



**Rialtas na hÉireann**  
Government of Ireland

## **Spending Review 2021**

# **Focused Policy Assessment: Town and Village Renewal Scheme**

**FINANCE AND EVALUATION UNIT**

**DEPARTMENT OF RURAL AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT**

**NOVEMBER 2021**

This paper has been prepared by IGEEES staff in the Department of Rural and Community Development. The views presented in this paper do not represent the official views of the Department or Minister for Rural and Community Development.

# **IGEEES**

Irish Government Economic and Evaluation Service

## Summary

This paper examines the Town and Village Renewal Scheme (TVRS) with a view to identifying potential operational improvements to the Scheme.

The TVRS is one of a series of national and local support measures designed to rejuvenate small rural towns and villages throughout Ireland. It was established in 2016 following commitments in the then Programme for Government and subsequently under the Action Plan For Rural Development. The scheme has been under the remit of the Department of Rural and Community Development (DRCD) since 2017.

The scheme is delivered through local authorities each year. DRCD publish a scheme outline setting out broad parameters and priority areas in respect of the scheme. Expressions of interest are then sought by the relevant local authority from local community groups. These are evaluated by the local authorities and a number are forwarded to the Department for appraisal. A broad range of projects are supported. Projects supported to date include improving civic spaces/public realm, enhancing recreation and amenities, job creation initiatives such as the development of enterprise hubs and digital hubs, tackling vacancy by bringing vacant dwellings back into use, shopfront enhancement, town/village marketing initiatives and creation of green spaces.

The number of towns and villages supported in each local authority area is limited (up to eight in 2021) with only one project per town or village funded in any given year. As of 2021, the scheme is targeted at rural towns and villages with a population of up to 15,000 people (up from a previous threshold of 10,000). The minimum level of project funding is €20,000, and the maximum is €500,000 (up from a, mainly, €100,000 threshold originally).

This paper has seven findings and four recommendations.

## Findings

### **Finding 1: Strong and continued support for the scheme in Government policy**

The scheme was established based on a commitment in the Programme for Government (PFG) 2016, and was later referenced in the Action Plan for Rural Development (2017), and the NDP 2018 – 2027. The most recent PFG (2020), and Our Rural Future: Rural Development Policy 2021-2025 commit to expanding the scheme.

### **Finding 2: Significant total investment in the scheme**

Total project costs (grant and match funding) amounted to over €113 million over the period 2016 to 2020, €94 million of which was grant funding. 1,341 projects in 837 towns and villages have been supported through the scheme. The average grant funding per project was less than €70,000 over the period.

### **Finding 3: Geographical distribution of funding and outputs**

Between 2016 and 2020, €3.6 million, on average, was invested in each county, with an average of 51 projects supported in each county. Projects are widely distributed, with a slightly higher concentration in border, midlands and eastern regions. 210 (25%) towns and villages have received 53% of grant funding over the period, as most of these had three or more projects funded. The majority of towns and villages (703 or 84%) had up to two projects funded through the scheme.

### **Finding 4: Broad range of projects and activities funded**

For the purposes of this paper, the type of projects funded by the scheme have been classified into eight categories. Most (45%) projects were focused on improving the streetscape and environment of towns and villages. Projects with multiple activities was the second most common type (15% of projects) - 33%

for improvements to streetscape and town environment, 16% for recreational activities and 15% for town enterprise and research. The next largest category was recreational activities (12%).

**Finding 5: Efficiency of the scheme**

No suitable alternative delivery model for the scheme is identified in this paper. Stakeholders are of the view that the approach to the delivery of the scheme works well. However, a number of issues relating to some of the scheme criteria have been identified in this paper and are reflected in the recommendations below.

**Finding 6: Effectiveness of the scheme**

Given the scale and number of projects funded per town and village, the scheme supports the revitalisation of, but cannot fully regenerate, towns and villages. Stakeholders indicate that the scheme is complemented by other supports, and can support the implementation of wider masterplans, and larger project development through other initiatives.

No measurement of outcomes has been undertaken. Although difficult to measure, the use of case studies could potentially be used as an approach. Broader non-programme specific data could also potentially be used to assess whether regeneration of towns and villages is occurring. Work is progressing in this area to develop a baseline set of indicators as part of a Towns Centre First policy, which is being implemented as part of a commitment in the PFG (2020).

**Finding 7: The scheme continues to have relevance**

There remain many vulnerabilities and challenges for rural towns and villages, most recently evident from the COVID19 pandemic. Government support for the scheme is strong and there are no alternative substitutes to the scheme. Discussions with stakeholders indicate the scheme is a valued support.

**Recommendations**

**Recommendation 1: Clarifying what the scheme can achieve (links to finding 6)**

Based on the scale of funding, number of projects supported per town and village, and views of stakeholders, the scheme should generally be understood and conveyed as a complementary effort that can support wider regeneration developments.

**Recommendation 2: Further consideration of scheme criteria (links to finding 5)**

*(i) Priorities for project funding*

The priorities for project funding has varied from year to year under each scheme outline. While there is value in having a flexible approach, a more stable approach each year could provide greater certainty for stakeholders, and could help facilitate longer-term project planning and improve the quality of projects.

*(ii) Population eligibility criteria*

In 2021, the eligibility criteria for the TVRS has been increased to towns and villages with a population of up to 15,000 people. This contrasts with the Rural Regeneration and Development Fund (RRDF), which can fund towns and villages with a population size of up to 10,000 people. In this respect, greater consideration could be given to how these rural regeneration initiatives align.

*(iii) Limits on the number of projects, and town/villages that can be supported each year*

The average scale of projects supported is small with most towns and villages (63%) receiving support for one project between 2016 and 2020. As the size of local authority remits vary, to help increase the effectiveness of the scheme, consideration could be given to reassessing the existing limits on the number of projects per town and village, and the number of towns and villages supported by local authority area each year. A revised limit could be tailored to the number of applicable towns and villages per local authority area, and/or their population sizes, within overall funding limits.

*(iv) Towns and villages targeted by the scheme*

The scheme aims to provide support for a widespread distribution of towns and villages across Ireland. However, in a small number of instances, towns in sub-urban areas or close to major city boundaries have been funded by the scheme. If a policy decision was made on the suitability of including these more urban settlement types, it could alternatively allow additional projects to progress in areas that are more rural. For example, eligible RRDF projects must be outside the five metropolitan areas of Dublin, Cork, Limerick, Galway and Waterford.

**Recommendation 3: Improvements on the type and format of data and information gathered (links to finding 5)**

In terms of the type of information gathered, the application and project completion forms could be amended to focus more on the key details of the outputs, and the intended outcomes. Monitoring and review of the scheme would also benefit from classifying projects into categories by activity type. The format of data and information collected (e.g. application forms) could also potentially be changed to Microsoft excel or a similar accessible digital format for monitoring and future review.

**Recommendation 4: Improvements to measure the outcomes of the scheme (links to finding 6)**

The use of case studies is likely the most practical and feasible approach that can be used to help convey the work of the scheme. Case studies could be developed on an annual basis for a sample of individual projects, and towns and villages that have received support over a number of years. For medium-longer term outcomes or impact, while not possible to link to the TVRS directly, broader non-scheme specific data (e.g. population, employment, business activity, level of vacancy etc.) could be used to indicate whether regeneration of towns and villages is occurring. This could potentially leverage work being undertaken by the Heritage Council for the Town Centres First Policy, which involves gathering a baseline of data that can be used to observe changes in the regeneration of towns overtime.

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Purpose of this paper

This paper is a Focused Policy Assessment<sup>1</sup> (FPA) of the Town and Village Renewal Scheme (TVRS). The purpose of this paper is to enhance the understanding of the scheme, and determine whether there are improvements that could be made to the operation of the scheme.

The TVRS is funded by the Department of Rural and Community Development (DRCD). The stated purpose of the scheme is ***“to support the revitalisation of towns and villages in order to improve the living and working environment of their communities and increase their potential to support increased economic activity into the future”***.

The following areas of the scheme are examined in this paper:

- Background including policy context and operation of the scheme.
- Rationale and objective(s).
- Inputs - scheme funding.
- Outputs - projects funded.
- Efficiency - assessment of the delivery and operation of the scheme, and trends in the average cost of outputs.
- Effectiveness - assessing the extent to which the scheme is meeting its objective(s).
- Continued relevance.

### 1.2 Report structure

The structure of this report is:

- Chapter 2: background, rationale and objective(s).
- Chapter 3: inputs and outputs.
- Chapter 4: efficiency and effectiveness.
- Chapter 5: continued relevance.
- Chapter 6: findings and recommendations.
- Chapter 7: appendix A – notes to the data.
- Chapter 8: bibliography.

### 1.3 Methodology and Limitations

Analysis of the scheme has been conducted through desk-based research supported by meetings with a small number of stakeholders (outlined below). The selection of stakeholders was chosen based on geographic spread, and included those who were engaged with the case studies, which are set out later in this paper. The data and information used in this paper is primarily based on readily available data and information collected by the line unit in DRCD who is responsible for managing the scheme. Therefore, the analysis in this paper is limited to this available data. Additional data

---

<sup>1</sup> FPAs are part of the evaluation process for public sector programmes, which may examine various areas of a programme such as rationale, inputs, outputs etc.

outside of this was not sourced for this paper<sup>2</sup>. The data examined relates to the years 2016 to 2020 inclusive.

The following stakeholders were engaged to inform this review.

- Local authorities who receive grant funding for projects in their localities:
  - Carlow, Kerry, Louth, Monaghan and Sligo County Councils.
- Local business organisations:
  - County Louth - Dundalk Chamber of Commerce, and County Cavan - Coeathill Chamber of Commerce.
- The line unit in DRCD responsible for managing the scheme.

This paper broadly follows the structure of a programme logic model, which is set out in Table 1 below.

**Table 1: Programme Logic Model**

Town and Village Renewal Scheme	
<b>Objectives</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support the revitalisation of towns and villages in order to improve the living and working environment of their communities and increase their potential to support increased economic activity into the future.</li> </ul>
<b>Inputs</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Exchequer funding.</li> <li>• Matched funding from project implementers.</li> <li>• Staff resources / admin.</li> </ul>
<b>Activities</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identification of potential projects by community stakeholders.</li> <li>• Submission of proposed projects by local authorities.</li> <li>• Review and approval of proposed projects by the Department.</li> <li>• Project oversight and implementation by project implementers.</li> <li>• Review of funding drawdown requests, and issuance of funding.</li> </ul>
<b>Outputs</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Completion of approved projects.</li> </ul>
<b>Outcomes</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Revitalisation of towns and villages as places to live and work.</li> </ul>

---

<sup>2</sup> For example, aside from gathering the views of a small number of stakeholders, other primary data collection methods were not undertaken due to a range of reasons including COVID19 restrictions, costs, time and practicality.

## 2. Background, rationale and objectives

### 2.1 Introduction

This Chapter first sets out the background, rationale and objectives of the scheme. This is followed by the policy context and an overview of the operation of the scheme.

### 2.2 Background, rationale and objectives

In public policy Ireland's towns and villages are viewed as central to the social, commercial and civic life of Ireland's wider communities. Following the economic crisis in 2008, research (2014) by the Commission for the Economic Development of Rural Area (CEDRA) found that rural areas had been particularly affected. A need for the regeneration of small towns and villages was identified to support economic recovery. As a result, CEDRA (2014) recommended the development of a Rural Town Stimulus Programme that focuses on rural towns and their hinterlands. The TVRS was later established in 2016 to support town and village regeneration as part of overall government efforts to support rural development.

The stated objective of the TVRS is "to support the revitalisation of towns and villages in order to improve the living and working environment of their communities and increase their potential to support increased economic activity into the future". The intention of scheme funding is to:

- Increase the attractiveness of towns/villages as commercial and social centres and their sustainability as a place to live;
- Enhance town/village environment and amenities for residents, business and visitors; and
- Promote town/village potential for tourism and centres for culture and local heritage.

