



REPORT OF NORTHERN PERIPHERY PROGRAMME “RETAIL IN RURAL REGIONS” PROJECT 2009/11 STUDY VISIT AND MEETINGS : IRELAND : 24-27 JANUARY 2011

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Summary

This study visit and the meetings held form part of the NPP “Retail in Rural Regions” programme of planned activities, which have previously included study visits and meetings in the Western Isles, Norway and the Faroe Islands

On each occasion each Partner (Scotland, Ireland, Northern Ireland, Finland, Iceland and the Faroe Islands) sends between 2 and 7 delegates, and the Programme Managers from the Kemi-Tornio University in Finland always attend to facilitate the Project Steering Group and Partner meetings

These events also provide the main opportunity for networking as these are the only times in the 3 year project that all Partners meet face to face – all other communication is by e mail or the ilinc web-based meeting system and more recently use of Moodle for project materials

Programme

The programme in Northern Ireland included a Project Steering Group meeting (1 hour) and a ½ day Project Meeting at the University of Ulster in Coleraine followed by visits to local visitor attractions

In the Republic of Ireland there were visits to the Donegal Enterprise Board, a community project running a visitor centre and café in the Gaeltacht (Irish speaking region) a visit to a privately owned convenience store, a visit to a florist with a wide-ranging stock and a visit to a co-operative running a visitor centre

Steering Group Meeting: 25 January 2011

As the fourth and penultimate gathering of the steering group, the discussions built on the previous meetings and concentrated on ensuring work packages were progressing as planned and on schedule.

The key challenges were how to take all the accumulated knowledge, experience and understanding to the final session in Iceland in November alongside maximising the legacy of the work, both nationally and internationally.

Project Meeting : 25 January 2011

The agenda at this meeting included discussion of the final Project Seminar to be held in Iceland 8 & 9 November 2011, benchmarking good practice (including use of Moodle and proposed Support Hall) and reports on project activities in Ireland, Scotland and Northern Ireland, with comments from the Faroe Islands related to Work package 4

In the report from the Icelandic Partner details were provided of the Seminar for Rural Retailers held on 14 & 15 January 2011 with further Seminars to be held in March and September – 20 rural retailers and 4 representatives of chains attended the first Seminar

In the Scottish report the main activity reported on was the proposed Training Programme for community-owned stores which had been discussed with those involved from November 2010 and would run until May 2011. The training topics to be covered include Customer Service, Merchandising, Selling Skills, Stock Control, Food Hygiene and Health & Safety

A copy of a recent report produced by the Plunkett Foundation entitled “Community-owned shops : A better form of business” was given to the leaders of each Project Partner.

Reference was also made to contacts which had been established through the NPP Project with a number of agencies and Scottish Government Departments, as well as links with Merkur and the Social Enterprise Academy

A final seminar of the CRN's Best Practice Group will be held in September at which the main outcomes of the project will be disseminated and discussions held about how the services required by rural retailers can be delivered from 2012 onwards



Visit to Donegal County Enterprise Board (Bord Fiontar Chontae Dhun na nGall), Letterkenny, County Donegal

The delegates were briefed on the work of the DEB by its Chief Executive Michael Tunney

The presentation covered a description of all the State-funded agencies in Ireland providing business support both to businesses based in Ireland and to businesses wishing to locate in Ireland

The DCEB was established in 1993 and has a small team 6 – all involved in promoting an enterprise culture and entrepreneurship in Donegal, including a support system for new and existing businesses

This included grant aid, business information service, management development & training and 1: 1 mentoring

In 2010 Euros 500,000 was provided in grants and 87 potential jobs created
Support for retail includes :

- Business Information Service
- SYOB (Start your own business) and SBA (Small Business Accounts)
- Management development programmes
- Profitnet Networking Programme – 9 groups, 170 businesses, 40% retail
- Mentoring
- Cross Border Support – Tradelinks

By coincidence, Tor Justad, the NPP RRR Project Co-Ordinator in Scotland knew the Chief Executive as he had delivered the first Social Enterprise Training Programme in Donegal in the 1990's

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Visit to McGee's Service Station, Falcarragh, County Donegal

The town's name An Fál Carrach means 'The Rugged Fence' but historically it is also known as Na Crois Bhealaí, meaning 'The Crossroads'. Falcarragh is situated on a narrow inlet of Ballyness Bay overlooking the Atlantic Ocean and has a population of around 800 people. Falcarragh is the main commercial town between Letterkenny and Dungloe

Seamus McGee, the owner of the service station, has taken care of the family business since taking over from his father. The business has had to change over the years due to other businesses moving into the area. New legislation meant he had to re-think which services he would provide within the garage side of the business. But never the less the business is still a success and Mr McGee hopes his daughter Meabh will follow in his footsteps.

