

# Focused Policy Assessment: Rural Regeneration and Development Fund

Finance and Evaluation Unit  
Department of Rural and Community Development

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**An Roinn Forbartha  
Tuaithe agus Pobail**  
Department of Rural and  
Community Development



Irish Government Economic & Evaluation Service

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# Summary

## INTRODUCTION

This review considered the operation of the Rural Regeneration and Development Fund (RRDF) from establishment to October 2022. It details findings with regard to the operation of the fund over that period, and sets out recommendations for the future operation of the fund. The analysis has been informed by the information compiled by the Department of Rural and Community Development (DRCD) unit who manages the RRDF, and discussions with a number of local authority stakeholders. A summary of the paper is set out below.

## BACKGROUND

The stated objective of the RRDF is to “provide investment to support rural renewal, strengthen and build resilience in rural communities, and to assist in the regeneration of towns and villages with a population of less than 10,000 people, and their outlying areas”.

The RRDF has two funding streams. Category 1 supports projects that are ready to commence. Category 2 supports proposals at an earlier stage but which aim to progress to Category 1 in the future. Aside from a minimum funding level of €0.5 million for a Category 1 proposal, there are no funding thresholds. There is currently a match funding requirement of 20% for Category 1, and 25% for Category 2 projects.

The lead applicant for a project must be a State funded body. Local authorities are responsible for delivering the vast majority of projects approved to date (81%).

Examples of other lead bodies include Coillte, Údarás na Gaeltachta, and Fáilte Ireland.

The RRDF was established in 2018, and the first year in which a Category 1 and 2 application process was undertaken. 2019 was first year in which funding was allocated to the RRDF. Annual allocations have increased year on year, from €52 million in 2019 to €60 million in 2022.

The award of funding takes place through a competitive process. An independent Project Advisory Board assists DRCD with its assessment of applications, and makes recommendations for funding to the Minister. While there are a number of steps involved, the RRDF operates a two-stage approval process before a project can be implemented. Successful applications are first approved in principle, and approval to proceed is subsequently granted once tendering has been completed and the costs/timelines agreed.

## SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The RRDF has approved funding of approximately €277 million for projects with an ultimate investment of €375 million including match funding. €222 million of the RRDF supports 89 Category 1 projects, and the remaining €56 million supports 102 approved Category 2 projects.

An assessment of the geographic spread of **approved projects shows wide coverage of approvals throughout the country**. However, there is a large variance between counties. This ranges from 1% to 13% of the approved funding for Category 1, and 2% to 8% for Category 2. A competitive process will give rise to these variances.

**Progress made by lead parties in delivering Category 1 projects has been slow to date, as has drawdown of allocated funds.** Of 89 Category 1 projects approved, nine (€11m) have been completed. 38 (€111m) remain at the preparatory phase (planning, design, tendering, review), and 42 (€102m) are on site. Delivery has been impacted by Covid-19 restrictions and other external factors such as high inflation and material/labour supply constraints. The success of the RRDF requires lead applicants to deliver on their commitments. Discussions with local authorities have identified a need for project management capacity building. This paper recommends steps to improve knowledge and capacity among lead parties. However, it also recommends that consideration be given to introducing rewards and penalties to encourage project completions, having regard to the level of projects being undertaken by lead parties and their capacity to deliver on existing commitments. This could include the option of financial rewards/penalties, and/or facilitating a greater or lesser number of applications by lead applicants in future calls, depending on their progress with existing projects.

**Progress with Category 2 projects has also been slow**, with nine (€2m) of 102 projects completed. 27 (€21m) are at the preparatory phase, and 66 (€33m) are being implemented. The stated purpose of Category 2 projects is to provide funding to enable projects to develop to Category 1 applications. This paper recommends that as these projects do not require planning or consents to be in place for funding, that the target should be that projects of this nature be completed within 18 months of their approval to proceed. This should improve the flow of completions and applications for Category 1 funding. It should be noted that feedback from lead bodies indicates that Category 2 funding is vital to enable projects to get off the ground and enable better quality projects to emerge. However, the progress and impact of Category 2 projects will need to be closely monitored over time.

Some **suggestions for improving the operation of the scheme were identified based on discussions with local authorities**. First, it was suggested that more certainty and stability on application timeframes would be helpful. For example, having a longer-term multi-annual timetable (e.g. three-year plan) for calls, with greater time within call windows, would allow better project planning and response at local level. Secondly, there

is a need to facilitate greater knowledge sharing and networking among lead bodies. This includes sharing knowledge on project ideas, processes, and measuring the outcomes and impacts of projects. It was suggested that networking opportunities, such as an annual conference would help to share ideas, learn best practice, and potentially give rise to a better understanding of the most impactful projects. Thirdly, some issues were raised around how a requirement for match funding can lead to good projects not being put forward, and that there is perception that larger projects will not be funded given the overall scale of annual funding allocations and the need to ensure a fair distribution of funding. This paper makes a number of recommendations in these areas.

Related to the **types of projects funded**, this review has found that the projects supported by the RRDF focus on a number of policy areas, mainly, town centre regeneration including public realm works, tourism or heritage projects, community facilities, remote working hubs and enterprise centres. Some policy or investment areas, such as town centre housing and climate action projects are less represented. However, the RRDF has not long been included as a support to policies in these areas and therefore is likely to increase in the future. It is also clear that proposals for large-scale projects are more limited. This paper recommends a number of actions to address these areas including the frequency of calls for applications, match funding requirements, and communication with stakeholders.