Responsibility for the scheme briefly rested with the Department of Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs when the scheme was established. It was then transferred to Department of Rural and Community Development (DRCD) in 2017. It is one of a number of supports provided through DRCD's Rural Development Investment Programme<sup>3</sup>.

### 2.3 Policy context

There is strong support for the TVRS in government policy. The scheme was established in 2016 following a Programme for a Partnership Government commitment that it would seek support for a Town and Village Renewal Scheme to support revitalisation of towns and villages i.e. increase the attractiveness and sustainability of towns and villages as places to live and work. The Action Plan for Rural Development was published in January 2017. This had a key objective of making Ireland a better place to live and work by revitalising town and villages through initiatives such as the Town and Village Renewal Scheme (Action 1 of the Plan).

Thereafter, Project Ireland 2040 was launched in 2018 to set out the strategic planning and development for Ireland over a 20-year period. It comprises of the National Planning Framework (NPF), and the National Development Plan 2018 - 2027 (NDP). The NPF noted that rural development is a multifaceted policy area. Therefore, several funding and investment structures exist, including Town and Village Renewal Schemes, to support national, regional and local priorities. As such, the NDP 2018 - 2027 committed to supporting rural towns and villages through initiatives delivered by DRCD including the TVRS.

---

<sup>3</sup> The TVRS is part of DRCD's Rural Investment Programme, which also includes the RRDF, CLÁR, the Outdoor Recreation Infrastructure Scheme, the Local Improvement Scheme, LEADER, and the Walks Scheme.

More recently, the Programme for Government: Our Shared Future (PFG) 2020 commits to development of a Town Centre First policy i.e. town centre regeneration by using existing buildings and unused lands for new development and promoting residential occupancy in rural towns and villages. As part of this policy, the PFG (2020) states that an expanded TVRS will be brought forward, to bring vacant and derelict buildings back into use and promote residential occupancy.

The TVRS is also included in policy measures 46 and 57 of Our Rural Future: Rural Development Policy 2021-2025, which was published in March 2021. Our Rural Future (2021) commits to expanding the TVRS to enable the revitalisation of rural towns and villages by bringing vacant and derelict buildings and sites back into use as multi-purpose spaces and for residential occupancy. The policy says that the TVRS will support town centre living by providing funding to local authorities or other State funded bodies to lead strategic projects that can have a transformative effect on towns.

## 2.4 Operation of the scheme

### 2.4.1 Process

DRCD has overall policy responsibility for the scheme. Each year, local authorities are invited to apply to DRCD to fund town and village projects under the scheme. Proposed projects must be identified in consultation with town and village community and business interests.

Local authorities advertise for expressions of interest for proposals from their communities and businesses. The local authority then identifies the most appropriate proposals for development (e.g. is it economical, in line with planning regulations etc.). These are made into detailed project applications in conjunction with the community and business interests. Projects are then submitted by local authorities to the Department for approval for funding. Local authorities submit three documents to the Department i.e. an overview of applications, an individual application per project, and a list of all the expressions of interest received.

The Department assesses projects based on a number of criteria including available funding, range and mix of projects, quality and impact, whether towns and villages received previous funding etc. Once approved, grant funding is provided to local authorities in reimbursement for costs incurred. Projects may be undertaken by the local authority itself, community groups, or a combination of both. The local authority releases the funding to those undertaking the projects subject to adherence to the terms and conditions of contracts the local authority has with them. Funding can be provided in three phases over the project lifetime to ensure continued cash flow for project completion. While it has varied overtime, as of 2021, each claim must provide 10% of total project costs in matched funding. Requests for draw down of funding must be accompanied by completion of a form that provides a status update on projects. Progress reports must also be submitted to the Department nine months into contracts, and on request. When a project is completed, local authorities must complete a final draw down request form, which is a compliance check that the project has been completed in line with the approved application. Projects must be fully completed to draw down the total amount of grant funding allocated to them.

### 2.4.2 Terms and conditions

A scheme outline is issued to local authorities each year. This sets out the terms and conditions of the scheme. Some of the key terms and conditions of the scheme from the 2021 scheme outline are set out in Table 2 below.

Overall, the terms and conditions of the scheme did not change substantially between 2016 and 2020. However, a number of major changes were made to the scheme in 2021, which are aligned to the commitments made in Our Rural Future (2021). The type of activities funded are broad, though



the particular focus of the scheme may be weighted towards certain activities in any one year. For example, the 2021 scheme outlines states that the focus is on tackling vacancy, and supporting remote working and town centre living. The eligibility criteria for towns and villages has largely remain focused on two categories i.e. those with a population under 5,000 people and those with a population of between 5,001 and 10,000 people<sup>4</sup>. In 2021, the eligibility criteria has increased to towns and villages with a population of up to 15,000 people on a trial basis. However, the majority of funding (60%) is allocated to towns and villages with a population under 5,000. The number of applications that can be made is limited to one project per town and village.

There is a requirement that applications for funding have gone through a consultation process with local community and business interests and be consistent with local plans and town and village health checks. The minimum amount of grant funding (€20,000) has remained unchanged. However, the maximum amount of grant funding (up to €500,000) has increased substantially from previous years, which generally had a maximum limit of €100,000<sup>5</sup>. The reason for this increase is that funding under Rural Regeneration and Development Fund<sup>6</sup> (RRDF) has a minimum grant funding level of €500,000 in rural towns and villages and there was an identified need to address a gap in funding projects up to this minimum funding level. The expectation is that this will enable the scheme to support projects that have the potential for a transformative effect within their local area, which is one of the aims of Our Rural Future (2021).

**Table 2: Terms and conditions of the TVRS, 2021**

2021 Scheme Outline	
Activities funded (non-exhaustive list of examples)	<p>Projects that bring vacant and derelict buildings and sites back into use as multi-occupancy spaces and/or residential occupancy; remote working hubs; town/village masterplans; upgrade and enhancement of shopfronts and street facades; parks, green spaces and recreational amenities; marketing campaigns to attract workers and business; support of night time economy; town centre enhancements; town/village health checks; car parking improvements; accessibility enhancements; heritage assets and quality marks etc.</p> <p>Projects not supported include footpath and cycle routes, support for a single enterprise; renovation of community centres and sports clubs; project more appropriate to other schemes such as CLÁR, the RRDF, the LIS, ORIS etc.</p>

<sup>4</sup> In 2020, the scheme was adapted in response to COVID19. An exceptional measure was introduced which allowed for applications from certain towns with a population over 10,000. It was stated that this was in recognition of the importance larger towns to economic revival and the part they play in the social fabric of communities.

<sup>5</sup> A higher maximum level of funding (€200,000) was permitted in 2020 for a limited amount of projects (i.e. up to 20% of total scheme funding) that could demonstrate exceptional benefit.

<sup>6</sup> The RRDF is a fund, established as part of Project 2040, which provides for capital investment in rural Ireland over the period 2019 to 2027. The purpose of the fund is to support job creation in rural areas, address de-population of rural communities, and support improvements in towns and villages with a population of less than 10,000, and outlying areas.

<b>Eligible towns and villages</b>	<p>Towns and villages with a population &lt;5,000, and with a population of 5,001 - 10,000. Larger towns with a population of up to 15,000 people may be eligible where the application is of high quality and outlines a strong need for the investment, good value for money and positive outcomes that will have a substantial impact on the town.</p> <p>Towns and villages with a population up to 5,000 will receive at least 60% of available funding. Local authorities can submit up to eight proposals to the Department (1 up to €50,000 (masterplan/seed funding), 4 up to €100,000, 2 up to €250,000, and 1 up to €500,000). Only one application can be submitted in respect of any individual town and village.</p>
<b>Consultation and engagement</b>	<p>Development of proposals must be done in consultation with town and village community and business interests. Proposals must also be consistent with the County Development Plan, Local Economic and Community Plan (LECP), town health checks, and other relevant local development plans.</p>
<b>Grant aid made available</b>	<p>The minimum and maximum grant payable is €20,000 and €500,000 respectively. In light of ongoing challenges due to COVID19, grant aid is provided for up to 90% of project costs. 10% matched funding is provided for by local authorities and/or philanthropic contributions.</p>

Source: DRCD Scheme Outline 2021

## 2.5 Summary and conclusions

Following the economic crash in 2008, research conducted by CEDRA (2014) noted that rural areas had been particularly affected and that there was a need for the regeneration of small towns and villages in Ireland to aid economic recovery. In 2016, the Programme for a Partnership Agreement (2016) stated that a Town and Village Renewal Scheme would be established to support revitalisation of towns and villages. This was part of the Government’s overall policy to support rural Ireland.

The TVRS was subsequently established in 2016. The stated objective of the TVRS was “to support the revitalisation of towns and villages in order to improve the living and working environment of their communities and increase their potential to support increased economic activity into the future”. The TVRS has been continuously included in Government policy since then. This includes the Action Plan for Rural Development (2017), the NDP 2018 – 2027, the PFG 2020, and Our Rural Future: Rural Development Policy 2021-2025. It has been included as a commitment to supporting rural Ireland through revitalisation of towns and villages.

DRCD has policy responsibility for the scheme. Local authorities submit projects for funding to the Department each year. Projects must be identified in consultation with the local community and be consistent with local plans. The minimum funding provision per project is €20,000 and, as of 2021, the maximum is €500,000. One project per town or village can be funded each year, and, as of 2021, a maximum of eight projects can be funded in any one local authority area.

As noted in Table 2 above, the types of projects supported are broad ranging. This includes bringing vacant and derelict buildings and sites back into use as multi-occupancy spaces and/or residential occupancy; remote working hubs; town/village masterplans; upgrade and enhancement of shopfronts and street facades; parks, green spaces and recreational amenities etc.

### 3. Inputs and outputs

This Chapter examines the inputs and outputs of the scheme. Inputs mainly relate to grant funding between 2016 and 2020. However, total project funding (grant funding and matched funding) is also assessed. The outputs of the scheme refer to the number and type of projects undertaken over the same period. A small sample of case studies are also provided in this Chapter to help explain the types of projects supported by the scheme. For the analysis of inputs and outputs in this paper, projects funded by the scheme have classified into eight categories based on the type of activities they support as set out below.

- **Community facilities:** Community facility projects e.g. the refurbishment and improvement of community centres.
- **Culture and heritage:** Projects aimed at culture, the arts, and heritage sites e.g. refurbishment of historical buildings.
- **Multiple activities:** Projects that consist of a mixture of activity types.
- **Recreational facilities:** Outdoor recreational activities e.g. playgrounds and green spaces.
- **Remote working/digital hubs:** Remote working, digital hubs or broadband connection points e.g. adapting vacant buildings to facilitate remote working.
- **Streetscape and town environment:** Aesthetic or functional improvement of town streetscape or environment including infrastructural enhancements e.g. the funding of additional car parking spaces, street lighting and signage.
- **Tourism:** Projects that promote tourism e.g. funding of visitor centres/hubs.
- **Town enterprise and research:** Developing enterprise, town planning and marketing strategies e.g. town websites and business supports.

#### 3.1 Inputs

This section briefly outlines the inputs to scheme by considering:

- Total project costs i.e. grant and match funding.
- Distribution of grant funding by county, town and village, and activity type.