Unlike many of Scotland's community-owned rural retailers, the service station has various other businesses in close proximity. Each business has its own unique selection of goods so as not to be in competition with the other.

Meabh has taken full advantage of the training provided by the RRR and has sung the praises of such opportunities to broaden her outlook, meet other retailers, share thoughts and ambitions to add to an already successful business.

Visit to Dunlewy Co-operative, Dunlewy, County Donegal

Dunlewy is a community with a population of approximately 200 close to Mount Errigal in a narrow valley close to the Upper and Lower Dunlewy lakes.

Dunlewy is on the route from the town of Letterkenny (40 km) to the coastal communities of Bunbeg (12 km) and Derrybeg – all situated in the parish of Gweedore, in an area of outstanding natural beauty

In the late 1980's the community realised that the area could only be developed through its own efforts and an association was formed in 1986

Our guide Seamus Gallagher, one of the main community activists involved in the Co-operative, explained that the original objectives included developing the local infrastructure, create employment and to enhance the culture and Irish language of the area as an integral part of the Donegal Gaeltacht

In 1989 a Co-operative was formed with the same objectives, with early projects being social rather than economic

The social projects included renovating an old school to become a community centre,

The approach used in the organisation has always been to allow maximum voluntary input and tapping of local energy

Fund-raising soon became necessary which involved all the community and local questionnaires were used to gauge opinions about different projects

One of the main community proposals related to the development of tourism and a decision was taken to develop a Visitor Centre

A weaver's cottage was purchased and Ionad Cois Locha (The Lakeside Centre) opened in July 1990 with 12 employees, 12,000 visitors and an income of £51,000, and by 2008 this had risen to 40 employees and an income of €800,000

By 2010 the Centre comprised many facilities including interpretative areas, café, craft shop, model farm outdoor play area, go-karting, pleasure boat,

themed walks, and Lakeside train rides, as well as traditional music concerts and a winter music school

There are also camper van facilities, exhibition centre and multi-purpose cultural centre

The centre is open from Easter to the end of October and funding of €3.8 million has been received from both State and Donegal-based agencies

The Co-operative has won a number of national and county awards for Tourism, Community Development and Business

The Centre is always looking for new ideas and current ones being researched include projects focused on fishing and accommodation and a hydro scheme

It sees itself as being in the leisure, entertainment and education businesses, with culture and recreation as its core, with the aims of generating profit, creating employment and stimulation of economic activity in the area remaining as core objectives

The Centre has demonstrated that a small isolated community can, by combining self-help with outside support can harness the potential of the spectacular surroundings for local benefit and the local people now feel they are “masters of their own destiny”

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Visit to Florist Shop in Ballybofey

The florist shop – owned by a husband and wife – is located at the end of a parade of shops, set back from the main road. We arrived late on into the afternoon and it was getting dark, however, the shop was very well lit and the fresh flowers outside made a welcoming impression.

The window display was very good and 'invited' you in.

Once inside, it quickly became apparent it was quite a mixture of goods – ranging from flowers and associated gifts to pet accessories, children's toys and greetings cards. The shop extended back some 50ft + and every inch seemed to be stocked.

The owners, who had decided to diversify into floristry not many years ago, had been on numerous training courses and had also received on site training for floristry. Keeping abreast of trends meant training is a key element in their business and this extended into their receptiveness to the training offered on the RRR project, of which they were both highly enthusiastic.

There is only one other florist shop in the town and the owners felt there was enough trade for both to survive. It was encouraging to learn they had little 'wastage' on fresh flowers and had a lot of wedding flower business both locally and from people from abroad returning to get married 'back home'.

The amount and quality of stock on the premises and the money tied up in it could be a challenge to some small retailers even in terms of stock taking resulting in orders for more than required and having to reduce the price of remaining goods.

It was hoped the RRR training would cover areas such as how to select stock, stock control, financial implications of holding too much of the wrong stock, and how best to 'brand' a business and selectively satisfy their customers across a broad price range and how to negotiate (eg splitting cases with other small traders).

With an inviting feel and quality floristry it was clearly a shop that had the potential to take full advantage of the RRR training and further improve both the service it provides the local community and its own sustainability.

Conclusion

The fourth gathering of the partners not only added a fascinating Irish dimension but also highlighted all the learning that had been accumulated so far and the training and networking that had been generated in each country. Everyone was looking forward to taking all this forward to the final event in Iceland in November and the creation of an effective lasting legacy from the work across rural northern Europe.

