathway then considers governance and resources. Finally, a set of conclusions and recommendations are offered. The annexes detail the opportunities and emerging economic activities in rural communities; and examples of innovative and community-led rural development projects. The content of the Transition Pathway has been informed by a suite of START outputs (see section 2.1).

<sup>1</sup> See START briefing for Midlands communities on drivers of change in EU rural areas, including decarbonisation and renewable energy, digitalisation, and new consumption patterns

## 2. Context

### 2.1 START Support

In July 2019, DG Energy of the European Commission advised the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment that the Midlands Region had been accepted into the EU Coal Regions in Transition Initiative (CRiT)<sup>2</sup>. This status allowed the MRTT to apply directly for support from START on a NUTS III basis. Following a three day intensive START field visit to the region in December 2019, a Service level agreement including a detailed workplan was agreed between the CRiT initiative and Offaly County Council on behalf of the MRTT in February 2020. This was subsequently revised in response to Covid 19 and the need for remote delivery of the START support, particularly in respect of the MRTT-START Engagement Process.

The main outputs of the START assistance, which have informed and support this pathway, are:

- ▶ **Regional Profile:** a detailed regional profile of the Midlands (NUTS III) summarising the socio-economic, industrial and institutional context of transition in the region (this was circulated to Irish and EU stakeholders and is available on the [European Commission's website](#))
- ▶ **Midlands Engagement Process:** community and stakeholder engagement materials and guidance regarding the on-line submission process for community and public, private and third sector transition project registrations from the wider Midlands Region, explaining eligibility, suitable project types and the submission process (this is available on the [European Commission's website](#))
- ▶ **Drivers of change and opportunities for rural communities:** included in the engagement process materials was a briefing for Midlands' communities and organisations on the drivers of change and development opportunities in EU rural areas, together with examples of effective community-led rural development projects from other EU regions (this analysis is available in Annexes 1 and 2 and on the [European Commission's website](#))

- ▶ **Future Employment and Skills Briefing Paper:** a briefing paper on future employment and skills in the wider Midlands which identified potential employment opportunities and requisite skills development / training across the region and offered policy and practice recommendations - the briefing paper was based on eighteen interviews and desk based research, consultation with members of the MRTT and the Midlands Regional Skills Forum (it is available on the [European Commission's website](#))
- ▶ **Project Inventory:** a project inventory that collated and classified the 150+ project proposals that were generated and submitted through the MRTT START online engagement process by community, public, private and third sector organisations in June 2020. The inventory can be easily interrogated, edited and developed (see Section 4)

### 2.2 A Just Transition for the Midlands

To ensure a Just Transition, communities and groups affected by the phase out of peat need to be supported in dealing with the negative consequences of transition and in benefiting from new opportunities. This implies that investment and related projects and programmes are targeted at the affected localities and groups (such as those made redundant and young people). However, wider regional development and transformational projects need also to be progressed. The Just Transition Commissioner's Progress Report (April 2020) identifies the designated growth centre for the region and key towns in acting as regional catalysts for job and enterprise creation which, in turn, provide opportunities for residents throughout the region<sup>3</sup>, in line with the National Planning Framework and the RSES for the East & Midlands Region, and the Midlands Regional Enterprise Plan.

To be successful, this two-pronged approach - targeting affected communities and groups whilst investing in wider regional development - requires a combination of bottom-up and top-down actions and processes. The benefits of this combined approach have been evidenced in former coal mining regions (e.g. Limburg in Belgium,

<sup>3</sup> An outcome dependent on intra-regional connectivity.

<sup>2</sup> The CRiT initiative was established by the European Commission to assist EU regions affected by the phase-out of coal, peat and oil shale as a source of energy

the Ruhr in Germany). The Pathway is predicated on this approach: facilitating bottom-up, smaller scale, localised measures alongside larger regional development measures and investments; thereby reconciling economic efficiency and equity.

For this process to be responsive and legitimate, the voices of affected communities and groups should be influential in the future planning process. The engagement process initiated by MRTT START Engagement Process in May 2020 represents a good platform for future engagement, which utilised existing local authority and local development company networks to create awareness.

Finally, the Midlands is the first Irish region to manage a Just Transition process, therefore the development and implementation of this transition pathway will have lessons for other Irish regions.<sup>4</sup>

## 2.3 Utilising Assets

Successful transition is based on the effective utilisation and repurposing of regional assets by linking them with new economic opportunities and drivers of socio-economic change. Such assets can take many forms, such as legacy assets from previous economic activity, human assets, and environmental and resource assets. These are further explored in the START Midlands Regional Profile, START briefing paper on Future Employment and Skills, and the Just Transition Commissioner's Progress Report. Several notable regional assets are:

- ▶ Anchor organisations – Bord na Mona and ESB are state enterprises that are synonymous with the region and have played a key role in the economy and narrative of the region and its interface with the national economy. Bord na Mona is committed to diversification (as detailed in the Brown to Green Strategy) and ESB is to retain national functions in the region. This status is recognised in the membership of the MRTT Steering Committee and its working groups
- ▶ Energy infrastructure – given the economic activities and investment of the above anchor organisations there is a significant regional power infrastructure associated with the generation and

distribution of electricity to the national market

- ▶ Industrial infrastructure – the pattern of previous industrial and economic activities has created a wide range of industrial infrastructure relating to property, transport (railways, access roads), operations and maintenance, fabrication, and training and development
- ▶ Environment and geography – the region is recognised as having an internationally significant landscape, environment and bio-diversity; moreover, it is an environment that can play a notable role in national decarbonisation goals (e.g. renewable energy, carbon sinks); the region is also contained within a wider geography (NUTS II) with high levels of energy demand, economic activity and income (the Eastern and Midland Region)
- ▶ Institutional capacity and density – compared with many other EU regions undergoing transition, the Midlands has a notable concentration of capable public and third sector organisations and actors
- ▶ Community, heritage and entrepreneurial spirit – the region's communities have a keen sense of identity, history and culture, which, in turn, has encouraged the creation of a range of local enterprises and notable examples of community development

## 2.4 Growth Sectors

New growth and employment opportunities can be evidenced. The existence of such emergent sectors demonstrates options for future development and prosperity, although the realisation of these opportunities comes with associated challenges. Crucially, new models of working and enterprise – such as remote working, co-working, digital and innovation hubs – ensure that the Midlands can benefit from these new growth sectors on a scale and in a manner that would not have been previously feasible. It is also quite possible that Covid 19 will reshape working, commuting, consumption and lifestyle patterns in a manner that will be beneficial to the Midlands. These opportunities need to be considered within the context of transition planning. The sectors set out below were identified following extensive regional analysis, START outputs e.g. Future Employment and Skills Briefing Paper (see section 2.1) and especially the Just Transition Commissioner's Progress Report (April 2020).

<sup>4</sup> It can also inform the work of the NESCC Just Transition Review Group

Potential growth sector	Potential employment opportunities	Potential challenges / risks
<b>Renewable energy investments</b>	Potential to create skilled and well-paid jobs and reinvent the region as a clean energy hub	Potential for local supply chain jobs can be relatively limited  Skilled work may be carried out by workers who are not locally based
<b>Sustainable tourism</b>	Opportunities for a wide variety of jobs in leisure and heritage and recreation areas such as the Lough Boora Discovery Park and other outdoor visitor experiential development initiatives	Numbers likely to be relatively limited in the short term, although a number of projects, including eco-tourism and greenway projects are underway to complement previous investments
<b>The bioeconomy and biodiversity, including horticulture</b>	Jobs can be created in biodiversity and eco-related projects. Using natural products to provide input into agrifood may also provide employment	The number of new jobs is likely to be low in the short term. Bioeconomy jobs may be technical and specialised, therefore requiring targeted training
<b>Food and drink</b>	Potential for many new jobs if the sector can be developed	Partly dependent on development of tourism in the region and greater awareness of the regional brand and profile
<b>Information technology and digitisation, including big data</b>	Potential to create numerous skilled jobs in new ICT technologies  Development of data centres	Training offer needs to be closely matched to vacancies  Risk of these jobs being filled workers from outside the region
<b>Second site location: Back office functions for businesses in other coastal cities, such as Dublin</b>	Opportunity for a range of managerial, professional and administrative jobs	This may be easier in the eastern parts of the region, where back office functions for Dublin businesses already exist
<b>Retrofitting and energy efficiency</b>	Potential for the employment of former BNM employees and others affected by redundancy	Available workers may not have all of the technical skills needed for the work on offer; and fulfil procurement requirements
<b>Bog rehabilitation and biodiversity</b>	Creation of additional jobs in a variety of professions relating to enhanced bog rehabilitation	Employment limited in scope and to the medium term
<b>Construction, light engineering and manufacturing</b>	Skills can be transferred if supported by targeted training to enhance existing skills	Training programmes need to teach transferable, medium-levels skills rather than basic skills

## 3. The Transition Pathway

### 3.1 Structure and phasing

To reflect the long-term nature of transition, the objectives and measures of the Pathway are phased over time. This approach assists in mapping the transition process and identifying inter-dependencies beyond the short term, thereby minimising the risk that choices made now or in the near future preclude opportunities in the longer term e.g. the future utilisation of current assets. Furthermore, the pathway is a blend of top down and bottom up approaches. Previous energy transitions in EU regions demonstrate that harnessing the capacity of both local, regional and national public sector bodies and communities throughout a phased transition journey facilitates positive change ([weblink to case study](#)).

Three regional transition phases have been identified to group the Pathway's objectives and measures (the related timescales will be reviewed by the MRTT as the process of transition progresses):

**Phase 1 is the initial transition period covering the first few years of change. The Midlands is currently in this phase. The objectives in this phase relate to:**

- mitigating the negative effects of enterprise restructuring and redundancies;
- assessing and securing related assets and legacies;
- enhancing community, social and citizen resilience and adaptation;
- re-orientating regional capacity to deal with transition; preparatory investigation/ research, innovation and investment for realising future opportunities; and
- developing a project inventory.

*Measures relating to this initial transition phase will be the most detailed.*

**Phase 2 (circa year 3 onwards) is characterised by the scaling-up and acceleration of regional investments relating to energy transition, economic diversification, infrastructure, environmental and biodiversity enhancement, and the utilisation of assets.**

**Phase 3 (circa year 5 onwards) is characterised by notable structural change, including productivity and equity gains predicated on energy transition, smart specialisation and growth in the emergent sectors noted (section 2.4), and on the repurposing of regional assets.**

*As noted, the Pathway in its current form is not an exhaustive list of measures, it is a dynamic pathway. Additional and more detailed measures, especially relating to the later phases of transition, will emerge over time. The measures noted below and those that subsequently emerge will inform the evolution of the project inventory (see section 4 – Project Inventory).*

*In the near term, the Government's response to the Just Transition Commissioner's findings and recommendations will need to be considered. It is also proposed that measures are allocated to relevant MRTT working groups (see Section 6).*

## 3.2 Phase 1

### Objective 1: mitigating redundancies and the effects of restructuring in short term

Measure	Aim	Owner(s)
<b>1.1 Guidance and support</b>	Ensuring individuals affected by redundancy and restructuring have access to tailored information on income supports and return to work, retraining and upskilling options	BnM, ESB, DEASP and ETBs
<b>1.2 Reskilling and upskilling</b>	Review reskilling and upskilling provision considering potential future need (see START briefing paper); maintain retraining provision as required (e.g. Springboard+, Explore)	Regional Skills Forum, Dept of Education & Skills, AIT, ETBs, BnM, ESB,
<b>1.3 Peatlands rehabilitation</b>	Restoration of 1,800 ha of peatland in short term to create 70 jobs across a range of professions (with scope for expansion beyond 2020). To this end, BnM employees attend enhanced rehabilitation training programmes developed by ETBs	NPWS, Bord na Mona, ETBs
<b>1.4 Retrofit training</b>	Provide access to retrofit retraining to former and current BnM employees at the NZEB Solas Training Facility, located at the National Construction Training Facility at Mount Lucas	BnM, ETBs, DHPLG,
<b>1.5 Irish Just Transition Fund</b>	Finance projects that can be delivered in the short term and will support economic, social and environmental development and provide positive early momentum to the transition process, particularly within impacted communities	Dept of Environment, Climate & Communications, Local Authorities