##### 3.1.1 Total project costs

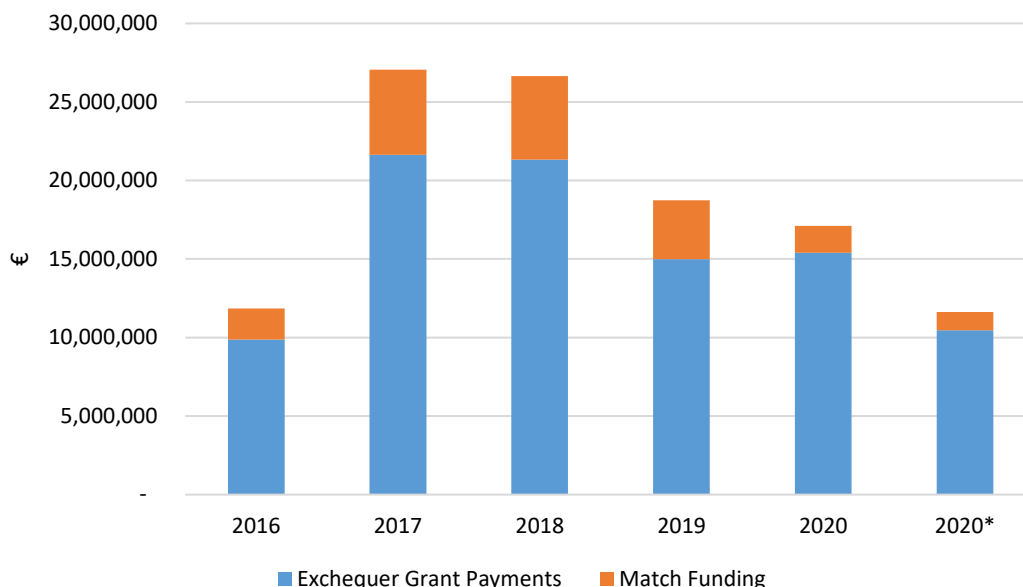
The total cost of a project is the sum of grant funding and match funding<sup>7</sup>. Between 2016 and 2020, total project costs amounted to over €113 million. On an annual basis, projects costs increased from €11.9 million in 2016 to €28.7 million in 2020. Grant funding amounted to €93.7 million or 83% of total project funding over the period. Grant funding peaked in 2020 at €25.9 million. In 2020, €10.5 million of grant funding was provided under an accelerated measure<sup>8</sup>, as part of the Government's July Stimulus Package.

---

<sup>7</sup> Data relating to the actual value of matched funding per project was not used in this paper, as it was unavailable in a readily accessible format. For the purposes of this analysis, it has been assumed that the full amount of matched funding was contributed for each project.

<sup>8</sup> In 2020, the Department ran its main scheme, and an accelerated measure due to the challenges associated with COVID19. The purpose of the accelerated measure was to "assist the expedited delivery of projects that address the short-term challenges of increasing footfall in rural villages and towns, and assisting local businesses/communities to adapt to public health requirements, particularly social distancing". The maximum funding limit was set to €25,000 per project for the accelerated measure in 2020, with the possibility of €40,000 for a small number of high impact projects.

**Figure 1: Total project costs (€), 2016 - 2020**



Source: DRCD. \*Accelerated measure.

### 3.1.2 Distribution of grant funding

#### Distribution of grant funding by project bands

Table 3 shows the distribution of total grant funding by project bands between 2016 and 2020. This shows that grant funding was concentrated between €50,001 to €100,000 (62.9%). Approximately 82% of total grant funding was provided for projects up to €100,000.

**Table 3: Distribution of total grant funding (€) by project bands, 2016 - 2020**

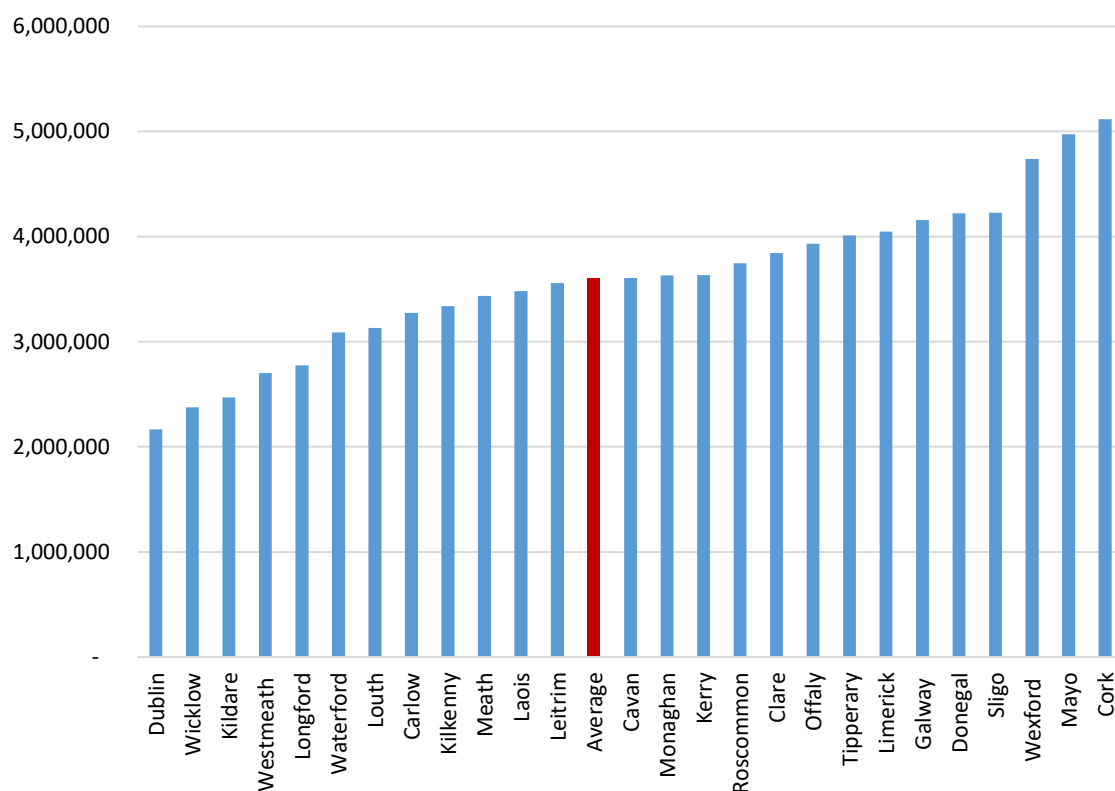
Bands of grant funding (€)	Aggregate grant funding (€)	Percentage
150,001 – 200,000	15,315,179	16.3%
100,001 – 150,000	1,493,107	1.6%
50,001 – 100,000	58,928,867	62.9%
0 - 50,000	17,950,135	19.2%
<b>Total</b>	<b>93,687,288</b>	

Source: DRCD

#### Distribution of grant funding by county

Figure 2 shows the total level of grant funding provided by county. The average level of grant funding by county between 2016 and 2020 was €3.6 million. Cork received the highest level of funding at €5.1 million over the period, while Dublin had the lowest level of funding at €2.2 million.

**Figure 2: Grant funding (€) by county, 2016 - 2020**



Source: DRCD

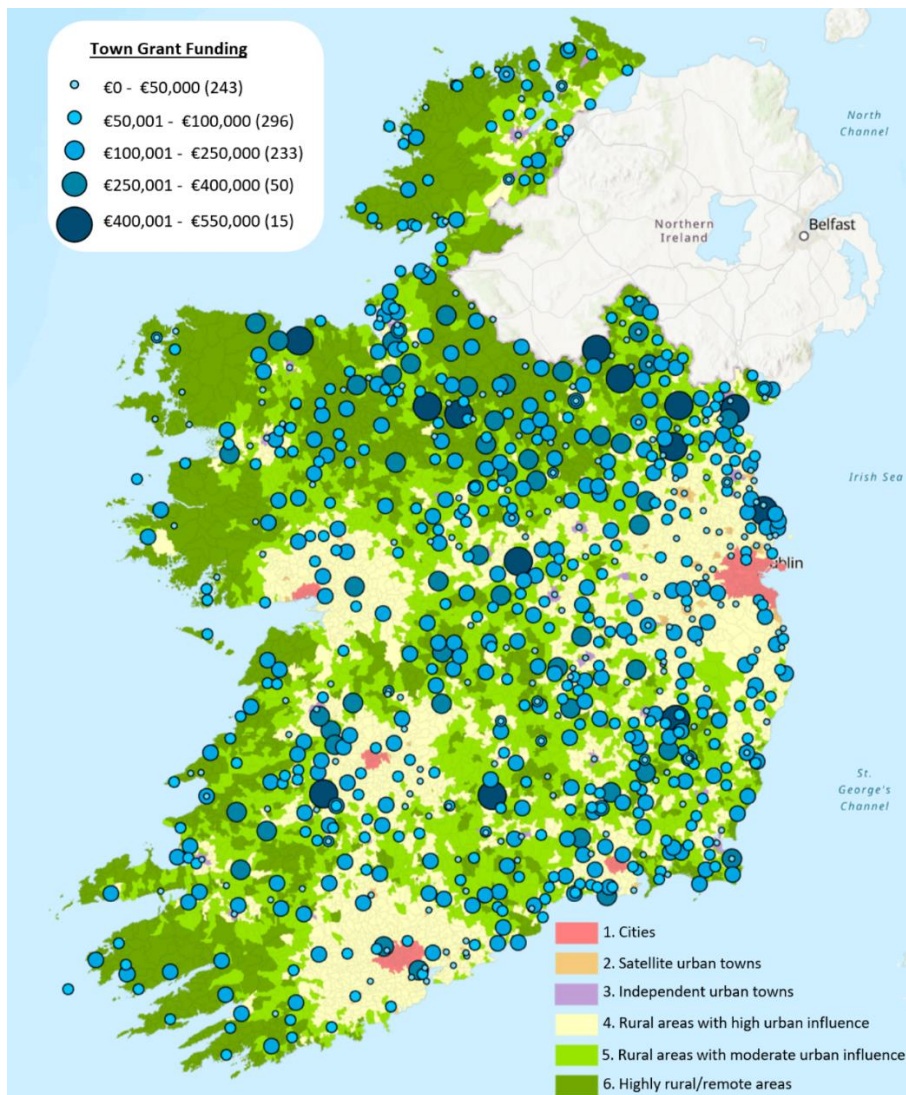
### Distribution of grant funding by towns and villages

Figure 3 below shows the distribution of funding to towns and villages between 2016 and 2020. This information is overlaid on a map of Ireland using a six-way urban/rural classification from the CSO’s report, *Urban Rural Life in Ireland (2019)*. There is widespread distribution of funding for projects across Ireland, with a slightly higher concentration in border, midlands and eastern regions. This distribution is likely, at least in part, to reflect the pattern of population concentrations and rural town and village locations in Ireland. The CSO’s report (2019) shows that highly remote areas are most concentrated in the western regions. A report by CEDRA (2014) also noted that many of the larger towns in Ireland are concentrated in the south and east regions.

Between 2016 and 2020, 837<sup>9</sup> towns and villages received grant funding under the scheme. There was a notable degree of concentration in the total funding distribution with 210 (25%) towns and villages receiving 53% of total funding. This is a reflection of the fact that the majority of these towns (56%) have had three or more projects funded. Conversations with local authorities indicated that the capacity of local communities to engage and put forward suitable projects for funding can vary. Therefore, this concentration may in turn be a reflection of the capacity of the local community to engage with the scheme.

<sup>9</sup> Note that under the accelerated measure of the scheme, some projects were funded on a countywide basis.