### Objective 2: Assessing, securing and addressing peat related assets and legacies

Measure	Aim	Owner(s)
<b>2.1 Anchor organisations</b>	Retain a significant regional presence of state enterprises via roll-out of BnM's Brown to Green and investment strategies and retention and subsequent expansion of ESB's remaining functions	Dept of Environment, Climate & Communications, BnM and ESB
<b>2.2 Assets (infrastructure)</b>	Assess and secure relevant assets for future economic and community purposes, including estate, power generation and distribution infrastructure, transport (rail, bridges, road)	Dept of Environment, Climate & Communications, BnM, ESB, EirGrid, MRTT
<b>2.3 Assets (land)</b>	Assess and secure relevant land assets for future for future economic and community purposes (building on Dept of Environment, Climate & Communications guidance)	Dept of Environment, Climate & Communications, BnM, ESB, MRTT
<b>2.4 Energy Hub</b>	Assess potential of using powerplant infrastructure to create an energy hub	Dept of Environment, Climate & Communications, BnM, ESB
<b>2.5 Renewable region</b>	Assess potential of region as a centre of renewable energy for Ireland (including wind, solar, renewable gas, anaerobic, energy storage, micro-renewables and community projects)	Dept of Environment, Climate & Communications, BnM, ESB, MRTT
<b>2.6 LIFE</b>	Facilitation of the delivery of the Eden Ireland LIFE Integrated Project	Dept of Environment, Climate & Communications, BnM

### Objective 3: Developing community resilience and adaptation

Measure	Aim	Owner(s)
<b>3.1 Community engagement</b>	Ensure that communities and groups are engaged in transition process and planning (see Section 5: Community Engagement and Development)	Just Transition Fund, MRTT and constituent Local Authorities, Local Development Companies, CARO
<b>3.2 Bottom-up projects</b>	Identify and support the inventory of community led projects across the region and develop related economies of scale and synergies (see Section 4: Project Inventory)	Just Transition Fund, MRTT, constituent Local Authorities, Local Development Companies, CARO
<b>3.3 Community capacity</b>	Develop capacity in affected communities in order that communities and their residents can be active, engaged agents of transition (see Section 5: Community Engagement and Development)	Just Transition Fund, MRTT, constituent Local Authorities, Local Development Companies, CARO
<b>3.4 Retrofitting</b>	Upgrade social housing stock to make them more energy efficient and climate sensitive, and support circa 340 jobs	Local Authorities, Dept of Environment, Climate & Communications, and Dept of Housing, SEAI

### Objective 4: Enhancing public sector capacity and regional profile

Measure	Aim	Owner(s)
<b>4.1 Policy agenda</b>	Utilise and build on Government's Implementation Plan for Just Transition in response to the Commissioner's recommendations; inform the development of the Territorial Just Transition Plan for the allocation of the EC's Just Transition Fund  The outputs of the START assistance to the MRTT will provide detailed regional insights	Dept of Environment, Climate & Communications, Office of Just Transition Commissioner, MRTT, Regional Assemblies
<b>4.2 Public sector innovation</b>	Embed a collaborative public model of transition; develop innovative approaches to investment i.e. develop capacity for large regional transition projects by developing thematic consortia (see Just Transition Commissioner's recommendations); develop easier interface between communities and public functions (e.g. planning) and create co-ordinated regulatory support across agencies for local projects. This will be informed by the Irish Government's response to the Just Transition Commissioners recommendations	Dept of An Taoiseach - Transition Group - MRTT and Local Authorities, Regional Assemblies
<b>4.3 Project inventory</b>	Create, develop and manage an inventory of bottom up and top down transition projects; identify funding opportunities, synergies and economies of scale, and gaps (see Section 4 Project inventory)	MRTT
<b>4.4 Marketing and profile</b>	Build on current brand, value proposition and collective offering to further promote the region as a place to live, learn, work and invest (review in context of growth sectors and Covid 19 circumstances)	MidlandsIreland.ie

## Objective 5: Innovation, investment and research to realise new opportunities and growth sectors

Measure	Aim	Owner(s)
<b>5.1 Enterprise hubs</b>	Grow the number of digital and sectoral innovation hubs in the region, supported by roll out of high-speed broadband and aligned with growth sectors	Office of Regional Enterprise Plan, IDA, Enterprise Ireland, LEOs, MRTT, Dept of Environment, Climate & Communications
<b>5.2 New enterprises</b>	Grow the number of new enterprises in the region, especially regarding green enterprises, circular economy and social enterprises	IDA, Enterprise Ireland, LEOs, Office of Regional Enterprise Plan, MRTT
<b>5.3 Attracting investment</b>	Attract investment to the region, and focus efforts and propositions on regional growth sectors (see section 2.4), Smart Specialisation and green growth opportunities	IDA, Enterprise Ireland, Office of Reg. Enterprise Plan, MRTT
<b>5.4 Connectivity</b>	Undertake research on options and costs for improving intra-regional public transport between regional growth centres / key settlements and rural communities; delivery of the National Broadband Plan in the region; enhancement of EV charging infrastructure across the region	Dept of Environment, Climate & Communications, DoT/TII, Office of Regional Enterprise Plan
<b>5.5 Climate Change Centre</b>	Progress the establishment of a landmark national Centre for Climate Change and Just Transition in the Midlands (linked to diversification and decarbonisation of the economy and communities, and the development of green enterprises)	BnM, ESB, Dept of Environment, Climate & Communications, MRTT, CARO, Local Authorities
<b>5.6 Large regional projects</b>	Identify, assess and support a pipeline of large scale, transformational transition projects for the Midlands (see Section 4: Project Inventory)	DETE, Trade & Employment, Dept of Environment, Climate & Communications, IDA, Enterprise Ireland, MRTT, Regional Assemblies
<b>5.7 Strategic alignment</b>	The objectives of the Midlands Transition Pathway should be aligned with the relevant European, national and regional policies and strategies including the European Green Deal, Climate Bill, Project Ireland 2040, the RSES and Regional Enterprise Plan	MRTT, Regional Assemblies

### 3.3 Phases 2 and 3

The Midlands Pathway to Transition will provide guidance to all regional stakeholders, and its dynamic nature will ensure that it can evolve over time to be responsive to its changing context. Additional and more detailed measures, especially relating to the later phases of transition (i.e. the second and third phases), will emerge over time and will be shaped and determined by the work of the MRTT and relevant preparatory / planning work in Phase 1. The objectives, measures and related activities of these later phases will be influenced in the first instance by the MRTT constituent working groups (including research, business planning, policy co-ordination and identification of funding streams) and the Implementation Plan of Government.

As previously noted, it is probable that the objectives and measures of Phase 2 will address issues such as the scaling-up and acceleration of regional investments relating to energy transition, economic diversification, infrastructure, environmental and biodiversity enhancement, and the utilisation of assets. Looking beyond this second phase, it is probable that Phase 3 will be characterised by notable structural change, including productivity and equity gains predicated on energy transition, smart specialisation and growth in the emergent sectors noted (section 2.4), and on the repurposing of regional assets.

# 4. Project Inventory

## 4.1 Midlands Engagement Process

Under the MRTT-START Midlands Engagement Process, the MRTT invited submissions of proposals for projects (or programmes) to assist a positive transition from peat harvesting and power generation in affected communities and related groups in the wider Midland Region. The submission period ran for a period of three weeks, from 22 May to 12 June 2020 and was open to public and private organisations and constituted third-party organisations and community groups. One of its main aims was to enable the MRTT and its constituent stakeholders to get a sense of the range, extent, and scale of potential projects (investment proposals) under consideration that might support transition. In total, 156 project proposals were registered under the Midlands Engagement Process.

Registration of projects through the MRTT-START engagement process ('Stage 1') was a requirement for a project to subsequently proceed with an application for funding under the national Just Transition Fund ('Stage 2'), for which applications closed on 17 July 2020. This pre-registration approach was adopted to ensure a more strategic and localised approach to identifying suitable projects. Following from the MRTT-START registration process, 101 applications were submitted for funding under the national Just Transition Fund, which are currently being evaluated.

The remaining 55 projects/programs registered under the MRTT-START engagement process did not make a subsequent application to the JTF. Among these projects, several community-based projects could not progress to the JTF as they are promoted by a group operating in a voluntary capacity without the necessary legal formation. Other factors that may have influenced decisions to not proceed with an application

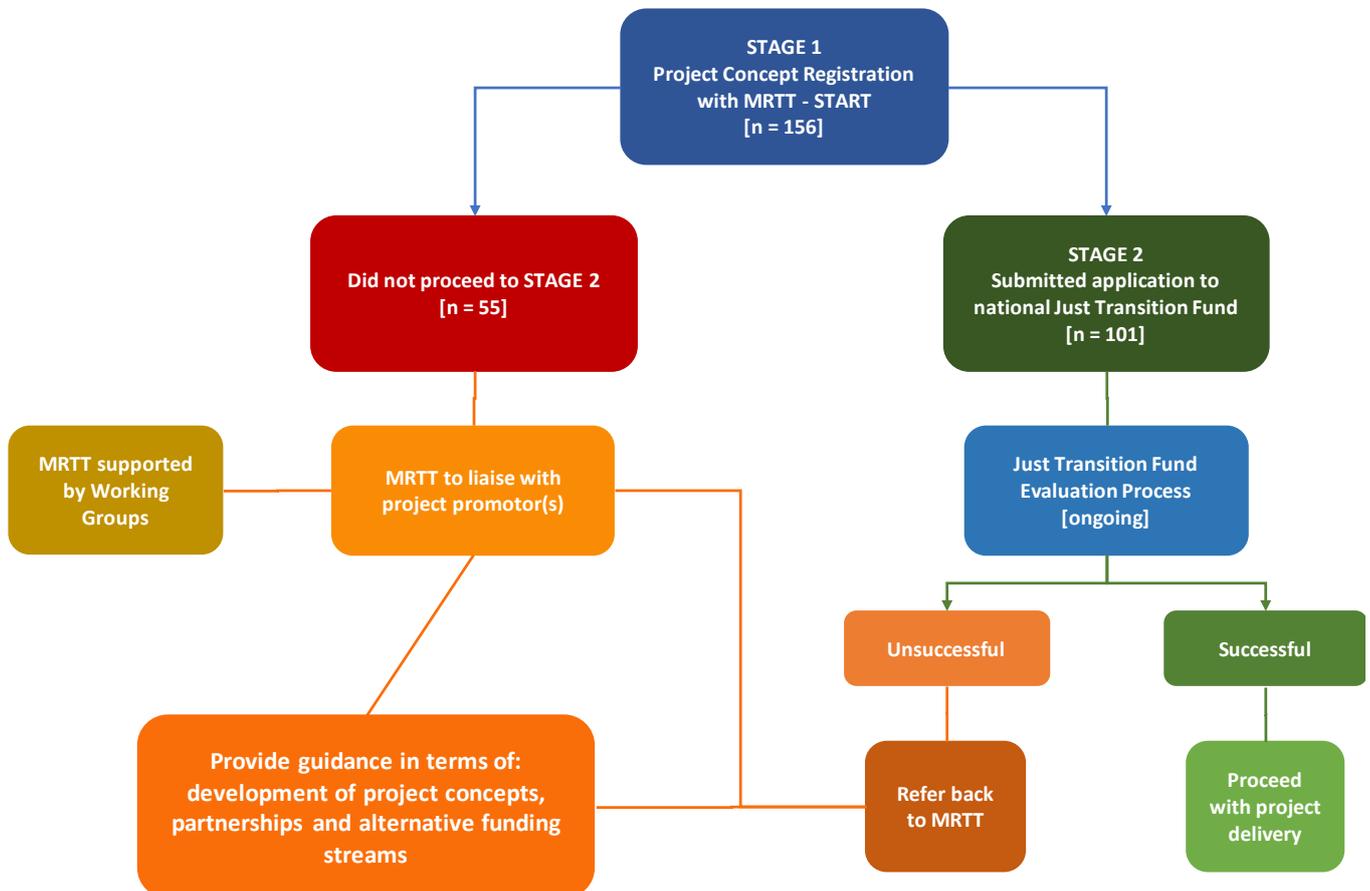


Figure 1: MRTT – START Engagement Process

to the JTF include: eligibility conditions (e.g. exclusion of some infrastructure projects), inability to secure match funding, or lack of capacity to complete the JTF application form. The provision of assistance to projects that did not proceed with an application to the JTF will be explored by the relevant MRTT working groups.