**Figure 3: Grant funding (€) per town, 2016 - 2020**



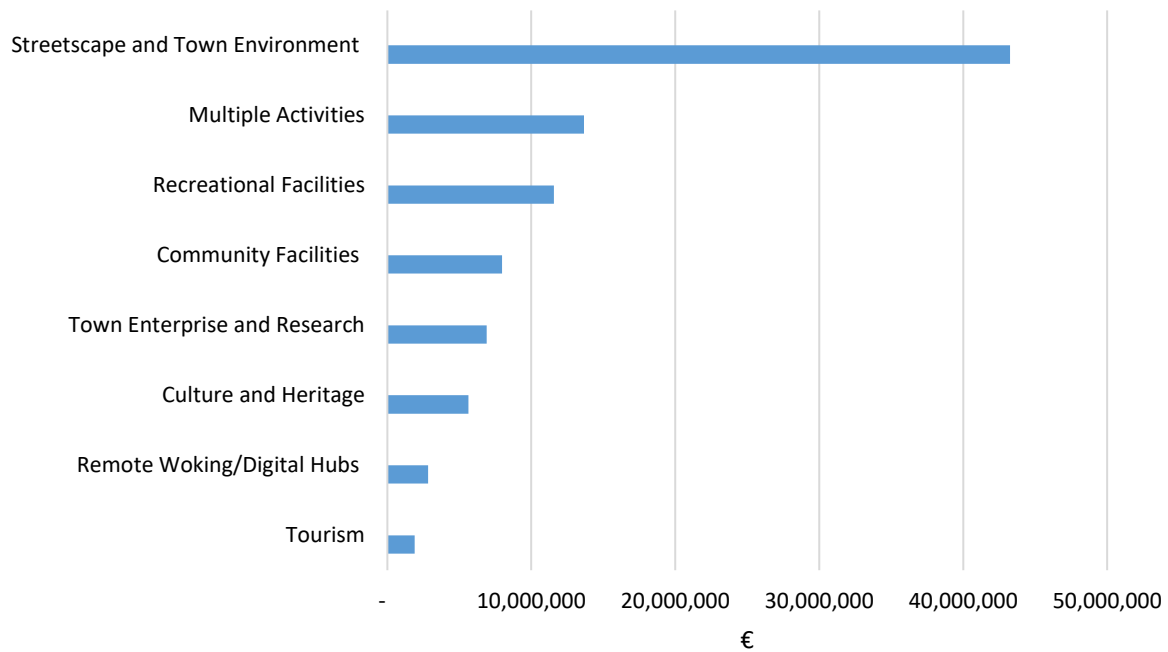
Source: DRCD

### Grant funding by type of activity

As previously noted, for the purposes of this paper projects have classified into eight different categories based on the type of activities supported. Figure 4 shows the level of grant funding by these types of activities. Funding the improvement of streetscapes and the town environment represented the most significant (€43.3 million or 46%) activity funded between 2016 and 2020. €13.6 million or 15% of total funding was provided for projects with multiple activities<sup>10</sup>. The next largest category of funding (€11.6 million or 12%) was provided for recreational activities.

<sup>10</sup> It is not possible to split out the proportion of activities under the multiple heading for this paper as project funding is not readily available (i.e. in an accessible digital format) at an itemised level.

**Figure 4: Grant funding (€) by type of activity, 2016 - 2020**



Source: DRCD

### 3.2 Outputs

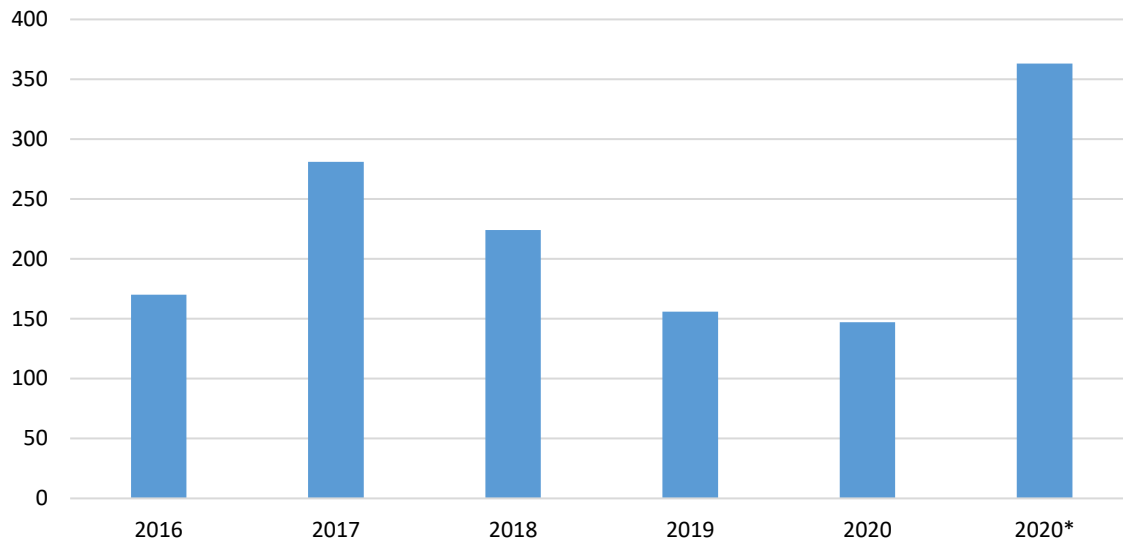
This section provides information on the number of projects by county, town/village, and type of activity. A selection of case studies is also included to help convey the work of the scheme. The case study approach was adopted given the very wide variety of types of project supported. This approach is in line with recent ESRI (2021) research on community and rural development investment and supports which notes the value of using case studies for such schemes.

#### 3.2.1 Total number of projects funded

Between 2016 and 2020 a total 1,341 projects were funded by the scheme. 978 projects were funded under the main scheme (i.e. excluding the accelerated measure in 2020), representing an average of 196 a year. 363 projects were funded as part of the accelerated measure in response to the COVID19 pandemic. On an annual basis (excluding the accelerated measure), the largest number of projects (281) were funded in 2017, and the lowest number of projects (147) were funded in 2020.



**Figure 5: Number of projects funded, 2016 - 2020**



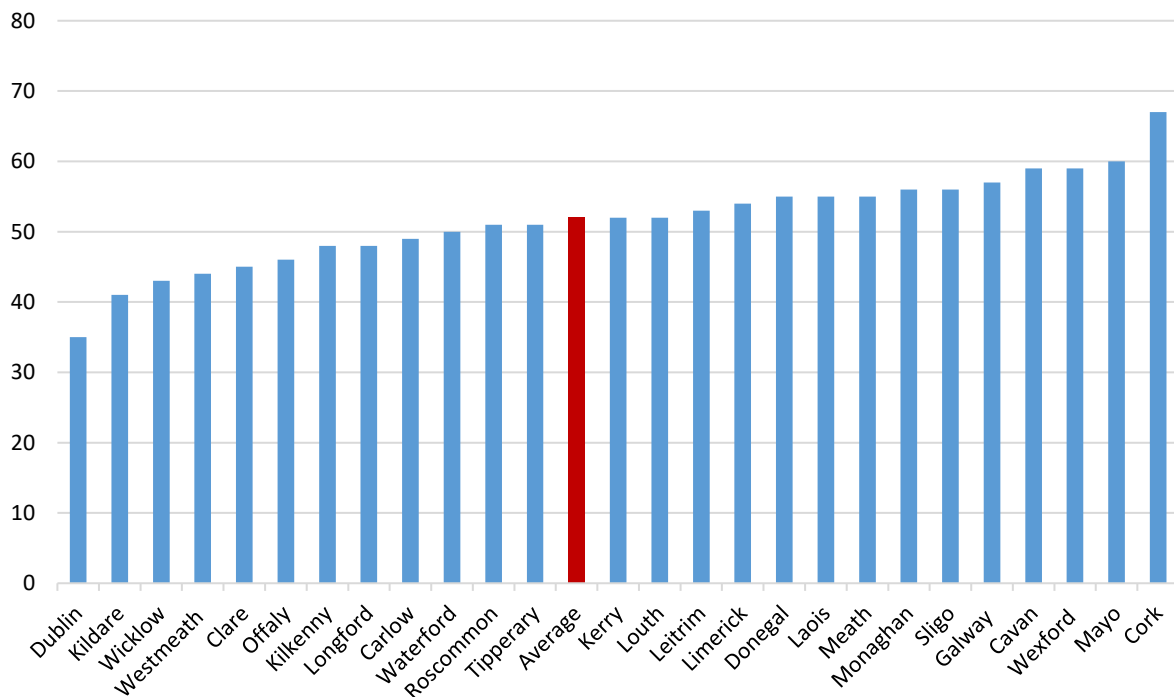
Source: DRCD. \*Accelerated measure.

### 3.2.2 Distribution of projects

#### Distribution of projects funded by county

Figure 6 shows the total number of projects funded by county. On average 51 projects were funded per county between 2016 and 2020. Cork had the largest number of projects (67 or 5%) funded, while Dublin had the lowest number of projects (35 or 3%). All other counties had between 40 and 60 projects funded.

**Figure 6: Number of projects funded by county, 2016 - 2020**



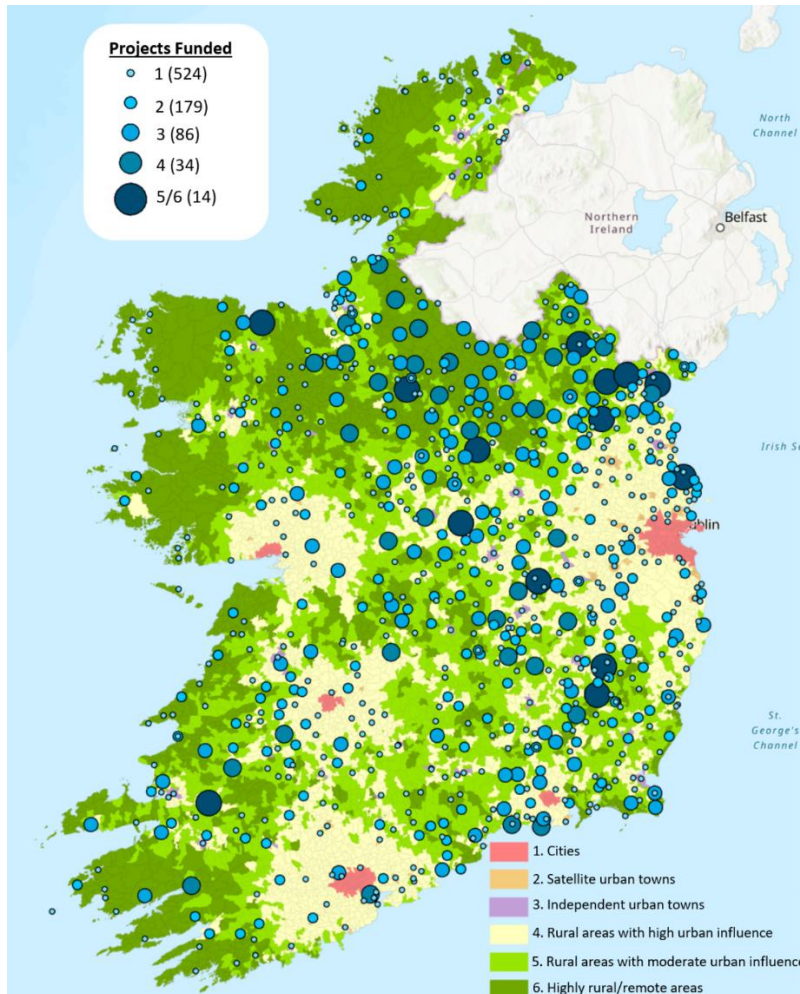
Source: DRCD



### Distribution of projects by towns and villages

Figure 7 shows the number of projects funded per town and village. As previously mentioned, 837 towns received grant funding between 2016 and 2020. The majority (524 or 63%) had one project funded under the scheme. 179 (21%) had two, 120 (14%) had three or four, thirteen (2%) had five, and one had six projects funded through the scheme. In total, 713 or 85% of towns and villages had up to two projects funded by the scheme over the period. This shows that despite a significant level of investment (almost €94 million), the number of projects supported per town and village has been modest.

**Figure 7: Number of projects per town, 2016 - 2020**

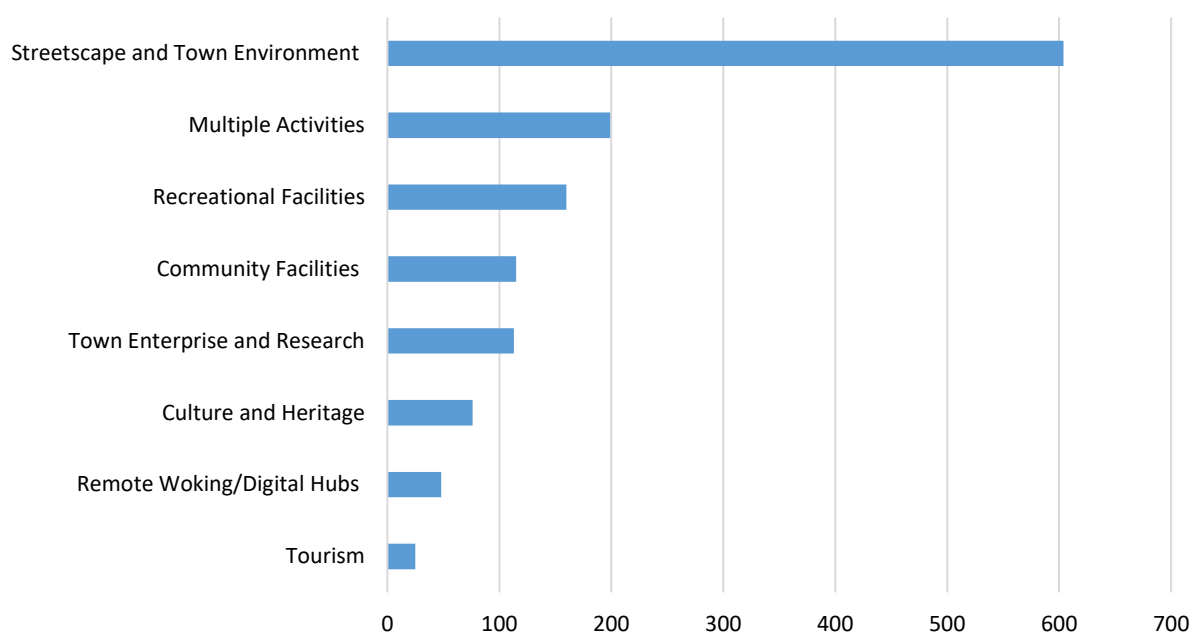


Source: DRCD

### Number of projects by type of activity

The distribution of funding to projects across eight types of activities was examined earlier in this Chapter. Figure 8 below shows the total number of projects support by these types of activities between 2016 and 2020. Most projects (604 or 45%) were aimed at improving the streetscape and environment of towns and villages. Projects that have multiple activities are the next largest category (15%), of which 33% funded improvements to streetscape and town environment, 16% funded recreational activities and 15% funded town enterprise and research. The next largest category was recreational activities (12%). The remaining categories range from 2% to 9% of total projects.

**Figure 8: Number of projects by type of activity, 2016 - 2020**



Source: DRCD

### 3.3 Case Studies

A broad range of projects are supported by the scheme. As a result, it is difficult to fully convey the types of work undertaken through the scheme in this Focused Policy Assessment. Therefore, three case studies are set out below to demonstrate the types of outputs funded by the scheme. These reflect multiple projects supported in Kenmare County Kerry, and two individual projects, one each in Virginia County Cavan, and Tulla County Clare. These case studies were chosen as they represent a geographical spread of locations that received a substantial level of funding through the scheme between 2016 and 2020.

#### 3.3.1 Multiple projects funded in Kenmare Town, County Kerry

**Table 4: Project details, 2017 - 2020**

Year	Total Project Costs	Grant Funding	Project Status	Description
2017	€39,000	€24,100	Complete	Refurbishment of Cromwell bridge, installation of street signage, electronic power points for park
2018	€95,000	€76,000	Complete	Restoration of park railings, commissioning of wooden sculpture, creation of route planner
2019	€70,000	€56,000	In progress	Renovation of Kenmare heritage centre
2020(AM)	€27,778	€25,000	Complete	Enhancement of town market footpaths
<b>Total</b>	<b>€231,778</b>	<b>€181,100</b>		

Source: DRCD

Kenmare town is located at the head of Kenmare Bay County Kerry. It is a designated heritage town. Tourism is a significant component of the town's economic activity. The town received funding through the TVRS between 2017 and 2020 for a number of projects, which aim to enhance tourism and quality of life for local people.

In 2017, funding was provided for three main activities. The refurbishment of Cromwell Bridge, the installation of small street signage and the addition of electronic power points to a local park. Total project costs amounted to €39,000 (€24,100 grant funding). Funding provided for **Cromwell**

**Bridge** was for refurbishment to ensure safety and stability of the bridge. The bridge is one of the oldest in Ireland (dating to circa 11<sup>th</sup> century) and is a heritage landmark for Kenmare. Funding for **Street signage** was sought on the back of a recommendation of the Tidy Towns Adjudication Report to provide named place signs for all streets. Funding was also provided for **electronic power points** for the park area of the square in Kenmare. This allowed for the removal of aging and unsightly cables, which benefit the overall infrastructure of the town during festivals and events.

In 2018, funding was provided for three projects that focussed on casual trading, and the development of a route planner. Total project costs amounted to €95,000 (€76,000 grant funding). A new trading area was being established and funding was awarded for the **restoration of heritage railings** around a park, adjacent to the new trading area. This was to ensure the stability and safety of the railings. Funding was also provided towards a **wooden sculpture** taking inspiration from Kenmare's location near the sea. The third project funded was a **route planner**, to help visitors plan their trip to the Kenmare. Data gathered from the route planner is monitored by the Kenmare Marketing and Events group (a group of representatives from the community and business sectors whose aim is to coordinate and develop the marketing of Kenmare). This is used to assess visitor's areas of interest.

**Figure 9: Cromwell Bridge**



**Figure 10: Heritage Railings**





In 2019 funding was provided towards the renovation of the **Kenmare Heritage Centre**. The centre showcases various themed exhibitions including the famine and legacy of landlords in the area, Kenmare lace and other historical information. On the premises, there are offices of Chamber of Commerce and Tourism, Kenmare District Community Group, Teagasc, and Fáilte Ireland. The building also houses Kenmare courthouse. A variety of works were required including the modernisation of exhibitions, new signage and lighting, improvements to building accessibility, and general renovation works to maintain structural integrity. The project commenced in Q1 2020. Total project costs amounted to €76,000 (€56,000 grant funding).

**Figure 11: Kenmare Heritage Centre**



Under the accelerated measure of the scheme, Kenmare received funding for the **enhancement of footpaths** near the town market. These works provided general accessibility improvements in the area. The objective of these works was to ensure that Kenmare’s Outdoor Market remained attractive to traders and shoppers during the Covid-19 pandemic. Total project costs were €27,778 (€25,000 grant funding).

**Figure 12: Footpath Enhancements**



### 3.3.2 Multiple projects funded in Ballisodare, County Sligo

**Table 6: Projects details, 2016 - 2020**

Year	Total Project Costs	Grant Funding	Project Status	Description
2016	€111,765	€95,000	Complete	Enhancement of Ballisodare village approaches and community park,
2017	€75,000	€60,000	Complete	Sally Gardens park development including a new pedestrian path, lighting, seating, landscaping etc.
2018	€100,000	€80,000	Complete	Rehabilitation and restoration of Ballisodare fish pass, enhancement of riverside walking route, amenity wall and railings
2020	€111,000	€100,000	In progress	Redevelopment of backlands areas to provide trail-head, parking facilities, landscaping and associated enhancement
<b>Total</b>	<b>€397,765</b>	<b>€335,000</b>		

Source: DRCD

Ballisodare a village serving a residential community for nearby Sligo City. The town is mostly known for its salmon fishery and association with the poet WB Yeats whose family had strong links to the area. The village has received funding through the TVRS to improve its attractiveness by addressing dereliction and enhancing tourism.

In 2016 grant funding (€95,000) was provided to **enhance the approaches** to the village and the grounds of the community park, and construct a **viewing platform** to provide better access to Ballisodare River.

In 2017 funding (€60,000) was provided to develop a new amenity **overlook area** at the site of the Sally Gardens made famous by WB Yeats. The project included the construction of a new pedestrian path, installation of lighting, new signage, seating, landscaping and general enhancement of the riverside area.

Ballisodare was again awarded further funding in 2018 (€80,000). This was provided for the restoration of the **river's fish pass** and the enhancement of the recently constructed riverside **walking route**. Enhancements included the construction of a low wall and railing to provide for safer use of the amenity, linking the previously constructed viewing platform to the village centre and facilitating panoramic views along the river.

In 2020 Ballisodare was awarded a fourth round of funding (€100,000). The funding was used to **address dereliction** by developing inaccessible back areas of the main street to provide a new Salley Garden amenity area with viewing areas, seating, landscaping, and pedestrian links to create a looped walk connecting the village centre to the riverside. Associated funding is also being used to make improvements to trail-head parking and informational facilities at Young's Quarry recreational amenity area, the commissioning of a WB Yeats/salmon mural, and streetscape improvements.

Figure 13: Village Signage



Figure 14: River view platform (before)



Figure 15: River viewing platform (after)





The County Council has noted increased levels of community engagement in planning and undertaking local development initiatives, which it attributes to the TVRS. Ballisodare has also experienced improved performances in the Tidy Towns completion each year since 2016, with works completed under the TVRS noted as a contributing factor increasing the attractiveness of the village. Ballisodare Community Council notes that the area has become a more attractive place to live with demand for accommodation in the village centre exceeding supply for the first time in decades. In addition, a number of new businesses have opened in the last two years creating new jobs in the area.

**Figure 16: River walk route**



### 3.3.3 Individual Project - Virginia Lakeshore Amenity, County Cavan

**Grant Funding:** €85,000 (2016), €100,000 (2018), €100,000 (2020)

The town of Virginia in County Cavan has received three rounds of grant funding (totalling €285,000) under the town and village renewal scheme for the development of the Virginia Lakeshore amenity area at Lough Ramor. The aim was to create a tourist amenity park, to attract visitors to the town.

**Figure 17: Lakeshore amenity area (1)**



**Figure 18: Lakeshore amenity area (2)**



In 2016, €85,000 was provided for the construction of footpaths, a boardwalk, outdoor fitness equipment, picnic benches and seating, and associated landscaping.

A second allotment of €100,000 was approved in 2018 for decorative lighting, carpark resurfacing, provision of fishing stands and lakeshore enhancement. In 2020, €100,000 was provided for enhancing access to the fishing stands and other development.

Cavan county council have stated that the development of the lakeshore facility has been successful and is recognised as a valuable addition to the town. It has provided a town core focal point that is aesthetically pleasing. The amenity has been an important outlet for people in the area during the COVID19 pandemic. The lake is used for recreational activities such as sailing, angling and swimming, and this activity has increased because of the project. The lakeshore is popular for staycations.

### 3.3.4 Individual Project - Cnoc na Gaoithe, Tulla, County Clare

**Grant Funding:** €100,000 (2017), €200,000 (2018)

Cnoc na Gaoithe in Tulla, County Clare has received funding (totalling €300,000) under two rounds of the TVRS for the development of a cultural and heritage building.

The site is an old school building that was donated to Comhaltas (a non-profit group focussed on the promotion of Irish traditional music) by the Sisters of Mercy religious institute. Initial restoration of the building was supported by funding through DRCD's LEADER Programme, local fundraising, and the support of Philanthropic trusts. The centre opened in 2012 teaching traditional Irish music, song, Irish language, computer skills, French, yoga, and meditation.

In 2017, funding (€100,000) was provided to convert the first floor of the building into facilities capable of hosting up to 30 visitors. Renovations included a community room, bedrooms, ensuite bathrooms, and a hallway. The project was completed in June 2018 and opened to the public in July 2018. A second application for funding was approved in 2018. €200,000 was awarded for the development of a new extension to the building to provide onsite tearoom facilities to cater for guests, visitors and for community events. The project was completed at the end of 2019.