Similarly, unsuccessful applicants to the JTF may be referred back to the MRTT to receive assistance in further developing project ideas, capacity building and preparing future project proposals. In both these cases, the MRTT will review the projects as registered through the Midlands Engagement Process to identify which require further support to make them viable contenders for funding when available, either in the short or longer term. Where appropriate, the MRTT will provide assistance in linking unsuccessful projects with other projects to develop more viable, strategic proposals, and help to identify other funding options.

Going forward, the project inventory database will be used to collate, monitor, and track the progress of submitted projects along with the inclusion of additions that may appear in the future.

## 4.2 Project Inventory Synthesis

The following sub-sections provide a brief overview of the characteristics of the projects registered through the MRTT-START engagement process ('Stage 1'). Further, separate information is provided for those projects that did not apply for funding under the national Just Transition Fund ('Stage 2').

**It is important to note that the presented analysis is based only on the information provided when projects registered through the MRTT-START engagement process.**

### 4.2.1 Geographical Distribution

**Table 1** shows the geographical distribution of projects registered through the MRTT-START engagement process, which displays a high correlation to the locations of the communities most impacted by transition from peat harvesting and power generation. Around 10 percent of projects target the wider Midlands

region (i.e. covering multiple counties), with the largest numbers of location specific projects coming from Offaly, Westmeath, Longford, and Roscommon.

### 4.2.2 Organisation Type

**Table 2** shows the organisational type of lead organisations of projects registered through the MRTT-START engagement process. In total, 48 projects were registered by community groups and 108 by public, private and third sector organisations.<sup>5</sup> In terms of projects that did not proceed to 'Stage 2' applications to the JTF, the highest rate of drop-off is observed for 'Other Community Groups', with 14 of 32 (44%) of registered projects that did not make an application to the JTF.

### 4.2.3 Project type (theme)

**Table 3** shows a broad initial categorisation of projects by type (thematic area).<sup>6</sup> One third of registered projects are categorised under 'Tourism & agriculture', of which a high proportion relate to tourism and recreation-based projects.<sup>7</sup> Other projects are distributed relatively evenly across the four remaining project types. Under the category of 'Enterprise & co-working', most projects are concerned with some form of enterprise centre or hub (including co-working spaces), with relatively few projects targeting specific enterprises or sectors. Similarly, most projects under the category 'Energy & technology' are concerned with energy-related projects (either energy production and storage or energy efficiency measures, such as retrofitting) with few projects in other technology areas.

### 4.2.4 Project status

**Table 4** shows the status of projects in terms of implementation readiness based on an initial assessment of the information provided with the project registration under the MRTT-START engagement process.<sup>8</sup> Noticeably, while projects at a concept stage

<sup>5</sup> This breakdown reflects the use of two different registration forms, respectively for 'community-led project proposals' and 'public, third and private sector-led projects and programmes proposals'. For the purposes of the categorisation used in the table, third sector covers organisations that registered using the registration form for 'public, third and private sector-led projects and programmes proposals' but have the form of a voluntary or community organisations (e.g. registered charities or associations), or operate on a social or not-for-profit basis (e.g. social enterprises, co-operatives, non-profit trusts)

<sup>6</sup> The categorisation follows loosely that to be used for initial evaluation of Stage 2 applications

<sup>7</sup> In total, 34 registered projects incorporated some form of recreation-based elements

<sup>8</sup> For the purpose of the categorisation used in the table, 'project concept' refers

	MRTT-START Registrations (Stage 1)		Did not proceed to JTF application	
	number	share	number	share
MIDLANDS - Wider Region	15	9.6%	7	12.7%
Offaly	68	43.6%	28	50.9%
Westmeath	20	12.8%	4	7.3%
Longford	19	12.2%	3	5.5%
Roscommon	16	10.3%	7	12.7%
Kildare	6	3.8%	2	3.6%
North Tipperary	4	2.6%	1	1.8%
Laois	3	1.9%	1	1.8%
East Galway	3	1.9%	1	1.8%
OTHER	2	1.3%	1	1.8%
<b>Total</b>	<b>156</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

Table 1: Geographical distribution of MRTT-START registrations

	MRTT-START Registrations (Stage 1)		Did not proceed to JTF application	
	number	share	number	share
Community - Development Organisation	16	10.3%	6	10.9%
Other Community Groups	32	20.5%	14	25.5%
Third Sector	16	10.3%	4	7.3%
Private Sector	44	28.2%	14	25.5%
Public Sector	48	30.8%	17	30.9%
<b>Total</b>	<b>156</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

Table 2: Organisation type of MRTT-START registrations

account for nearly 30% of all projects registered under the MRTT-START engagement process, they represent over 40% of projects that did not proceed to a JTF application. This suggests that many promoters of early-stage projects did not consider their concepts to be sufficiently developed to make an application for

JTF funding and, accordingly, may require support/guidance for further development of their project ideas as foreseen under the MRTT – START Engagement Process. Conversely, most of the projects (19 from 23) at the stage of a feasibility assessment proceeded to a JTF application.

to early-stage projects ideas (without detailed project definition and design); 'feasibility assessment' refers to projects that are sufficiently developed to undertake assessment of their technical and economic feasibility (business case); 'implementation planning' refers to projects that have reached the stage of development of organisational and financial plans for implementation; and, 'ready to implement' refers to projects that the project proposer(s) indicate as ready to implement, subject to the availability of adequate financial means

	MRTT-START Registrations (Stage 1)		Did not proceed to JTF application	
	number	share	number	share
Energy & technology	28	17.9%	9	16.4%
Enterprise & co-working	26	16.7%	7	12.7%
Tourism & agriculture	52	33.3%	20	36.4%
Training support	27	17.3%	9	16.4%
Community transitioning support	23	14.7%	10	18.2%
<b>Total</b>	<b>156</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

Table 3: Project type (theme) of MRTT-START registrations

	MRTT-START Registrations (Stage 1)		Did not proceed to JTF application	
	number	share	number	share
Project concept	45	28.8%	24	43.6%
Feasibility assessment	23	14.7%	4	7.3%
Implementation planning	29	18.6%	11	20.0%
Ready to implement	59	37.8%	16	29.1%
<b>Total</b>	<b>156</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

Table 4: Project status of MRTT-START registrations

#### 4.2.5 Project value

**Table 5** and **Table 6** show, respectively, the estimated total size (value) of projects and the indicated size (value) of funding support required of projects registered through the MRTT-START engagement process. In this context, it should be noted that information on the size of projects was not always supplied by applicants and in some cases no distinction was made between overall project size and required funding support. It should also be kept in mind that information on the funding terms, conditions, and eligibility requirements for the JTF were not available at the time of registration under the MRTT-START engagement process. The financial envelope for JTF applications has been subsequently set at a minimum threshold of € 50,000, and a maximum threshold of € 1 million.

Of registered projects that provided an estimate of total project value, just over half (53%) indicated a value below € 1 million and, at the other end of the spectrum, 25 projects indicate a total value of € 5 million or above. Larger projects feature notably in the areas of enterprise development and enterprise centres/hubs (6 projects), agriculture and food production (5 projects), energy production, and storage (4 projects). Some of these projects, which generally are at very initial stages could, subject to feasibility assessment and/or business planning, have the potential to be significant transformational projects for the region. Among large-scale project concepts that have been put forward are ones in the areas of sustainable horticulture/food product and hydroponics, clean and renewable energy technologies, major recreation and tourism investments, and large scale development of technology and innovation capacity in the region.

	MRTT-START Registrations (Stage 1)		Did not proceed to JTF application	
	number	share	number	share
Less than €100k	9	5.8%	3	5.5%
€100k to €250k	20	12.8%	7	12.7%
€250k to €500k	22	14.1%	9	16.4%
€500k to €1 million	25	16.0%	11	20.0%
€1 million to €2.5 million	30	19.2%	12	21.8%
€2.5 million to €5 million	12	7.7%	2	3.6%
€5 million to €10 million	12	7.7%	1	1.8%
More than €10 million	13	8.3%	3	5.5%
Not available	13	8.3%	7	12.7%
<b>Total</b>	<b>156</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

Table 5: Project size of MRTT-START registrations

	MRTT-START Registrations (Stage 1)		Did not proceed to JTF application	
	number	share	number	share
Less than €100k	12	7.7%	5	9.1%
€100k to €250k	18	11.5%	6	10.9%
€250k to €500k	33	21.2%	11	20.0%
€500k to €1 million	23	14.7%	9	16.4%
€1 million to €2.5 million	28	17.9%	10	18.2%
€2.5 million to €5 million	14	9.0%	1	1.8%
€5 million to €10 million	5	3.2%	1	1.8%
More than €10 million	7	4.5%	2	3.6%
Not available	16	10.3%	10	18.2%
<b>Total</b>	<b>156</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

Table 6: Project funding requirement of MRTT-START registrations

## 5. Community engagement and development

There is a need for communities to become active, engaged agents in the regional transition process. The MRTT -START Engagement Process (June 2020) and related media activities were an innovative and important first step in this process and was one which was both welcomed and commended by local communities. Moreover, the high level of responses and the feedback from communities indicate a desire for ongoing involvement in the transition process.

### 5.1 Future Engagement

The MRTT through its network of partners and via the engagement process has access to a wide range of community contacts, representing a significant resource for future consultation. The Just Transition Commissioner's Progress Report (April 2020) notes the need for the restructuring of the MRTT. An early agenda item of the reconstituted MRTT should be the maintenance and development of community engagement. There is also a need to connect with affected communities that have not engaged with the transition process to date. The online model of engagement that was designed by the MRTT START (due to Covid 19 making face to face workshops impossible), demonstrates the value, efficiency, and replicability of proactive, meaningful virtual community

engagement at scale. It is recognised that community engagement in project development will involve a wide range of local and regional organisations actively engaged with communities if we are to build on the high level of interest displayed in response to the START engagement process and the JTF call for applications. Further principles and ideas regarding community engagement can be found in the CRiT [Governance of transitions toolkit](#). However, it is evident that additional human resources must be provided to undertake future consultation activities (see Section 6).