The availability of these new facilities allows the centre to offer week long workshops and host various visiting groups. The centre has also become a tourist information point with information available on the various tourist attractions around Clare and flyers for local pubs, restaurants and other businesses.

The site has received further funding from the RRDF. €900,000 was awarded in 2019 for the refurbishment of an adjacent convent school building into a state of the art multi-functional performance space, which will be used to preserve, highlight and promote the cultural heritage of Clare. The project is currently under construction.

## 3.4 Summary and Conclusions

This Chapter examined the inputs (funding) and outputs (projects funded) of the scheme based on available data. The following is a summary of findings.

### 3.4.1 Inputs

- Between 2016 and 2020, total project costs amounted to over €113 million. This represents an average of €22.6 million each year over this period.
- Grant funding amounted to almost €94 million between 2016 and 2020. Annual grant funding peaked at €25.9 million in 2020.

**Figure 19: Cnoc na Gaoithe**



**Figure 20: Cnoc na Gaoithe tearoom**



- In 2020, €10.5 million of grant funding was provided under an accelerated measure, as part of the Government's July Stimulus Package.
- Approximately 62.9% of total grant funding was provided at a level between €50,001 and €100,000.
- Grant funding has varied on a county basis. Between 2016 and 2020 Cork received the highest level of grant funding at €5.1 million while Dublin had the lowest level of funding at €2.2 million. The average level of grant funding by county was €3.6 million.
- 837 towns have received grant funding as part of the scheme. 210 towns (25% of towns funded) accounted for 53% of total grant funding. This is a reflection of the fact that the majority of these towns (56%) have had three or more projects funded. This concentration may in turn be a reflection of the capacity of different local communities to engage with the scheme.
- The most common activity funded was the improvement of streetscapes and the town environment (€43 million or 46% of total funding). Projects that funded multiple activities represented the second most common activity (€13.6 million or 15% of total funding).

#### 3.4.2 Outputs

- 1,341 projects were funded by the scheme between 2016 and 2020. 978 projects were funded under the main scheme (i.e. excluding the accelerated measure in 2020). 363 projects were funded as part of the accelerated measure in 2020 in response to COVID19.
- On average, 51 projects were funded per county between 2016 and 2020. All counties (except for Cork (67) and Dublin (35)) had between 40 and 60 projects funded.
- Despite a significant level of investment in the scheme, the number of projects supported per town and village has been modest. The vast majority of towns (524 or 63%) had one project funded through the scheme. A further 179 or 21% had two projects funded.
- In line with the distribution of funding by types of activities, most (45%) projects were focused on improving the streetscape and environment of towns and villages. Projects with multiple activities was the second most common type (15% of projects); 33% of which funded improvements to streetscape and town environment, 16% funded recreational activities and 15% funded town enterprise and research.



## 4. Efficiency and Effectiveness

### 4.1 Introduction

This Chapter examines the efficiency and effectiveness of the TVRS. An assessment of the efficiency of the scheme is undertaken by examining:

- The scheme delivery model.
- A selection of scheme criteria.
- Information gathered on outputs and outcomes.

The effectiveness of the scheme is examined by considering whether the scheme is meeting its objective(s) of revitalising rural towns and villages as places to live and work.

### 4.2 Efficiency

This section considers:

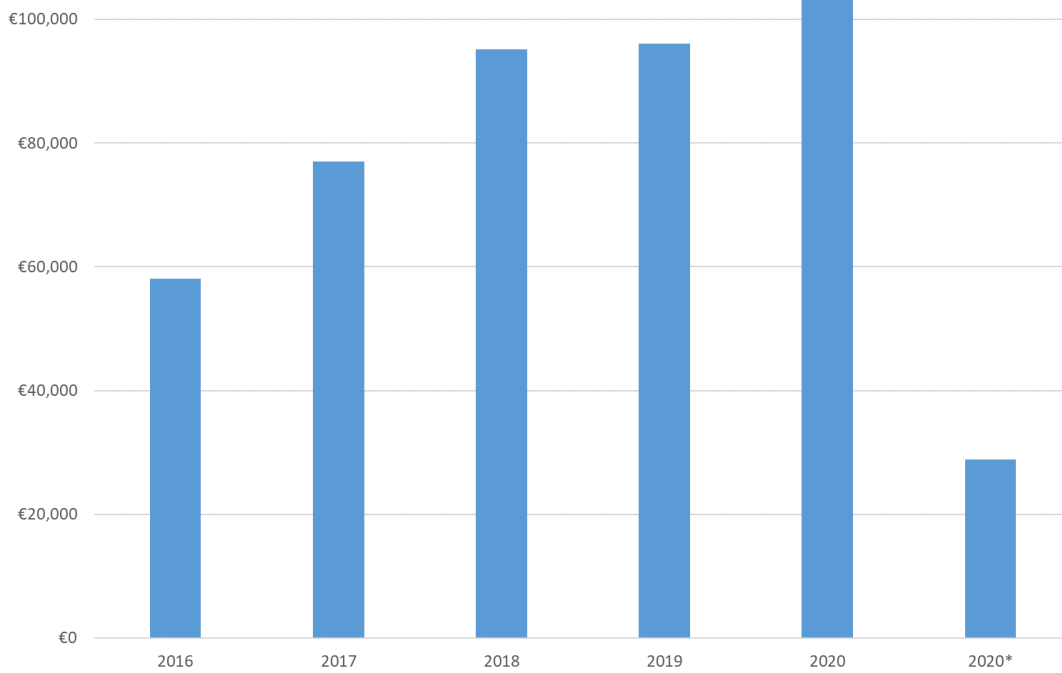
- The delivery model of the scheme.
- A number of the criteria of the scheme including the towns and villages targeted by the scheme; consistency of approach with the RRDF; the limits on the number of projects and towns and villages supported each year; and, the approach taken to prioritising projects for funding each year.
- The type and format of information gathered on outputs and outcomes of the scheme.

#### 4.2.1 Delivery model

As outlined in Chapter 2, DRCD has overall policy responsibility for the scheme. Local authorities submit projects for funding to the Department each year. These projects must be identified in consultation with local community groups and businesses, which local authorities indicated is a positive element of the scheme. A health check of towns and villages must be completed to ensure that projects identified are based on need, and projects must be consistent within the overall context of local development plans. The Department assess applications using various criteria such as quality, type of projects etc. and grant funding is provided for costs incurred. Requests for drawdown must be submitted with a form outlining the status of projects, and compliance checklists must be completed as part of the process. The local authority itself undertakes the projects or enters into contracts with community groups to ensure projects are completed in line with public spending requirements such as adhering to public tendering requirements for example. The scheme is also subject to on-site inspection by the Department's financial auditor, and the Inspection, Compliance, and Business Development unit of DRCD.

In terms of costs, Figure 21 shows that the average grant funding per project has risen steadily since 2016. Excluding the accelerated measure in 2020, funding per project increased from €58,118 in 2016 to €104,781 in 2020. The average amount of funding approved per project between 2016 and 2020 was €69,864. However, excluding the accelerated measure, the average was higher over the same period (€86,000).

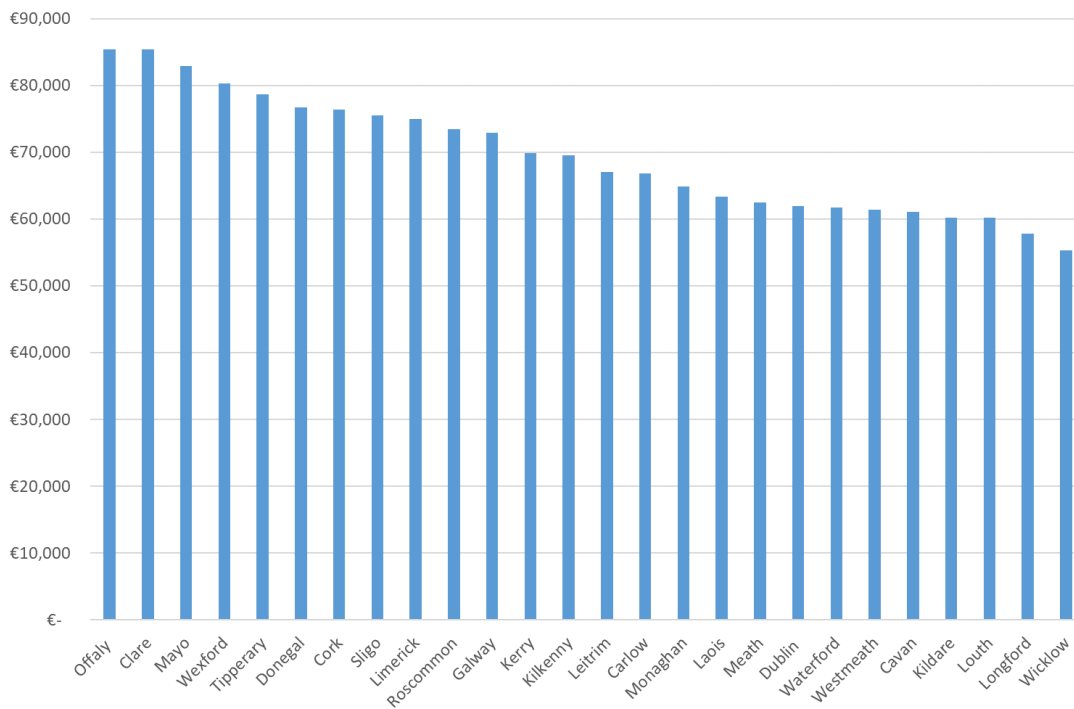
**Figure 21: Average grant funding per project, 2016 - 2020**



Source: DRCD. \*Accelerated measure.

Figure 22 shows that the average funding approved per project on a county basis ranges from a minimum of approximately €55,000 to a maximum of just over €85,000.

**Figure 22: Average funding per project by county, 2016 – 2020**



Source: DRCD

However, it is difficult to draw any conclusions on the efficiency of the scheme based on the changes in the cost of projects above. The average cost per project has increased year on year. However, this does not take account of inflation, which, in real terms, would have the effect of reducing the variance in costs over time. In addition, the type of projects funded under the scheme vary significantly and so it is not possible to identify a uniform unit cost for comparison.

Having considered the above, no suitable alternative delivery model is identified. Overall, stakeholders are of the view that the approach to the delivery of the scheme works well. The approach taken is in line with a bottom up policy for community and rural development, and no major concerns were identified in conversations with stakeholders.

#### 4.2.2 Scheme criteria

As mentioned, as part of consideration of the efficiency of the scheme, the scheme criteria have been examined for this paper. A number of considerations relating to some of these criteria are outlined below.

##### **Impact of changing priorities for project funding each year**

It is notable that the priorities for projects to be funded in the scheme outline has varied from year to year. Changing priorities for funding each year is likely to affect project planning. Conversations with local authorities indicate that greater certainty or stability in this regard could help facilitate longer-term project planning, and thereby help improve quality of projects proposed. This is particularly relevant in the context of the recent increase in the maximum funding limit (up to €500,000) for projects.

##### **Consistency of approach to the population criteria used for the TVRS and the RRDF**

In 2021 the population eligibility criteria has been increased to towns and villages with a population of up to 15,000 people. However, this means that the TVRS can now fund projects in towns that are of greater size than towns funded by the RRDF (provides funding for towns and villages with a population of up to 10,000 people), which funds projects of far greater scale than the TVRS. Therefore, the approach used does not appear to be fully aligned across these rural regeneration initiatives.

##### **Potential impact of limits on the number of projects, towns, and villages that can be supported**

The scheme has funded a large number of projects (1,341) across many towns and villages (837) since its establishment. However, the average scale of projects (less than €70,000) is small, and most towns and villages supported had one (63%) project funded by the scheme between 2016 and 2020. As part of the terms and conditions of the scheme, there is a limit on funding one project per town and village each year, and a maximum of eight per local authority area (in 2021). This approach ensures that there is a wide distribution of towns and villages supported by the scheme but it may also potentially limit the overall impact of the scheme in revitalising individual towns and villages as a result.

##### **Towns and villages targeted by the scheme**

The scheme is targeted at rural towns and villages. However, in a small number of instances, the towns and villages funded by the scheme have been in sub-urban areas or close to major city boundaries such as Swords and Malahide in Dublin. This may be a relatively minor issue in terms of overall funding levels, but it could alternatively allow additional projects to progress in areas that are

more rural if a policy decision was made on the suitability of including these more urban settlement types.

#### 4.2.3 Type and format of information gathered on outputs and outcomes

As part of monitoring the scheme, a range of information is collected through application forms, progress reports, and funding draw down request forms. However, information gathered on projects in terms of the details of outputs could be improved, and no information is collected on outcomes. In addition, the format of information collected does not easily facilitate monitoring and review of the scheme. This is because there is a large volume of projects funded by the scheme, and much of the information is collected in a qualitative manner e.g. application forms in Microsoft word.

### 4.3 Effectiveness

This section considers whether the scheme is achieving its objective of revitalising towns and villages, and how the outcomes of the scheme can be measured.

#### 4.3.1 Regeneration of rural towns and villages

It is important to note that the TVRS is one of a number of supports for rural Ireland, which is provided through DRCD's Rural Development Investment Programme. Although the objective of the TVRS is the regeneration of towns and villages, the scheme cannot accomplish that task on its own. As noted in Chapter 3, the scale of projects under this scheme are not large e.g. an average of less than €70,000 grant funding per project between 2016 and 2020. The distribution of projects funded across towns and villages also shows that most (63%) have had one project funded through the scheme. This scale of funding may be most impactful for smaller villages. Conversations with local authorities indicate that they are of the view that the scheme is of value by funding projects that would otherwise not have been funded, facilitating a greater volume of projects to be completed, and engaging the local community in identifying projects for their area. In their view, the scheme assists with regeneration of towns and villages but cannot accomplish that objective on its own, and is complemented by other public supports. Projects funded through the scheme can support the implementation of wider masterplans and larger project development through other initiatives such as the RRDF for example.

#### 4.3.2 Measuring the outcomes of the scheme

No assessment of the results or impact of the scheme have been undertaken to date. Conversations with local authorities reveal that it is difficult or impractical to ascribe a direct result in many cases due to the nature of activities funded e.g. footpaths, lighting etc. or due to the relatively small scale of many projects. Research by the ESRI (2021) indicates that there are specific challenges associated with measuring the causal impact of both community and rural development programmes. Counterfactual analysis of community level outcomes is extremely difficult to implement. However, it is suggested that a framework such as the programme logic model can be used with a combination of quantitative and qualitative tools where possible. Given the myriad of different activities and the scale of projects funded under the scheme, it is very difficult to identify appropriate approaches and metrics (quantitative or qualitative) which can be used to identify the impact of the TVRS.

In this paper, case studies of projects and towns and villages have been used to communicate the work of the scheme. The use of selected case studies is likely the most practical and appropriate approach to help convey the work of the scheme. The use of broader non-scheme specific data (e.g. population levels, business activity, employment, level of vacant buildings, tourism etc.) could potentially be used for wider level of understanding of whether regeneration of towns and villages is

occurring overtime. In this respect, the PFG (2020) committed to a Towns Centre First policy<sup>11</sup>, which included the undertaking of a Collaborative Town Centre Health Check (CTCHC) framework to gather data and lead actions. Work is currently being undertaken by the Heritage Council for the Towns Centre First policy, to gather a baseline of data that can be used to observe changes in the regeneration of towns overtime.

#### 4.4. Summary and Conclusions

This Chapter assessed the efficiency and effectiveness of the scheme based on available information. The following is a summary of the findings.

##### 4.4.1 Efficiency

The scheme delivery is a bottom up approach, which involves local authorities, and community groups submitting proposals to the Department based on identified local needs. Projects must be consistent with local plans, and are subjected to various reviews by the Department and compliance with national rules and procedures e.g. public tendering etc. Stakeholders suggested that there is value in the scheme in terms of the types of projects it facilitates, and the inclusion of community in identifying local projects. The average amount of grant funding provided for projects increased from €58,000 in 2016 to a high of approximately €105,000 in 2020 (for the main scheme). The average funding approved per project on a county basis ranges from a minimum of circa €55,000 to a maximum of just over €85,000. However, it is not possible to analyse efficiency of the scheme by comparing unit costs. This is due to the array of different types of projects that can be funded through the scheme.

No alternative approach to delivery of the scheme has been identified. Overall, stakeholders are of the view that the delivery of the scheme works well. However, a number of issues have been identified in this Chapter relating to a number of scheme criteria. This includes:

- The impact of changing priorities for project funding each year.
- The consistency of the approach to population eligibility criteria used for the TVRS and the RRDF.
- The potential impact of limits on the number of projects, towns, and villages that can be funded each year.
- The towns and villages targeted by the scheme.
- Improving the type and format of data and information gathered on outputs and outcomes of the scheme.

##### 4.4.2 Effectiveness

The aim of the TVRS is to support the regeneration of rural towns and villages. The scale of projects funded under the scheme are not large and most towns and villages have had one or two projects funded to date. This scale of funding may be most impactful for smaller villages. Conversations with local authorities reveal that the scheme is valued but on its own, it cannot accomplish the regeneration of rural towns and villages. Rather, it assists with regeneration of towns and villages complemented by other supports such as the RRDF.

No assessment of the outcomes of the scheme have been undertaken to date. Research (ESRI 2021) shows that there are challenges with measuring the casual impact of rural and community development supports. In the case of the TVRS, it is difficult to identify impacts due to the type and

---

<sup>11</sup> Town centre regeneration by using existing buildings and unused lands for new development and promoting residential occupancy in rural towns and villages.

scale of projects funded, as confirmed in conversations with local authorities. However, the use of case studies could potentially be used as an approach to convey the work of the scheme. The use of broader non-programme specific data could also potentially be used to aid the understanding of whether regeneration of towns and villages is occurring. Work in this area is progressing as part of the Towns Centre First policy.

## 5. Continued Relevance

### 5.1 Introduction

The continued relevance of the scheme is assessed below by considering the rationale for the scheme, the policy context, whether there are other Government supports in place that provide an alternative substitute to the scheme, and stakeholder views on the additional importance of the scheme.

### 5.2 Continued Relevance

The TVRS was established in 2016 to support rural development following the economic crisis in 2008. Research by CEDRA (2014) highlighted that rural areas had been particularly impacted, and that towns and villages are central to social, commercial and civic life in Ireland. Therefore, there was a need for regeneration of towns and villages to support economic recovery. CEDRA (2014) recommended the development of a Rural Town Stimulus Programme that focuses on rural towns and their hinterlands. Ireland as a whole recovered from the economic crash but as noted in Our Rural Future (2021) there remain many vulnerabilities and challenges for rural areas, including rural towns and villages. Our Rural Future (2021) reiterates the importance of the wellbeing and success of rural areas to Ireland. A significant proportion of Ireland's population, workforce and economic activity is located in rural areas. More specifically, in terms of the size of towns and villages supported by the TVRS, Census 2016 data indicates there were 844 towns<sup>12</sup> with a population of up to 15,000 in Ireland, which accounted for 1,146,694 people or 24% of the total population. Furthermore, while the COVID19 pandemic has negatively affected society as a whole there are particular sectors/industries (e.g. hospitality) which are most prevalent in rural towns and villages that have been most negatively affected. This reaffirms the need for continued support for rural towns and villages in Ireland.

In this respect, as previously highlighted in Chapter 2, there continues to be strong support for the TVRS in Government policy. The scheme was established following a commitment in the PFG (2016) and subsequently included in the Action Plan for Rural Development (2017). As part of Project 2040, the NDP 2018 - 2027 noted that Government is supporting rural towns and villages through initiatives delivered by DRCD such as the TVRS, and that these would be integrated overtime with the RRDF to ensure more strategic use of funding. More recently, the Programme for Government: Our Shared Future (PFG) 2020 committed to the development of a Town Centre First policy under which an expanded TVRS has an important role to play by bringing vacant and derelict buildings into use and promoting residential occupancy. Our Rural Future (2021) also reaffirmed the commitment to expanding the TVRS as an enabler for revitalising rural towns and villages.

The TVRS is one of a number of supports provided through DRCD's Rural Development Investment Programme, which includes the RRDF, CLÁR, the Outdoor Recreation Infrastructure Scheme (ORIS), the Local Improvement Scheme (LIS), LEADER and the Walks Scheme. These initiatives/schemes have an overall aim of supporting rural Ireland. The LIS, the Walks Scheme, ORIS, CLÁR and LEADER are not considered substitutes to the TVRS as they mostly fund different activities, or their target areas are not specifically focussed on towns and villages in Ireland.

---

<sup>12</sup> In Census 2016, a new Census town was defined as there being a minimum of 50 occupied dwellings, with a maximum distance between any dwelling and the building closest to it, of 100 metres, and where there was evidence of an urban centre (shop, school etc.).

The overall aim of the TVRS and the RRDF are more similar i.e. regeneration of towns and villages. The purpose of the RRDF is to support job creation in rural areas, address de-population of rural communities and support improvements in towns and villages with a population of less than 10,000, and outlying areas. However, there are key differences in the operation and outputs of the TVRS and the RRDF, which indicate that they are complementary, and not substitutes. The scale of projects supported differ substantially between the TVRS and the RRDF. The minimum grant funding awarded to a project under the TVRS is €20,000 and the maximum grant funding awarded was mainly €100,000 between 2016 and 2020 (however, funding of up to €200,000 was provided for in 2020 and this has increased up to €500,000 in 2021). The average grant funding provided for projects under the TVRS was less than €70,000 between 2016 and 2020. The minimum funding requirement for projects under the RRDF is €500,000. To date, the average amount of grant funding provided for projects under the RRDF is approximately €2.5 million. Therefore, the type and scale of outputs under each scheme/programme is markedly different.

In addition, as part of process of the TVRS, consideration is given to projects that demonstrate leverage or linkage to other schemes operated by Government Departments or agencies. For example, if a town/village project is submitted for funding under the TVRS and an RRDF application, the local authority is required to explain the rationale for submitting the application to the TVRS, and how it aligns to the RRDF application.

Discussions with stakeholders (local authorities and business groups) for this paper indicate that the TVRS continues to be an important part of efforts aimed at revitalising towns and villages in Ireland. It is a source of funding which is complementary to other public funding supports. It was stated that the TVRS has allowed projects to be funded that would otherwise not have been completed, or not completed at the same volume. The scheme was also noted as having an important role in engaging the local community to identify and develop projects to help revitalise their own towns and villages.

Having regard to the above, the TVRS continues to be relevant. There is a strong rationale for the scheme; it has strong support in Government policy; and there is no public support that provides an alternative substitute service to the scheme.



## 6. Findings and Recommendations

### 6.1 Introduction

This Chapter concludes the paper with seven findings and four recommendations.

#### Findings

1. Strong and continued support for the scheme in Government policy.
2. Significant total investment in the scheme.
3. Geographical distribution of funding and outputs.
4. Broad range of projects and activities funded.
5. Efficiency of the scheme.
6. Effectiveness of the scheme.
7. The scheme continues to have relevance.

#### Recommendations

1. Clarifying what the scheme can achieve.
2. Further consideration of scheme criteria.
3. Improvements on the type and format of data and information gathered.
4. Improvements to measure the outcomes of the scheme.