## 5.2 Capacity Development

The MRTT START engagement process gathered feedback from community groups about what support they required to effectively develop local projects and capacity to assist transition in their communities. As is often the case, funding was a recurring theme (i.e. the need for capital and revenue funding, match / co-funding challenges, knowledge of future funds, especially EU) and there is a need to further link communities with existing sources of support and expertise eg IREO . It was evident

Theme	Type of support
<b>Governance</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Board development</li> <li>▶ Governance and decision-making skills</li> <li>▶ Community development and social enterprise models</li> </ul>
<b>Organisational management</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Facilities management</li> <li>▶ Revenue generation and business planning</li> <li>▶ Budget management</li> <li>▶ Marketing and communications</li> </ul>
<b>Project Management</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Project identification / feasibility / appraisal / phasing</li> <li>▶ Financial due diligence</li> <li>▶ Procurement</li> <li>▶ Managing third parties / professional service providers</li> <li>▶ Accessing inter-disciplinary skillsets (see below)</li> </ul>
<b>Accessing external expertise</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Pro Bono support from state enterprises (BnM and ESB)</li> <li>▶ Selectively accessing professional skills in public sector</li> </ul>
<b>Public sector interface</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Co-ordinated regulatory support across public agencies</li> <li>▶ Joined up cross agency support for projects</li> <li>▶ Introductions (not just sign posting) to other key actors</li> </ul>
<b>Economies of scale / sharing</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Cross county / community approaches</li> <li>▶ Sharing expertise across communities</li> </ul>
<b>Transition knowledge</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Small scale renewables</li> <li>▶ Energy efficiency / conservation</li> <li>▶ Retrofitting and insulation</li> <li>▶ Biodiversity</li> <li>▶ Environmental enhancement</li> </ul>

Table7: Capacity development requirements of communities

that a range of community groups felt qualified and competent regarding local / project development. Such a finding may have been due to many of the respondents being mature community groups. However, this view was far from universal. Areas of required support that were referenced by respondents are summarised in Table 7. It would be appropriate that this issue is an early agenda item of the reconstituted MRTT and its constituent working groups, and consideration given to how these requirements can be met by public agencies and relevant third sector organisations.

### 5.3 Asset utilisation

In July 2020, the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment indicated that it would write to state enterprises and agencies to identify land and facilities that could be used for green energy projects. It would be valuable if a similar review is undertaken to identify BnM and ESB land and facilities that could be used for community development / transition projects. This will ensure that seemingly redundant assets, but which have latent community worth, are not lost. Where one stakeholder sees a liability or no worth, another can see an opportunity. It is appropriate that this review takes place prior to plans for rationalisation and removal are markedly progressed.

### 5.4 Community benefit and gain

To ensure that transition to a new and locally sourced energy supply has community support and involvement, it is often the case that the community directly shares in the benefit. Where this benefit is given in a financial form, such monies can assist in providing seed and matching monies and/or ongoing revenues for community projects. The transition to renewable energy sources (wind, hydro, biomass, solar and hydrogen) in the Highlands of Scotland is a case in point. Local communities with the support of local government have agreed formal concordats with electricity generators, which detail the scale, nature and duration of community benefit. The concordat typically lasts several years and can extend to cover several renewable developments. The concordat includes details of the community benefit fund arrangements, including level of payments. It seeks

to maximise the benefit to local communities and the local economy through a range of different activities which can bring mutual benefits to the developer and the community. These have included renewable energy resource assessments, support for school energy education officers, the promotion of green energy projects and community resources ([weblink to case study](#)).

In addition, new public and private investments should be shaped by the principles of community gain. This may well require consideration, input and support from the office of the Just Transition Commissioner and / or Dept of Environment, Climate & Communications.

Finally, it is important to observe that Bord na Mona has a notable track record of promoting Community Benefit and Community Gain in the Irish context. BnM initiated a Community Benefit Scheme following the commissioning of the Drehid Landfill. Since 2009 BnM has supported over 300 local projects to the value of circa €2m. Therefore, there is already a process to be built upon in the Midlands. Likewise, with the ESB with Offaly Development Funds and its contribution of €5M to the Just Transition Fund.

## 6. Governance and resources

The “whole of Midlands approach” and the “whole of government approach” as advocated by the Just Transition Commissioner in his Progress Report (April 2020) is a logical and constructive model for governing and co-ordinating the transition process in the Midlands. Moreover, the restructuring of the MRTT, as proposed in the same report, in terms of composition and structure, can further promote the efficiency and effectiveness of the MRTT, as a vital regional structure with valuable local and regional knowledge.

The Just Commissioner’s report also recommended the establishment of Working Groups comprising various organisations and government bodies for co-ordinating activities and resources and accessing relevant funding/ schemes and programmes. It was also noted that such working groups can assist projects - contained within the

inventory and progress their design and development, access partnerships and / or identify sources of funding (see Section 4). The proposed working groups relate to the following areas:

- ▶ Education/Training/Research
- ▶ Employment Generation
- ▶ Employment Continuity Pathways
- ▶ Community Assistance Programme/Social Enterprise Interventions

The working groups will allow for a more efficient and effective delivery of the MRTTs work programme. It is proposed that the Measures of the Transition Pathway (see Section 3) are allocated to the most relevant working groups (e.g. Measure 1.1: Guidance and Support would be allocated to Employment Continuity Pathways WG). The Working Groups will provide regular updates to the MRTT Steering Committee.

The START team has been impressed by the professionalism and commitment of the stakeholders it has met and liaised with since December 2019. However, the START team are also aware that, to date, the MRTT agenda and work programme has been largely managed and progressed by a very small number of capable, committed individuals. If the ambitions of Midlands Pathway to Transition and related programme management, governance, consultation and engagement functions are to be realised, additional human resource will need to be secured. Also, as new initiatives and policy developments emerge (e.g. the Government's response to the implementation of the recommendations contained within Just Commissioner's report, the development of the Territorial Plan for Just Transition) additional resources will be required to engage with and realise these opportunities for the Midlands. There is a need to invest in the capacity of the MRTT.

## Section 7. Summary

The Midlands is the first Irish region to undertake a Just Transition process. Given this significance, it is important that the Midlands has a strategic framework (a pathway) that can act as an accepted programme for transition, and a point of reference and co-ordination for multiple actors and one that is cognisant of relevant policies, strategies and plans. The development and implementation of this pathway will have lessons for Ireland and its regions.

Successful transition in other EU regions has shown the importance of blending bottom-up and top-down approaches that engage communities, all levels of government and multiple actors. Moreover, transition is usually a long-term process which can be characterised by several phases. Therefore, the Midlands Pathway to Transition needs to be inclusive and responsive to change (political, economic, social and technical); and the measures within it and the projects contained in the related inventory should evolve over time.

The Just Transition Commissioner's first progress report was an important milestone for the MRTT in terms of identifying opportunities and the means and mechanisms, including MRTT governance, for realising these opportunities. The Government's response and the development of the Territorial Plan for Just Transition will represent other important milestones that will shape the Midlands Pathway to Transition.

The MRTT is rapidly becoming a dynamic regional structure for co-ordinating and supporting transition across multiple actors and communities, ensuring that collaboration is a hallmark of the Midland's transition process. Given this level of ambition and expectation, it is important that MRTT management and administrative resources are commensurate.

# Annex I: Opportunities and emerging economic activities in rural communities

## Introduction

Rural communities will have an important role to play in addressing many of the most pressing national and international challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, such as climate change, sustainable energy production and resource utilisation, protection and preservation of the environment and biodiversity, safe and secure food production, and demographic change. Likewise, rural communities need to adapt to take advantage of changing social and consumer behaviour and expectations, such as remote working, holidaying closer to home, and demand for local sourcing of products and services.

At the time of writing, we must also expect that Covid-19 and its aftermath will profoundly influence the future development of rural areas as it will for urban areas. Certainly, we can foresee that the pandemic may lead many people to reconsider their living and working patterns and how they spend their disposable income and free time.

To respond to the challenges they face, rural communities in the Midlands, as elsewhere across Europe, will need to harness drivers of change such as digitalisation, innovative and sustainable tourism, and circular economy principles to diversify their local economies and develop and grow new and existing enterprises that can provide alternative employment opportunities for the future.

With the intention to encourage local community groups and champions to bring project ideas forward for discussion, this section highlights some of the external factors that are reshaping rural communities and provides examples of projects and actions that have successfully embraced opportunities for change. These examples should be read in conjunction with Section 2 (Seizing new opportunities), which provides more information on development projects from across Europe that illustrate emerging opportunities for rural communities.

A feature of many of the successful projects is the way that positive changes have been enabled through a bottom-up approach, building on local community

involvement, supported by a clear vision and planning, and multi-level (local, national, EU) policy making and funding. Accordingly, as a starting point, the next sub-section looks at how local communities can be actively engaged in rural development processes. The subsequent sub-sections outline some key factors behind the creation of new business and employment opportunities in rural areas, before highlighting the specific cases of digital hubs, tourism and the agri-food sector.

## Engaging local communities to harness emerging opportunities

Rural development policy has shifted from a top-down approach to a community-led approach. This change reflects a recognition that overarching policies which provide the general enabling conditions for local development, derived from a traditional top-down approach, need to be complemented by a community-led approach involving all local stakeholders to implement local actions. At the same time, rural policy now supports diversification in rural areas beyond the primary sectors of agriculture, forestry, and fishery by promoting business development and entrepreneurship, and fostering opportunities related, for example, to the circular economy and bioeconomy<sup>1</sup>.

Through the LEADER<sup>2</sup> programme and other local development initiatives<sup>3</sup>, the EU has facilitated the emergence and development of new opportunities by enabling local communities to lead or participate in the design and development of local development projects. Such community-led initiatives aim to build new forms of cooperation and alliances and develop the capacities of local authorities to support and implement local development strategies based on specific rural challenges, needs and opportunities.

Local needs are usually better addressed when people are involved, and multi-level governance is in place. Effective implementation of policies typically requires a realistic discussion between local, regional, and national authorities to align objectives, and secure the cooperation of people and the private sector in

identifying local needs and targeting interventions<sup>4</sup>.

A participatory approach to identification of the challenges faced by rural communities can bring an increased sense of shared responsibility and collective ownership of local initiatives. Moreover, fostering cooperation and a sharing of ideas among sectors, stakeholders and local actors can strengthen the regional ecosystem and create a basis for innovation.

Active participation can take place through consultation processes and workshops on a wide range of topics; for example, topics may include different economic opportunities, regional branding, local renewable energy strategies, community-based climate action, and rehabilitation and reconversion of local assets (e.g. former industrial sites and other assets relating to previous economic activities, such as peat extraction etc.) In the context of energy transition, people can be engaged through community-led initiatives to formulate amongst other actions, local renewable energy strategies and development plans, or at an operational level through community-based service provision, climate actions, and the rehabilitation and reconversion of local energy-related assets. Engaging the local population can fill the gap arising from lack of a strong and common territorial energy vision<sup>5</sup> and can prove pivotal in determining how to combine energy solutions with local services, for example by creating a local energy information point<sup>6</sup>. Community consultation processes can also initiate local renewable energy production and consumption projects, setting-up actual energy self-sufficient towns or villages where residents can benefit from the local energy provided by the community-owned plants.<sup>7</sup>

Rural networks and Green Clusters can provide a mechanism for rural communities to cooperate and to link local natural capital, resources and skills for novel applications, maximising the benefits different assets can deliver through an integrated approach.<sup>8</sup> With a growing importance of decentralised renewable energy systems, consumer involvement is necessary to realise the full potential of the energy transition, based on cooperatives, community trusts and foundations, where the initiative is owned by a community, or a hybrid model including also public and private organisations. Profits from cooperatives or community-based initiatives feed back into the local community, by generating direct employment (e.g. for maintenance and management) or indirectly by reinvesting profits into the community itself.<sup>9</sup>

## Familiar challenges ... New opportunities

Challenges facing rural areas are well documented across EU Member States.<sup>10</sup> Peripheral and rural regions commonly exhibit a declining and an ageing population, often accentuated in areas centred on traditional, dominant economic activities.<sup>11</sup> Outward migration of young people to urban centres or prosperous regions amplifies this trend which, in turn, is reinforced by the lack of employment opportunities, lower wages, or lack of basic services, such as public transport, utilities, education, and social amenities, in rural areas.<sup>12</sup>

Low population densities and remoteness affect basic service provision in rural areas. Higher costs of serving rural areas can discourage infrastructure investments (e.g. in broadband networks) and result in lower levels of service provision, less choice, and higher costs when compared to urban users.<sup>13</sup> By way of example, rural areas often provide fewer local educational opportunities and choices, resulting in a less diverse skills base and a higher proportion of early school leavers than found in urban areas.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, there is a notable rural-urban digital divide, with rural areas lacking infrastructure and basic digital skills, thereby lowering the chances for rural workers and communities to exploit the benefits of available digital technologies.<sup>15</sup>

Yet, despite their challenges, rural areas will be central to tackling societal challenges such as climate change, halting loss of biodiversity and ecosystem services, or supporting an energy transition based on renewable energy sources. Equally, food and agriculture require innovations to meet the demands of a growing population. Enabled by digitisation and new technologies, many of today's emerging economic opportunities in rural areas revolve around the creation of value through sustainable use of raw materials, and utilisation of natural assets and environment to develop new production and consumption processes. Of key importance for the creation of new business opportunities and job creation in rural areas are:<sup>16</sup>

- ▶ **Digitalisation:** digital infrastructure and technologies provide platforms for new forms of communication, knowledge exchange, and service delivery that can reduce the relevance of location and physical proximity. These technologies can greatly facilitate remote working, which can be supported in rural communities through the provision of co-working facilities and digital hubs.