### 6.2 Findings

#### **Finding 1: Strong and continued support for the scheme in Government policy**

There is strong support for the TVRS in Government policy. The scheme was established based on a commitment in the PFG (2016), and subsequently included in the Action Plan for Rural Development (2017). Thereafter, the NDP 2018 - 2027 committed to supporting rural towns and villages through initiatives delivered by DRCD including the TVRS. More recently, the PFG (2020) states that an expanded TVRS will be brought forward, to bring vacant and derelict buildings back into use and promote residential occupancy. The TVRS is also included in Our Rural Future: Rural Development Policy 2021-2025, which commits to expanding the TVRS to enable the revitalisation of rural towns and villages.

#### **Finding 2: Significant total investment in the scheme**

Between 2016 and 2020, total project costs amounted to over €113 million, of which grant funding represented almost €94 million. This has supported 1,341 projects in 837 towns and villages across Ireland. Since the establishment of the scheme, the level of grant funding has risen from €9.8 million in 2016 to a peak of €25.9 million in 2020. The average grant funding per project rose from €58,118 in 2016 to €104,781 in 2020 (excluding the accelerated measure). The average grant funding per project was less than €70,000 between 2016 and 2020.

#### **Finding 3: Geographical distribution of funding and outputs**

Between 2016 and 2020, grant funding by county averaged €3.6 million. On average 51 projects were funded per county over the period with most counties having between 40 and 60 projects funded. There is widespread distribution of funding and projects supported across Ireland with a slightly higher concentration in border, midlands and eastern regions. There is a notable degree of concentration in funding with 210 (25%) towns and villages receiving 53% of total grant funding, as most of these towns and villages had three or more projects funded. Overall, despite a significant level of investment between 2016 and 2020, the number of projects supported per town and village

has been modest. The majority of towns and villages (703 or 84%) had up to two projects funded by the scheme.

#### **Finding 4: Broad range of projects and activities funded**

For the purposes of this paper, the type of projects funded by the scheme have been classified into eight categories. Most (45%) projects were focused on improving the streetscape and environment of towns and villages. Projects with multiple activities was the second most common type (15% of projects); 33% of which funded improvements to streetscape and town environment, 16% funded recreational activities and 15% funded town enterprise and research. The next largest category was recreational activities (12%). The remaining categories range from 2% to 9% of total projects.

#### **Finding 5: Efficiency of the scheme**

No suitable alternative delivery model is identified in this paper. Stakeholders are of the view that the approach to the delivery of the scheme works well. The scheme is in line with a bottom up policy for community and rural development. Nonetheless, a number of issues relating to some of the scheme criteria have been identified. This includes:

- The impact of changing priorities for project funding each year.
- The consistency of the approach to population eligibility criteria used for the TVRS and the RRDF.
- The potential impact of limits on the number of projects, towns, and villages that can be funded each year.
- The towns and villages targeted by the scheme.
- Improving the type and format of the data and information gathered on outputs and outcomes of the scheme.

#### **Finding 6: Effectiveness of the scheme**

The TVRS was established to support town and village regeneration as part of overall Government efforts to support rural development. However, the scheme, on its own, cannot fully regenerate towns and villages. The average funding per project between 2016 and 2020 was less than €70,000, and most towns and villages supported have had one (63%) project funded through the scheme. Conversations with stakeholders indicate that the scheme is valued and that it does assist with regeneration of towns and villages, but is complemented by other supports. For example, projects funded through the scheme can support the implementation of wider masterplans, and larger project development through other initiatives such as the RRDF.

No measurement of outcomes has been undertaken to date. It is difficult to identify impacts due to the type and scale of projects funded. This was confirmed in conversations with local authorities. However, the use of case studies could potentially be used as an approach to convey the work of the scheme. Broader non-programme specific data could also potentially be used to aid the understanding of whether regeneration of towns and villages is occurring. In this respect, work is progressing to develop a baseline set of indicators as part of the Towns Centre First policy.

#### **Finding 7: The scheme continues to have relevance**

While the TVRS was established to support rural towns and villages in response to the economic crash in 2008, the wellbeing and success of rural towns and villages to Ireland as a whole continues to be of critical importance. There remain many vulnerabilities and challenges for rural areas (including towns and villages), including, most recently, the COVID19 pandemic. As noted in this

paper, Government support for the scheme is strong as it has been continually included in key Government policies. There are no alternative substitutes to the scheme and it is complemented by other regeneration initiatives such as the RRDF. Discussions with stakeholders indicate the scheme is a valued element of efforts to assist with the revitalisation of rural towns and villages.

### 6.3 Recommendations

#### **Recommendation 1: Clarifying what the scheme can achieve (links to finding 6)**

The objective of the TVRS is “to support the revitalisation of towns and villages in order to improve the living and working environment of their communities and increase their potential to support increased economic activity into the future”. Based on the analysis in this paper and discussions with local authorities, it is clear that the scheme can support the revitalisation of towns and villages but it cannot accomplish regeneration of towns and villages on its own. The average scale of projects funded is small and despite significant investment, the number of projects supported per town and village has been modest. The maximum funding for projects has increased to €500,000 in 2021 with the expectation that this will enable the scheme to support projects that have potential for a transformative effect in their locality. Nonetheless, the scheme should generally be understood and conveyed as a complementary effort that can support wider regeneration developments such as the RRDF for example.

#### **Recommendation 2: Further consideration of scheme criteria (links to finding 5)**

##### *(i) Priorities for project funding*

The priorities for project funding has varied from year to year under each scheme outline. While there is value in having a flexible approach, a more stable approach each year could provide greater certainty for stakeholders, and could help facilitate longer-term project planning, thereby helping to improve the quality of projects put forward for funding.

##### *(ii) Population eligibility criteria*

In 2021, the eligibility criteria for the TVRS has been increased to towns and villages with a population of up to 15,000 people. This contrasts with the RRDF, which can fund towns and villages with a population size of up to 10,000 people. Therefore, in this respect, greater consideration could be given to how these rural initiatives align and complement each other.

##### *(iii) Limits on the number of projects, and town and villages that can be supported each year*

There is a limit of funding one project per town and village each year. In addition, there is a limit on the number of towns and villages (up to eight in 2021) that can be supported per local authority each year. This ensures a geographical spread of projects funded through the scheme. However, having regard to the average scale of projects supported, and varying sizes of local authority remits, this may lessen the overall impact of the scheme in terms of revitalising towns and villages. To increase the effectiveness of the scheme, consideration could be given to reassessing these limits. For example, a revised limit could be tailored to the number of applicable towns and villages per local authority area, and/or their population sizes, within overall funding limits.

##### *(iv) Towns and villages targeted*

The scheme aims to provide support for a widespread distribution of towns and villages across Ireland. However, in a small number of instances, towns in sub-urban areas or close to major city boundaries have been funded by the scheme. If a policy decision was made on the suitability of including these more urban settlement types, it could alternatively allow additional projects to

progress in areas that are more rural. For example, eligible RRDF projects must be outside the five metropolitan areas of Dublin, Cork, Limerick, Galway and Waterford<sup>13</sup>.

**Recommendation 3: Improvements on the type and format of data and information gathered (links to finding 5)**

This paper has identified that there is a need for improving the data and information gathered on outputs and outcomes. In addition, the format of the data and information collected does not easily facilitate monitoring and review of the scheme.

In terms of the type of information gathered, the application and project completion forms could be amended to focus more on the key details of the outputs, and intended outcomes, as relevant. In addition, as the type of projects funded by the scheme are broad, monitoring and review of the scheme would benefit from classifying projects into categories by type of activity. This would generally help to improve the understanding of the types of projects being funded through the scheme.

The format of data and information collected (e.g. application forms) could also potentially be changed to Microsoft excel or a similar accessible digital format. This could be used as an opportunity to facilitate greater accessibility of data for monitoring purposes and future review, but also to potentially reduce burden for those involved by condensing the information gathered to keep focus on the key information needed for applications.

**Recommendation 4: Improvements to measure the outcomes of the scheme (links to finding 6)**

The use of case studies is likely the most practical and feasible approach that can be used to help convey the work of the scheme. Case studies could be targeted on a project basis for those that have received the largest amounts of funding under the scheme. They could also focus on a sample of towns and villages that have received support through the scheme over a period of years. A selection of these case studies could be developed on an annual basis.

In terms of medium-longer term outcomes or impact, broader non-scheme specific data on towns and villages supported by the scheme could be used to indicate whether regeneration is occurring. For example, changes in metrics such as population size, level of services/facilities available, number of enterprises, employment, tourism, number of vacant dwellings, local perceptions etc. While changes in these indicators could not be attributed to the TVRS itself, they could be used to indicate whether revitalisation of towns and villages supported by the scheme is occurring. This could potentially leverage work being undertaken by the Heritage Council for the Town Centres First Policy, which involves gathering a baseline of data that can be used to observe changes in the regeneration of towns overtime.

---

<sup>13</sup> These metropolitan areas are set out in Appendix 4 of the Implementation Roadmap for the National Planning Framework, Government of Ireland, July 2018.

## 7. Appendix A – Notes to the Data

The level of grant funding, and the number of projects and towns funded on a county basis is set out in Table 1A below.

**Table 1A: Grant funding and number of projects and towns funded by county, 2016 - 2020**

County	Grant (€ millions)	No. of Projects Funded	No. of Towns/Villages Funded
Carlow	3.3	49	27
Cavan	3.6	59	25
Clare	3.8	45	32
Cork	5.1	67	49
Donegal	4.2	55	51
Dublin	2.2	35	24
Galway	4.2	57	38
Kerry	3.6	52	29
Kildare	2.5	41	27
Kilkenny	3.3	48	30
Laois	3.5	55	29
Leitrim	3.6	53	23
Limerick	4	54	37
Longford	2.8	48	25
Louth	3.1	52	30
Mayo	5.0	60	46
Meath	3.5	55	39
Monaghan	3.6	56	25
Offaly	3.9	46	28
Roscommon	3.7	51	28
Sligo	4.2	56	32
Tipperary	4	51	36
Waterford	3	50	31
Westmeath	2.7	44	25
Wexford	4.8	59	41
Wicklow	2.5	43	30
<b>Total</b>	<b>93.7</b>	<b>1,341</b>	<b>837</b>

Source: DRCD

## 8. Bibliography

1. Central Statistics Office (CSO), *Urban and Rural Life in Ireland*, (2019).
2. Commission for the Economic Development of Rural Areas (CEDRA), *Energising Ireland's Rural Economy*, (2014).
3. Department of Rural and Community Development (DRCD), *Our Rural Future: Rural Development Policy 2021-2025* (2021).
4. Department of Rural and Community Development (DRCD), *Town and village Renewal Scheme Outline*, (2021).
5. Department of Rural and Community Development (DRCD), *Town and village Renewal Scheme Outline*, (2016).
6. Economic and Social Research Institute, *Review of International Approaches to Evaluating Rural and Community Development Investment and Supports*, (2021).
7. Government of Ireland, *Implementation Roadmap for the National Planning Framework*, (2018).
8. Government of Ireland, *The Programme for Government: Our Shared Future*, (2020).
9. Government of Ireland, *The Programme for a Partnership Government*, (2016).

### Quality Assurance process

To ensure accuracy and methodological rigour, the author engaged in the following quality assurance process.

- Internal/Departmental
  - ✓ Line management
  - ✓ Spending Review Steering group
  - ✓ Other divisions/sections
  - Peer review (IGEES network, seminars, conferences etc.)
  
- External
  - ✓ Other Government Department
  - Other Steering group
  - Quality Assurance Group (QAG)
  - Peer review (IGEES network, seminars, conferences etc.)
  - External expert(s)
  
- Other (relevant details)



**Tithe an Rialtas. Sráid Mhuirfean Uacht,**  
**Baile Átha Cliath 2, D02 R583, Éire**  
Government Buildings, Upper Merrion Street,  
Dublin 2, D02 R583, Ireland

T:+353 1 676 7571  
@IRLDeptPer  
[www.per.gov.ie](http://www.per.gov.ie)