- ▶ **Sustainable Tourism:** increased awareness of the value of ecosystem services<sup>17</sup> and of the need to act as custodians of rural environments and landscapes so they may sustain future generations provides opportunities for rural areas. Recognition of environmental issues and climate change, combined with an increasing interest in touristic activities linked to nature and rural environment, emphasises the importance of appropriate ecosystem services in rural development, especially for the emergence of a sustainable tourism industry.
- ▶ **Bioeconomy:** the development of the bioeconomy – based on production of renewable biological resources and the conversion of these resources and waste streams into value added products (e.g. food, feed, bio-based products and bioenergy)<sup>18</sup> – has the potential for creating bio-industries with a strong rural base.
- ▶ **Circular economy:** ‘closing the loop’ of product lifecycles through recycling and re-use, which maintain and add to the value of products, materials and resources, while minimising the generation of waste, is of particular relevance for rural industries such as forestry, agriculture and food production.
- ▶ **Renewable energy:** creation of synergies between the transition from fossil fuels to renewable energy sources and rural development, both through the development of sustainable supply chains for bioenergy and through community-gain schemes and projects for decentralised, and often small-scale, local clean and renewable energy supply for rural communities.<sup>19</sup>

These drivers have different implications for the various sectors that constitute the rural economy. The following sub-section sketches some of the main economic opportunities for rural areas, focussing on digital services, sustainable tourism, bioeconomy and circular economy opportunities that are particularly relevant to the agri-food sector.

## Emerging opportunities in rural economic sectors

### Digitally enabled services

With increasing connectivity, digitalisation is supporting the shift of rural economies towards the services sector and increased integration of digitally enabled services within primary and industrial (e.g. manufacturing) sectors. Opportunities relating to digitalisation complement traditional offline markets. Rural manufacturers can operate their own dedicated trading space, via e-commerce and other online platforms, in which they manage their product catalogue, prices, sales, collections and invoicing, flexibly managing the availability of their products and services and extending their reach far beyond their local customer base. They can also widen the range of services accompanying the manufacturing process by offering more than the mere products, adding delivering and installation, repairing and maintenance services after the purchase of the final goods, all of which can provide additional revenue streams<sup>20</sup>. Enabling businesses to take such steps may require targeted support for skills training and financing for their transition to becoming processors, distributors, marketers and eventually customer relationship managers.

Digital platforms can enable farmers to link directly with customers and diversify their customer base beyond their traditional reach, while capitalising on shorter and local value-chains. Farmers across EU Member States have diversified their customer base, delivering produce directly to households in their local and urban vicinity. This can be combined with the increasing consumer trends for greater traceability and organic products, whereby consumers wish to understand the production and transportation processes. Food quality concerns and the need to reduce waste and employ shorter distribution channels can lead to the creation of circular farm networks. “Food Assemblies”<sup>21</sup> across EU Member States provide both online and offline platforms that enable local producers to group together to deliver their products to urban customers, meeting the need for more environmentally friendly and sustainable consumption patterns through short supply-chains. One observed consequence of the Covid-19 outbreak is that it appears to have further encouraged urban-based consumers to increase their sourcing of food and drink products from local rural communities.<sup>22</sup>

Rural digital hubs are one means to support rural communities overcome common shortcomings in digital infrastructures, services, and skills and knowledge, enabling them to harness the opportunities of the digital economy. Hub facilities can help to retain local small business or attract new ones, in some cases encouraging them to relocate to rural areas by linking the option of remote working to lower living costs combined with a higher quality of life. The Midlands already has a number of these in place.<sup>23</sup> Implemented in many rural areas, digital hubs have created spaces for work, exchange of ideas and collaboration. Typically, a prerequisite for creating a hub is the availability of high-speed broadband and wireless internet connection. Where these are unavailable, it may achieve through community-based service provision (e.g. implementing a community-owned fast broadband network to serve remote rural areas).<sup>24</sup>

In some cases, communities have used the setting-up of a hub as a vehicle to make use of and rehabilitate previously unoccupied buildings or refurbish recently vacated premises.<sup>25</sup> Functions and services delivered by digital hubs may, among others, include:

- ▶ Support to local businesses and entrepreneurs through the provision of digitally enabled working environments (both closed and co-working) and provision of digital technologies (video conferencing, product modelling software, 3D printers, or workshop spaces, etc.)
- ▶ Supporting remote working (teleworking) within rural communities.
- ▶ Enable collaboration between local entrepreneurs and research facilities.
- ▶ Provision of training in areas such literacy, digital skills, career pathway development, starting a business, or more specific business development activities (e.g. project management, managerial and leadership skills, communications and marketing). Such services may be delivered in the facility itself or remotely.

Rural digital hubs are more than business incubators since they go beyond a purely business focus and provide both existing and future businesses with collaborative spaces via a viable digital ecosystem. In some cases, they may adopt a sectoral focus (e.g. food, light engineering, software development). Or they may target younger generations, for example

by providing technology courses (e.g. coding and programming) as part of embedding the development of STEM<sup>26</sup>, to strengthen resilience and future-proof rural areas and communities. They may also provide wider socio-economic and community services, such as providing local groups with spaces for collaboration and networking or providing community-based services and a base for social enterprises<sup>27</sup>; for example, by linking to the provision of health services based on digital applications, shared mobility services (such as carpooling options or local pick-up services for pupils in an effort to reduce congestion) and e-enabled community outreach services.

### **Sustainable tourism**

Increasing demand for local outdoor activities and public awareness of natural environments and biodiversity offer potential avenues for development of tourism in rural areas; for example, holidaying-at-home ('staycationing'), where a holiday is formed around day-trip leisure activities within driving distance of a family's or person's home, has been a growing market after the economic crisis of 2008. In response to Covid-19 this may further increase, as people may wish to minimise long and medium haul journeys.

Rural areas may choose to strategically plan network of natural and semi-natural areas designed to deliver a range of recreational opportunities, aiming to improve health & wellbeing, enhancing biodiversity and increasing ecosystem resilience, strengthening the landscape character, climate change resilience and supporting a sustainable economic development. Offers of outdoor activities depend on the local natural assets, including greenways, blueways, mountain bike tours, water-related activities such as canoeing and paddle board safaris, guided walks, summer camps, climate change facilities and schools, biodiversity field trips, and the emergence of designated 'Dark Sky'<sup>28</sup> locations, alongside various forms of tourism-based environmental and cultural education programmes.

Integrated tourism approaches may also identify a combination of local assets as the basis for packaged tourism offers, including specific site visits related to food and drink processors, or sites of cultural and heritage value, benefitting the wider community and building a regional or local brand. For example, greenspaces can be used for sustainable food production, contribute to flood management and at the same time provide access to nature for informal recreation. The inter-relationship and connections

between the individual projects carried out in a geographically defined area are essential aspects to be considered to ensure that opportunities for shared positive outcomes and mutual benefits are maximised.<sup>29</sup>

### **Bioeconomy and circular economy opportunities:**

Through their involvement in farming, fishing, and forestry activities, rural areas are uniquely positioned to take advantage of the opportunities presented by the bioeconomy. Rural communities can benefit from the jobs and value creation brought by bioeconomy activities and related ecosystem services (e.g. using modern digital technologies to manage water and soil resources more efficiently).

By pushing for biologically produced inputs into other industries, the bioeconomy enables a diversification of agri-food towards value chains related to chemicals, pharmaceuticals, and plastics, together with the production of nature-based alternatives to traditional fertilisers, paints, glues, or pharmaceuticals. Local agricultural business can provide residues and by-products from the growing and processing of crops to be processed in biorefineries to produce waste-based products, like using tomato and olives waste to develop fertilisers, food-packaging, bio-based coatings consisting of a vegetable fraction or entirely made from bio-based materials such as vegetable oils and natural pigments<sup>30</sup>, natural additives, aromas and functional food products with health benefits<sup>31</sup> and lastly, biofuels.

Industries and activities associated with the bioeconomy, which are characterised by research and development activities and use of new technologies, have strong innovation potential for products and production processes. Also, in combination with digital technologies, bioeconomy activities can stimulate innovative business practices and increases overall rural competitiveness and growth.<sup>32</sup> Digital tools can enhance performance of farming, fisheries and forestry sectors by supporting precision production methods; for example, through the use of data-driven management tools to optimise crop production. Digital technologies can enable innovative systems such as hydroponic<sup>33</sup> or aquaponic<sup>34</sup> farming which, in turn, can be combined to reduce nutrient waste through reuse, making the food production system circular and sustainable.<sup>35</sup> Further, moving towards more innovative cultivation methodologies and business practices can increase the attractiveness of farming activities to younger generations.<sup>36</sup>

The circular economy provides opportunities in rethinking existing production processes and recognises the value of waste-stream to feed into new processes or products, contributing to innovation, growth, and job creation.<sup>37</sup> A circular economy approach underlies the EU Farm-to-Fork Strategy, one of the major building blocks of the European Green Deal, which aims to further develop efficient food production systems, better storage and packaging, healthier consumption and more sustainable processing and farm transport.<sup>38</sup> Rural agri-businesses can tap into the potential of circular economy synergies within food production and distribution to diversify their products and activities, for example making use of specific waste and by-products of the local agricultural streams to provide high-quality food and drink products. Specific examples are a vodka-distillery using non-marketable potatoes<sup>39</sup> or the development of “Beer crackers” produced using grains from microbreweries which would otherwise be thrown away.<sup>40</sup>

Production and consumption of renewable energy in the EU have been increasing, but further efforts are still needed if the EU’s renewable energy targets are to be met. Here, sustainable bioenergy (i.e. production and use of biomass for energy generation) has an important role to play. Biomass is the most significant renewable energy source in the EU, making the agriculture and forestry sectors particularly important to renewable energy production. Further development of sustainable bioenergy value chains has the potential to deliver a positive environmental impact and create an economic opportunity which is greater than, for example, solar or wind projects that have limited impact on rural job creation and development.<sup>41</sup>

Through the mobilisation of wider geographic networks, rural communities can cooperate to mobilise enough resources to enable larger scale waste management and renewable energy projects. Locally produced manure, crop or wood residues can provide the necessary input to run a local biogas plants<sup>42</sup> to provide gas, electricity and heating to local households, offices, or public buildings. In return, farmers can use the digestate<sup>43</sup> as fertilisers.<sup>44</sup> Where such projects aim at community-gain, excess revenues from cooperative projects can feed back into the local community, for example by supporting other energy initiatives such as energy efficiency retrofitting of buildings, and employment generating activities.

- 1 See the Cork 2.0 declaration [https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/sites/enrd/files/cork-declaration\\_en.pdf](https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/sites/enrd/files/cork-declaration_en.pdf)
- 2 [https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/leader-clld\\_en](https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/leader-clld_en)
- 3 European agricultural fund for rural development (EAFRD). <https://ec.europa.eu/info/food-farming-fisheries/key-policies/common-agricultural-policy/rural-development>
- 4 OECD, 2019: OECD Regional Outlook 2019: Leveraging Megatrends for Cities and Rural Areas. <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264312838-en>
- 5 Waasland Region, in Belgium, provides an example of an initiative to enable the local communities to engage with the citizens and participate in climate action and raising public support for energy saving actions and renewable energy was the aim of the Waasland Region, in Belgium. For more information, see: [https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/sites/enrd/files/project/attachments/gp\\_be\\_waaslandenergy\\_web\\_388\\_fin.pdf](https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/sites/enrd/files/project/attachments/gp_be_waaslandenergy_web_388_fin.pdf)
- 6 See the example of Aragon, Spain, in Section 2: Seizing new opportunities
- 7 See the example of Feldheim, in Germany in Section 2: Seizing new opportunities
- 8 See the example of Green Infrastructure in Wales, UK in Section 2: Seizing new opportunities
- 9 See the example of Emissions Zero in Wallonia, Belgium, in Section 2: Seizing new opportunities
- 10 See, for example: OECD, 2016: Regional Outlook. Productive regions for inclusive societies. <https://regions20.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/OECD-Regional-Outlook-2016.pdf> and Eurostat, 2019: Eurostat regional yearbook 2019. <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/3217494/10095393/KS-HA-19%E2%80%91001-EN-N.pdf/d434affa-99cd-4ebf-a3e3-6d4a5f10bb07>
- 11 See, for example: OECD, 2016: Rural 3.0 - A framework for rural development. <https://www.oecd.org/cfe/regional-policy/Rural-3.0-Policy-Note.pdf> and Eurostat, 2019: Eurostat regional yearbook 2019. <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/3217494/10095393/KS-HA-19%E2%80%91001-EN-N.pdf/d434affa-99cd-4ebf-a3e3-6d4a5f10bb07>
- 12 Eurostat, 2019: Eurostat regional yearbook 2019. <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/3217494/10095393/KS-HA-19%E2%80%91001-EN-N.pdf/d434affa-99cd-4ebf-a3e3-6d4a5f10bb07>
- 13 ENRD, 2018: Smart Villages. Revitalising rural areas. [https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/sites/enrd/files/enrd\\_publications/publi-enrd-rr-26-2018-en.pdf](https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/sites/enrd/files/enrd_publications/publi-enrd-rr-26-2018-en.pdf)
- 14 See, for example: Eurostat, 2017: Statistics on rural areas in the EU. [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Statistics\\_on\\_rural\\_areas\\_in\\_the\\_EU#Education](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Statistics_on_rural_areas_in_the_EU#Education) and European Parliament, 2019: Demographic trends in EU Regions. <https://ec.europa.eu/futurium/en/system/files/ged/eprs-briefing-633160-demographic-trends-eu-regions-final.pdf>
- 15 ENRD, 2017: Seminar on 'Revitalising Rural Areas through Business Innovation'. [https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/sites/enrd/files/s4\\_rural-businesses-factsheet-digital-hubs.pdf](https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/sites/enrd/files/s4_rural-businesses-factsheet-digital-hubs.pdf) and ENRD, 2018: Smart Villages. Revitalising rural areas. [https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/sites/enrd/files/enrd\\_publications/publi-enrd-rr-26-2018-en.pdf](https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/sites/enrd/files/enrd_publications/publi-enrd-rr-26-2018-en.pdf)
- 16 See, for example, Rubizmo 2018: Anticipated Futures for Modern Rural Economies, Short policy brief. <https://rubizmo.eu/attachment/render/fbbb3655-bef5-4ed6-9a49-3db33baa2cf7>
- 17 The term 'ecosystem services' refers to the direct and indirect benefits to humans gifted by the natural environment and from healthy ecosystems (e.g. terrestrial, freshwater and marine ecosystem). Ecosystem services include: the products obtained from ecosystems such as food, fresh water, wood, fibre, genetic resources and medicines ('Provisioning services'); the benefits obtained from the regulation of ecosystem processes such as climate regulation, natural hazard regulation, water purification and waste management, pollination or pest control ('Regulating services'); the provision of living spaces for plants and animals and maintaining the viability of gene-pools through biodiversity ('Habitat services'); and non-material benefits that people obtain from ecosystems such as spiritual enrichment, intellectual development, recreation and aesthetic values ('Cultural services'). See, Biodiversity Information System for Europe (BISE) <https://biodiversity.europa.eu/topics/ecosystem-services>
- 18 EC, 2012: Innovating for sustainable growth: a bioeconomy for Europe. <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/1f0d8515-8dc0-4435-ba53-9570e47dbd51>
- 19 See, for example: OECD, 2012: Linking renewable energy to rural development. [https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/urban-rural-and-regional-development/linking-renewable-energy-to-rural-development\\_9789264180444-en#page3](https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/urban-rural-and-regional-development/linking-renewable-energy-to-rural-development_9789264180444-en#page3) and European Court of Auditors, 2018: Renewable energy for sustainable rural development: significant potential synergies, but mostly unrealised. <https://op.europa.eu/webpub/eca/special-reports/renewable-energy-5-2018/en/>

- 20 To maintain and increase its customer base, a family-run Polish company, Zakład Wyrobów Metalowych Dojnikowscy (ZWM,) needed to offer more than the mere production of metal goods and so developed a range of services, from the initial design, delivery and installation, to repair and maintenance services after purchase. See <http://www.zwmdojnikowscy.pl/en/about-us/>
- 21 See the example of Food Assemblies in Section 2: Seizing new opportunities
- 22 The Guardian, 2020: Milk floats ride to the rescue of locked-down British households. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/11/milk-floats-ride-to-the-rescue-of-locked-down-british-households>
- 23 See the example of Ludgate Hub in Skibbereen, Ireland, in Section 2: Seizing new opportunities
- 24 See the example of Molenwaard, in the Netherlands, in Section 2: Seizing new opportunities
- 25 See the example of Ludgate Hub in Skibbereen, Ireland, in Section 2: Seizing new opportunities
- 26 STEM stands for: science, technology, engineering and mathematics.
- 27 A social enterprise is a business run by a group of volunteers who charge for a product or service, where all traded income is reinvested in sustaining and developing the business, and where the product or service provided is a response to a local relevant social need. The business is therefore managed by the workers, acting like a cooperative providing customised jobs and training to the long-term unemployed, people with mental illnesses or limited skills, or to migrants.
- 28 See, for example: Dark Sky Ireland (<https://www.darksky.ie/>), Mayo Dark Sky Park (<http://www.mayodarkskypark.ie/>), and Kerry Dark Sky Reserve (<http://www.kerrydarkskytourism.com/>)
- 29 See the example of the Green Infrastructure in Wales, UK in Section 2: Seizing new opportunities
- 30 Royal HaskoningDHV [undated], Factsheet Bio-Based Coatings. <https://biobasedprocurement.eu/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Biobased-Coating.pdf>
- 31 See the example of “Agrimax, multiple high-value products from crop and food-processing waste” examples from Italy and Spain, where two pilot biorefineries are to be set up: one to process waste from tomatoes and cereals at a family-run farm in northern Italy, the second one, at a fruit producing facility in southern Spain, will process olive and potato waste to produce fibres, protein and aromas. More details at: <http://agrimax-project.eu/#overview>
- 32 EIP-Agri Workshop, 2019: Opportunities for farm diversification in the circular bioeconomy. <https://ec.europa.eu/eip/agriculture/en/event/eip-agri-workshop-opportunities-farm>
- 33 Hydroponic greenhouse production methods entail growing plants in a porous material – other than soil – and allowing water containing mineral nutrients to filter through it.
- 34 Aquaponic is a cropping system combining a hydroponic unit with aquaculture, i.e. raising aquatic animals in tanks.
- 35 Danner, R.I. et al, 2019: Designing Aquaponic Production Systems towards Integration into Greenhouse Farming, Water 2019, 11(10), 2123. <https://doi.org/10.3390/w11102123>
- 36 EC, 2019: DG Agri Research Factsheet: Digital transformation in agricultural and rural areas. [https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/food-farming-fisheries/farming/documents/factsheet-agri-digital-transformation\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/food-farming-fisheries/farming/documents/factsheet-agri-digital-transformation_en.pdf)
- 37 EC, [undated]: Circular Economy webpage. [https://ec.europa.eu/growth/industry/sustainability/circular-economy\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/growth/industry/sustainability/circular-economy_en)
- 38 EC, 2020: Farm to Fork Strategy for sustainable food. [https://ec.europa.eu/food/farm2fork\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/food/farm2fork_en)
- 39 See the example of a Danish distillery in Section 2: Seizing new opportunities
- 40 See the example of the BIGH Farm in Brussels, Belgium, in Section 2: Seizing new opportunities
- 41 European Court of Auditors, 2018: Renewable energy for sustainable rural development: significant potential synergies, but mostly unrealised. <https://op.europa.eu/webpub/eca/special-reports/renewable-energy-5-2018/en/>
- 42 See the example of Emissions Zero in Wallonia, Belgium, in Section 2: Seizing new opportunities
- 43 Digestate is the material remaining after the anaerobic digestion of a biodegradable feedstock.
- 44 ENRD, 2019: EAFRD Projects Brochure: Bioeconomy. [https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/sites/enrd/files/enrd\\_publications/publi-eafrd-brochure-09-en\\_2019.pdf](https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/sites/enrd/files/enrd_publications/publi-eafrd-brochure-09-en_2019.pdf)

## Annex II: Seizing new opportunities: examples of innovative and community-led rural development projects

This section identifies examples of local development projects across European rural communities. The selected projects represent community-based approaches which have assisted the diversification of rural communities, supported the skills and capacity development of local stakeholders, and brought positive change at the local level. The examples are illustrative in nature and are aimed at stimulating the development of project ideas and thinking in the Midlands.

It should be recognised that all the identified projects have been uniquely shaped by their specific economic, social and institutional contexts, thereby limiting the simple transfer of lessons to other locations. Following on from the previous section, the selected examples are presented by overarching themes. These are related to community involvement and services, digital infrastructure, tourism and heritage, renewable energy, agri-business and diversification, and entrepreneurship and training.

### Community involvement and services

#### **Including citizens in the energy transition dialogue: Catalan Institute for Energy and Aragon Infoenergy Project - Spain**

Including citizens in the energy transition debate to identify local alternative energy sources, challenges and concerns is the objective of two separately run projects in Spain, namely the Catalan Institute for Energy workshops and Aragon InfoEnergy Project. The Catalan Institute for Energy (ICAEN) initiated a participatory approach to include citizens in the energy transition debate in order to identify solutions towards the Catalonia energy model of 2050. It organised two open sessions (the inaugural and the final) and three workshops, where attendees - citizens and experts – were able to reflect, debate and jointly propose needs and solutions in three pre-identified challenges: “Photovoltaic self-consumption and solar communities”, “Electric vehicle and energy storage opportunities” and

“Digitization of energy”. 71 project proposals arose from the participatory approach and are currently being evaluated.

Aragón Infoenergía is a network of eight LEADER Local Action Groups that jointly implemented a project to promote an energy transition by local and renewable resources and with the involvement of the local communities. The Local Action Group Bajo Aragon-Matarrana initiated the project, which subsequently expanded to include seven other Local Action Groups. The collective project established several specific actions such as information provision, conferences, and advisory services to promote and support the development of rural renewable energy projects. The collaboration set up a communication strategy to make local entities and companies aware of the project. They created an info energy point and specific digital management tools. Auditors and experts have provided advice to local entities and citizens on better energy solutions to reduce energy consumption.

*Source: <https://www.asiader.org/>*

#### **Social Enterprise Planning - Ireland**

A social enterprise is a business run by a group of volunteers who charge for a product or service they provide, responding to a locally relevant social need, whilst all traded income is reinvested in sustaining and developing the business. The aim of the Social Enterprise Community Planning in Offaly was to support the social, recreational and economic regeneration of the community. The support focusses on key strengths and opportunities for future social and economic development of the area and on the identification of the priority actions to take advantage of such opportunities. Local communities are enabled to take ownership of the actions and have a lead role in engaging with other stakeholders to develop a social enterprise in their own local area. The support was tailored for each community, as different areas have different community resources, assets and gaps to be filled. Facilitators were pivotal in helping local groups making the leap from

idea to reality, from the brainstorming to addressing the practicalities of many aspects of a final overall plan and waiting for feedback on many legal and formal aspects of the plan.

*Source: <https://offalyldc.ie/enterprise-supports>*

### **Creetown Initiative – Scotland (UK)**

Creetown is a village with a population of around 750. The Creetown Initiative was formed in 2002 by local residents who wanted to improve services and quality of life for people living in the village. It has carried out a wide range of projects in the village and surrounding area. The initiative now employs 14 staff and have expanded the scope of their work to include a consultancy service to other communities and organisations in Scotland. Projects undertaken include leasing motorcycles to young unemployed people to allow them to access work or training while staying in the village; undertaking a community arts project to redesign the village square; managing the youth club; and redeveloping the closed down bar to create a space for community businesses focussed on the tourism sector.

*Source: <http://creetowninitiative.co.uk>*

### **Monmouthshire Green Infrastructure Strategy – Wales (UK)**

Green infrastructure (GI) is a strategically planned network of natural and semi-natural areas designed and managed to deliver a wide range of ecosystem services, e.g. water purification, air quality, space for recreation and climate mitigation and adaptation. The network can improve environmental, economic and social benefits through natural solutions, supporting the green economy, creating job opportunities and enhancing biodiversity, based on an integrated and joined up approach. Monmouthshire, in Wales, UK, has developed a Green Infrastructure Strategy, recognizing the multi-functionality of Green Infrastructure assets and aiming to maximise benefits through an integrated approach. Projects are identified based on their inter-relationship and connections to ensure that opportunities for shared outcomes and mutual benefits for the involved communities are identified. The five objectives of the GI Strategy are: improving health & wellbeing; enhancing biodiversity & increasing ecosystem resilience;

strengthening the character of the landscape; increasing climate change resilience; and supporting a sustainable economic development are the five objectives of the GI Strategy.

*Source: <https://www.monlife.co.uk/connect/green-infrastructure/green-infrastructure-strategy-2019/>*

## **Digital infrastructure and networks**

### **The Ludgate Hub - Ireland**

Skibbereen, Ireland, used to be a town characterised by very low-level broadband and a lack of e-centre or enterprise parks which failed to attract and provide a diversity of employment opportunities. Initiated by a board of eleven local people operating on a pro-bono basis, the hub is in a rehabilitated bakery shop. A steering group of local entrepreneurs, digital ambassadors (volunteers) and local business owners / enterprises, including business and service providers, retailers, teachers, farmers, students, and the local authority were all involved in the project initiation phase. Through pro-bono contributions, the project development made use of the available local human capital, used for mentoring advice, financial / legal advice, (inter)national network opportunities / contacts, marketing and technical support. The Chamber of Commerce supported the re-branding of the rural town, by developing a dedicated website. A joint venture between the Electricity Supply Board (ESB) and Vodafone delivered a 100% fibre-to-the-building broadband network and installed 1GB of internet connectivity. The Hub provides numerous offers through which the local residents and businesses can use its services, such as desks and rooms for both short- and long-term use, conference and training spaces for private meetings, workshops or trainings, providing state-of-the-art digital and non-digital equipment and technologies. It has developed into a beacon of innovation enabling new spin-off enterprises to develop. The hub created an ecosystem of creativity and ultimately made Skibbereen a hotspot for technology start-ups and relocation. Today, the hub activities are self-sustained, and it employs 11 permanent staff. It attracted 25 Co-Working Companies and enabled €1.8 Million in local services & trades since 2015. 15 new hub

members have permanently moved to the rural area with their families. Through the organisation of events, the hub has supported over 2,800 bed nights in the local area.

*Source: <https://www.ludgate.ie/>*

### **Cowocat\_Rural Network of coworking spaces in rural Catalonia - Spain**

'Cowocat\_Rural' aims to attract young skilled professionals to rural areas and tackle outmigration by providing a network of co-working spaces in rural areas. The aim is to boost the creation of employment and economic activity in the rural areas and to promote the values of coworking and teleworking in the participating territories. It promotes networking through a database identifying local actors and enables the connection of rural professionals who are part of the coworking ecosystem. It further encourages collaboration between the existing coworking spaces, public or private, and organises networking events and workshops. New coworking spaces can build on support material provided by the organisation, in terms of business development support and technical advice. Furthermore, the organisation has established programmes to promote coworking opportunities with universities or high-school students. The Coworking Rural Visa (also called RuralPass) promotes the mobility of professionals within and between rural and urban areas. The RuralPass facilitates and allows all coworkers part of the Cowocat\_Rural Network to work for three days a quarter, free of charge, in another rural area with an affiliated coworking space or in one of the urban coworking spaces in Catalunya. Coworkers of urban spaces can also use this service to go to rural areas. The Rural&Go programme offers a tourism package which combines work and holiday, making the coworking spaces available whilst offering the benefits of the rural areas for leisure and recreational purposes. Over 18 spaces and 130 professionals are today part of the network. Twelve networking meetings have been organised with over 300 attendees. The network created a coworking space in a University and organised a training programme in two Universities to promote the concept of coworking. It also organised the 'Catalunya Coworking Day', offering training to 50 participants and the opportunity to exchange experiences.

*Source: [https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/sites/enrd/files/project/attachments/rr-es\\_rr-01\\_cowocat\\_ok\\_dl\\_cdp\\_ok\\_0.pdf](https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/sites/enrd/files/project/attachments/rr-es_rr-01_cowocat_ok_dl_cdp_ok_0.pdf)*

## **Tourism and local cultural and heritage sites**

### **Big Pit National Coal Museum – Wales (UK)**

Big Pit is an award-winning British national museum which still retains many features of its former life as a coal mine. The Museum is set in a unique industrial landscape, designated a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 2000 in recognition of its international importance to the process of industrialisation through iron and coal production. It is one of the few mining museums where visitors can descend in the pit cage and visit the places where generations of coal miners worked. With facilities to educate and entertain all ages, Big Pit offers a multimedia tour of a modern coal mine with a virtual miner in the Mining Galleries providing access to those who may have difficulty accessing the site, and surface exhibitions and displays held in the Pithead Baths and original colliery buildings. Through the Underground Tour, visitors can go 300 feet underground with a real miner and see what life was like for the thousands of men who worked at the coal face. Big Pit is an anchor point on the European Route of Industrial Heritage. The route comprises 850 sites across 32 countries and showcases the diverse industrial history across the continent. Big Pit is a reminder of the coal industry in Wales and the people and society it created.

*Source: <https://museum.wales/bigpit/>*

### **Landschaftspark Duisburg-Nord - Germany**

The Landschaftspark Duisburg-Nord was formed on the former site of the Thyssen Ironworks which closed in 1985. The silhouette of the ironworks defined the townscape and demolition would have resulted in the loss of the industrial heritage. It is one of 25 attractions on the Ruhr Industrial Heritage Trail. It has created a large open recreational space for the population, as well as opportunities for sports and leisure; and cultural activities such as theatre and concert performances. Over time, biodiversity has increased and in addition to the landscaped areas, there is a wilderness area where no visitors are allowed. The parc has managed to attract over 1.2 Million visitors in 2019, attracting visitors through lightshows, fairs (jobs and sectoral), festivals, outdoor activities (such as movie projections) and competitions (such as mountain-biking, sand buildings, hiking and running trails).

*Source: <https://www.landschaftspark.de/en/>*

### **St Fagans National Museum of History – Wales (UK)**

Previously known as the Museum of Welsh Life, the museum is intended to preserve aspects of rural life exploring history together with the visitor through people's everyday lives. The museum stands in the grounds of the St Fagans Castle and gardens, a late 16th-century manor house. Since 1948, over forty original buildings from different historical periods have been re-erected in the 100-acre parkland, among them houses, ironmen cottages, a farm, a school, a chapel and a Workmen's Institute. The site holds displays of traditional crafts, with a working blacksmith forge, a pottery, a weaver, a miller, and a clog maker. It also includes two working water mills: one flour mill and one wool mill. Part of the site includes a small working farm which concentrates on preserving local Welsh native breeds of livestock. Products from the museum's bakery and flour mill is available for sale. Visitors gain an insight into the rich heritage and culture of Wales, and the Welsh language can be heard in daily use amongst craftsmen. Throughout the year, St Fagans hosts festivals, music and dance events, exploring all aspects of how people in Wales have lived, worked and spent their leisure time.

*Source: <https://museum.wales/stfagans/>*

### **The Vistula Valley regional Branding – Poland**

The Vistula Valley in the Kujawsko-Pomorkie region, Poland, is a region of rich cultural and culinary heritage. A project co-funded by the European Agricultural Fund for Regional Development (EAFRD) set out to promote the food and cultural attractions in the area, resulting in a package of thoroughly researched offers for tourists, a new cultural and food brand and a more business-like approach to attracting tourists. It built on a participatory approach, where over 100 locals took part in workshops, study-trips and activities aiming to share knowledge, improve skills and develop new approaches in the tourism industry. Extensive analyses were undertaken to identify the tourism potential, the development of a local brand that clearly identifies the cultural identity of the area, involving experts of the tourism industry to match the offers with the demands and mobilising an extensive stakeholder network for a successful identification of tourism packages. The project resulted in the launch of a new network promoting food and culture tourism in the Vistula valley

and the creation of 6 food-themed tourist packages including trips to the Vistula Valley and the Dobrzynska area.

*Source: [https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/sites/enrd/files/project/attachments/gp\\_pl\\_vistula\\_valley\\_brand\\_webv.pdf](https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/sites/enrd/files/project/attachments/gp_pl_vistula_valley_brand_webv.pdf)*

### **Mid-Ireland Adventure - Ireland**

Tourism in rural areas offers great potential due to the increasing demand for outdoor activities. Mid-Ireland Adventure is a start-up company that aims to supply the growing demand in outdoor activities in rural areas of the Midland region. It provides a wide range of activities, including mountain bike tours, guided walks, summer camps, stand up paddle board safaris, as well as environmental and cultural education programmes. Through LEADER support, the start-up has been able to purchase further equipment. Not only has the start-up secured a permanent position, it is also expected to expand with the growing demand and contributes to spin-off benefits to the rural communities, by attracting local, national and international customers, which make us of local retail, hospitality and accommodation.

*Source: [www.midirelandadventure.ie](http://www.midirelandadventure.ie)*

## **Local renewable energy development**

### **Community owned renewable energy plants - Belgium**

Emissions Zéro is a citizen cooperative created in 2007 investing in the production of renewable energy in Wallonia and Brussels. It is part of a wider Federation of Citizens Renewable Energy Cooperatives (REScoop EU) and counts over 2000 members. Its aim is to boost the development of a 100% Belgian green electricity - from wind, hydro, PV and biomass – and to promote and ensure the citizens' control over both the production and the consumption of such energy. Emissions Zéro selects sufficiently profitable projects to be able to develop the cooperative while offering a reasonable financial return to the partners active in the production of green electricity. It has installed and operates: 2 wind turbines located in the Dour-Quévrain wind farm, of which it is a 50% owner in partnership with

the municipalities; provided financial support in form of a subordinate loan of €250,000 to the Monceau-sur-Sambre hydroelectric power station on the Sambre River – whilst providing capital for the facility in association with another 8 citizen cooperatives; an agricultural bio-methanisation unit in Ochain, operational since 2017 for the production of electricity (in turn, doubling its capacity with the installation of a second cogeneration engine); finally, acting as third-party investor in photovoltaic installations, and operating photovoltaic resources installed on roofs of public buildings, car parks, and schools. It provides a total of 17000 MWh of electricity annually sold to a green supplier or to the co-operators at a fair and stable price.

*Source: <https://www.emissions-zero.coop/>*

#### **Energy self-sufficient village Feldheim - Germany**

In the Feldheim district, Brandenburg, a comprehensive concept for a decentralised renewable energy supply for companies, private households and municipalities has been realised. The project was developed and implemented in partnership-based cooperation between the city of Treuenbrietzen, the residents of the district, the agricultural cooperative Fläming eG and the project developer Energiequelle GmbH. Energiequelle GmbH planned the building blocks of the concept based on state-of-the-art modern wind energy and biogas plants, linking it to the regional energy supply network via a newly built distribution system. The wind farm forms the backbone of the local power supply, while the heat is supplied by the local biogas plant. The natural fluctuations of the wind power supply will be compensated in a second expansion phase by a battery storage system. A modern wood chip heating plant is available for the additional heat requirement on particularly cold days. The speciality of the Feldheim concept is the separate local heating and power network through which the heat and electricity produced on site is routed directly to consumers. In this way, costs and dependencies on the networks of traditional energy suppliers are avoided. Ownership of the local heating network is held by the Feldheim Energie GmbH & Co. KG, through which the connected households, companies, and the city of Treuenbrietzen have come together. Energiequelle GmbH and Co. WP Feldheim 2006 KG are the owners of the separate electricity networks to supply the connected end-consumers. The investments

required to build the separate electricity and heat supply networks were covered by local, regional, national and EU funds.

*Source: <https://nef-feldheim.info/the-energy-self-sufficient-village/?lang=en>*

#### **Previous mining town to 100% renewable energy sourced community - France**

Loos-en-Gohelle is a town of 7000 inhabitants located in the North of France. The city, just like its surrounding area, was deeply affected by coal mining industries, active from the 1850s until their closure in the 1980s. With strong political support from its mayors, the town has since chosen the road towards renewable energy through strong citizen involvement. The previous mining sites were converted into cultural and sustainable development centres, setting up PV panels on 12 public buildings. A private operator finances and takes care of the construction works. They aim for the development of eco-construction (for social housing and municipal buildings) and new approaches to urban planning and the environment (water infiltration on the plot, greenbelt, differentiated management of green spaces, etc.). Developing a new identity with renewable energies in a location that has a deeply engrained identity with the coal mining industry was at first challenging, as well as involving all local stakeholders in the process. Citizens had to rediscover their capacity to drive actions and personal initiatives. Projects and initiatives were initially carried out “on an ad hoc basis”, though these actions have gradually developed into a coherent framework. Loos-en-Gohelle is now considered a “pilot city for sustainable development” in France, and in 2015 it joined the network “100% Territoires à énergie positive” (100% Renewable Energy Sourced communities) aiming to have 100% of their electricity coming from renewable energy sources by 2020 and to rely 100% on renewables by 2050.

*Source: <https://www.renewables-networking.eu/documents/CaseStudyLoos-en-Gohelle-FR.pdf>*

## Farming and agri-business development

### State-of-the-art hydroponic greenhouse farm - Romania

Dissatisfied by the quality and supply of vegetables in supermarkets, a family from Constanta, Romania, decided to relocate into a rural community approximately 30km from their town, to develop a state-of-the-art greenhouse hydroponic farm. The vegetables grown were to supply the urban supermarkets. The objectives were to reintroduce new tomato cultivation methodologies, to use renewable energy sources, and create a sustainable business for the local community by generating jobs for the local workforce and increasing the added value of agricultural products. The family was supported by the Agricultural Chamber of Constanta, where they followed agronomy courses, received specialised advice on hydroponic applications and the necessary equipment, and support on their funding application for the Regional Development Programme (RDP) along with a private bank loan (both granted in 2011). The funding helped building the greenhouse and purchasing the equipment, such as trolleys and platforms for harvesting and storing the crops, an electromagnetic pollination systems or foil for soil cover. Operational spaces for the hydroponic production system included also a warehouse, thermal plant - using pellets and briquettes - a refrigeration unit, weighbridge, etc. The family is the sole local producer of tomatoes and provides supermarkets as well as wholesalers directly. The production accounts for 350 tons in a single production cycle and is able to deliver 2 tons daily. The project created 12 direct jobs and the family has applied for further funding to extend their primary processing area.

*Source: [https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/sites/enrd/files/project/attachments/gp\\_ro\\_polytunnels\\_renewable\\_web.pdf](https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/sites/enrd/files/project/attachments/gp_ro_polytunnels_renewable_web.pdf)*

### The BIGH Farm – Belgium

The BIGH Farm project has defined its mission to create a network of sustainable farms that build on the existing urban infrastructure, using buildings and their energy loss, rainwater, CO2 and natural potential for space, orientation, microclimate and solar exposure. Located

in Brussels, the BIGH Farm project aims to build its network based on circular economy principles, i.e. identifying waste-streams to minimise raw material input such as energy, water and crops, and create a no-waste production process through an aquaponic farming ecosystem. It identifies its opportunities on a zero-tolerance for chemicals, antibiotics or Genetically Modified Organism (GMO) policy. Short distribution channels support the delivery of fresh and high-quality produce, creating direct and indirect employment opportunities in the production, processing and delivery systems. The BIGH Farm cooperates with local agri-businesses, such as the Beer Food Company, which uses the grains of urban microbreweries to transform into crackers – this approach to creating a network of cooperating farming and agri-businesses is accelerating the development of circular food production systems and is applicable in urban as well as rural areas. The BIGH Farm has diversified its portfolio in offering also guided visitor tours, a location for corporate events and environmental education programme for schools and universities alike.

*Source: <https://bigh.farm/>*

### Lammefjorden's Distillery - Denmark

Inspired by a 200-year old local tradition of high-quality alcohol production, three local entrepreneurs initiated a micro-brewery using the locally produced surplus potatoes, which were otherwise deemed non-marketable. The potatoes grow in reclaimed, vitamin-rich soils which gives the vodka and brandy a distinctive spice and is a sought-after product across the world. Next to its vodka, the distillery offers visitor attractions through a tour to observe the entire production process, from growing the potatoes to the final product. It is the first company in Denmark to produce Danish vodka and schnapps from potatoes and the first delivery of the product took place in fall 2018. The three entrepreneurs undertook several preparatory activities to develop their business plan for the development and establishment of a distillery and identification of local potato producers; obtaining price quotes for the interior infrastructure and equipment; and building on the experiences of other micro-distilleries in the region. They also approached the Danish Technological Institute (Agrotech) for their product development, branding and marketing. After 2.5 years of start-up phase, the

distillery was finally built in a retrofitted farmhouse and a first batch arrived on shelves in 2018. The distillery has so far created one further employment opportunity but is expected to grow with a growing number of products to be developed. Through its tours, the distillery is expecting around 1000 visitors annually.

*Source: <http://www.nordicsoil.dk/>*

### **The Food Assembly – multiple Member States (BE, DE, ES, FR, IT, NL)**

The Food Assembly is a network of farmers and processors that sell their produce directly to the consumer. Through so-called Hives, the farmer can sell their produce to consumers in several different localities within their proximity. The Food Assembly is thus offering a new opportunity for producers, which set their own prices and receive an income that is both fair for them and good for the local economy, and encourages a more environmentally friendly and sustainable shopping experience through short supply-chains. Buyers can choose and select products from a range of farmers and agri-businesses on dedicated online platform and collect it at a defined location in their town or city, bringing the farmers products directly into urban areas. Each Food Assembly or Hive has its own online platform and physical site looked after by a Host. The farmers and agri-businesses have their own dedicated trading space in which they manage their product catalogue, prices, sales, collections and invoicing, flexibly managing the availability of their products so to avoid producing waste from unsold stock. Farmers are effectively shifting from producers to processors, distributors, marketers and customer relationship managers. They earn 80% of pre-tax turnover, and the remaining 20% goes to the Assembly Host, which provides technical and commercial support.

*Source: <https://laruchequiditoui.fr/en>*

## **Entrepreneurship and training**

### **GrowBiz rural start-up support – Scotland (UK)**

Start-up enterprises face specific challenges in rural areas and require a more targeted support system. The GrowBiz project aims to provide comprehensive support services for new and existing enterprises in rural Perthshire in Scotland, to support the development of employment opportunities, improved skills and a stronger local economy. GowBiz and the Enterprise Rural Perthshire project provide community-based enterprise support in rural Perth and Kinross, through a combination of one to one support for start-ups, peer learning and training sessions, a mentoring programme and networking events. So far, they have worked with over 400 rural businesses; 2500 people have participated across 200+ learning and networking events; three women's networks were set up which now meet at a monthly basis; over 100 new businesses and 200 jobs created in the area and 45 mentors trained. The added value of the 'relational' approach, which is based on long-term relationships with businesses and encouraging collaboration and knowledge-sharing, is the network and legacy that it leaves behind - new businesses are equipped with tools and skills to do well on their own.

*Source: <https://www.growbiz.co.uk/>*

### **PISMA-NOVSKA Business incubator - Croatia**

The metal industry has a long tradition in the Sisak-Moslavina County and is one of the priority economic sectors. To use the untapped potential, an entrepreneurial incubator has been built to support and promote entrepreneurs in their business endeavours and create new employment opportunities in the predominantly rural area. PISMO is the first digital innovation hub located in Sisak Moslavina county with the outspoken objective to support the successful shift of traditional industries to modern ones. To do so, it provides services to companies that are eager to adopt digital technologies in dominantly traditional activities. The core business of PISMO is in smart skills development through the enhancement of existing skills base and creation of a modern labour force for smart specialisation. PISMO also partly focuses on providing services for the metal processing sector. It is

expected to improve the position and competitiveness of the Croatian manufacturing industry focused on fabricated metal products for the international market. The business incubator provides all the necessary equipment, such as a CNC machine, a 3D printer, a music and film studio and software in over 26 functional spatial units. Currently, PISMO is also engaged in creating technical documentation for a gaming campus (university, student dormitory, e-sport arena).

*Source: <http://inkubator-pismo.eu/en/digital-innovation-hub/>*

### **Caberfeidh Horizons – Scotland (UK)**

The Caberfeidh Horizons Transition & Training Project offers training, jobs and employment and personal development opportunities for young people and adults living in the rural area of the Cairngorms National Park in Scotland. The project covers two parts: Transition and Employability, and Training. The Transition and Employability targets young people from 15 to 24-year-old, transitioning from school to work. The Training part provides specified work experience opportunities for young people in need of additional support, including learning disabilities, mental health problems and long-term unemployment. Since its start in 2017, the project has recruited 46 trainees. The training has successfully led to three achieving Sports Leader Awards, courses in computing skills, video skills or graphic arts. The project also holds a weekly drop in/outreach event in Aviemore in partnership with High Life Highland.

*Source: <http://caberfeidhhorizons.com/training---transition-project.html>*

### **Odisseu, bringing back the youth to rural areas - Spain**

Odisseu aims to fight the brain drain that affects most rural areas in Catalonia, Spain, and provide solutions for generation renewal, with a focus on people aged up to 40. The organisation enables young people in rural areas to participate in site visits of local companies to discover the locally available business network for potential future employment opportunities in the area. Participants can connect to the network directly through an online tool, named “Retorna” (Return). To attract young talents back into the rural areas, the organisation has developed guides on available services, such as housing, coworking, health, education, sports, culture etc. Finally, they conducted a study to identify the required profiles to incorporate young professionals into the agricultural sector.

*Source: <http://www.odisseujove.cat/>*

## **Resources from the Initiative for coal regions in transition**

The European Commission’s Initiative for coal regions in transition develops support materials to assist practitioners in coal regions across Europe, and toolkits, guidelines and reports, covering key transition-related issues for coal regions in transition in Europe.

### **Website**

[www.coalregions.eu](http://www.coalregions.eu)