**Further attention is needed to understand the socio-economic impact of RRDF projects.** While plans for monitoring and evaluation of projects forms part of application processes, the collection and analysis of this information by delivery bodies needs to be ensured. This paper recommends that all applications should have a clear monitoring and evaluation plan (with a template provided to support this). All projects should have SMART (Specific; Measurable; Achievable; Relevant; Time-bound) project objectives and metrics. A pre-project baseline should be established, and metrics should be measured over time following project completion. Initial reports on the outcomes of projects should be completed within 18 months of project completion and final reports no more than 36 months following completion. The compilation and dissemination of this information should help build knowledge among lead bodies. Given the scale of RRDF funding, this paper also recommends that DRCD should consider undertaking once off evaluation of selected larger projects in the future to help identify the impact for rural communities. Consideration could also be given to establishing a long-term research partnership e.g. with the university sector, to help monitor and understand the impacts of investment.

**Differences in original cost estimates and delivery costs have emerged for some projects.** It is difficult to accurately forecast costs in an environment of high inflation. However, while most cost adjustments are less than 20%, a small number are greater than this, including two projects with over 50% increased costs between the application estimates and procured project costs. To manage the budget, this paper recommends setting a limit on permissible cost increases following approval in principle.

**The existing demands of managing the RRDF, together with the recommendations in this paper, involve significant additional work for the responsible line unit.** The operation of the fund has evolved from a stage of completing project assessments and approvals, to one where there is now management and oversight of existing approved projects, assessment and approval of new projects, and a need to focus on project outputs and outcomes. In addition, this paper highlights areas for attention, including facilitating capacity building and knowledge sharing among stakeholders, and improving monitoring and evaluation. In this respect, this paper recommends consideration of resourcing requirements to ensure these recommendations can be implemented. The table below summarises the recommendations in this paper.

### Summary of recommendations

| Recommendations  | Objectives   |
|--|--|
| <p><b>1. Project delivery, planning, and accountability:</b> Focus on capacity building with delivery bodies to ensure delivery of existing RRDF projects, including assurance that sufficient internal resource is dedicated to project delivery within these bodies. Have a long-term outlook for funding calls (e.g. three year plans), with more stability on criteria and significant time between calls, to allow better project planning at local level.</p> <p>For Category 1 projects, consideration should be given to introducing rewards and penalties to encourage project completions. This could involve financial rewards/penalties, and/or allowing a greater or lesser number of applications in future calls depending on the progress applicants have made with existing projects. For Category 2 projects, consideration should be given to introducing a requirement for all projects to be completed within 18 months of approval to proceed or funding will not be provided.</p> | <p>Addressing relatively slow progress with both Category 1 and Category 2 projects to date.</p> <p>Increasing accountability for progress at the level of lead managing authority.</p> <p>Ensuring the RRDF funding is targeted at projects and delivery bodies where it can be most impactful.</p> |
| <p><b>2. Engagement with stakeholders:</b> Establish and manage networking opportunities for lead bodies, with the objective of sharing ideas, learning best practice and understanding the most impactful rural development projects. This could include regular network meetings and/or an annual conference. This work should also involve compiling,</p>   | <p>Building capacity and knowledge in lead authorities with regard to project generation and delivery and best practice in rural development projects across the country.</p> <p>Facilitating networking and knowledge sharing on project ideas, application</p>                                     |

|   |  |
|---|--|
| <p>sharing and publishing information such as best practice case studies.</p>   | <p>processes and measuring impacts and outcomes of projects.</p>   |
| <p><b>3. Scale and scope of projects:</b> Use the above networks to generate ideas for good projects that support priority policy objectives such as the Town Centre First Policy and climate action. Consider reducing match funding requirements for larger projects and for specific priority policy areas. Reduce the frequency of calls for applications and consider increasing the minimum RRDF requirement of €500,000 to €1,000,000 for Category 1 projects. Monitor the level of application and success rate of Category 2 to Category 1 projects over the next 18-24 months to determine if the process is working as intended.</p>                     | <p>Generating ideas for projects of scale, and in policy areas which are currently underrepresented (e.g. climate action, town centre housing).</p>  |
| <p><b>4. Approach to funding adjustments:</b> Set an upper limit on permitted funding adjustments for projects when moving from the approval-in-principle to approval to proceed stage of projects.</p>   | <p>Effectively managing overall RRDF budgets.</p>  |
| <p><b>5. Improve understanding of impact / outcomes:</b> Ensure all applications have a clear monitoring and evaluation plan, and that approved projects have measureable (SMART) project objectives/metrics. A baseline should be established, with regular monitoring of metrics following project completion. Initial reports of project outcomes should be completed within 18 months and final reports no more than 36 months following project completion. Consideration should also be given to once-off evaluation of larger projects by DRCD and the potential establishment of a long-term research framework e.g. with a third level institution(s).</p> | <p>Clear measures of outcomes and impacts for the specific projects funded, allowing future assessment of socio-economic benefits of these projects.</p> <p>Better understanding of impact of RRDF as a whole, and the impact of different project types on rural development.</p> |
| <p><b>6. Resourcing requirements:</b> Consider resourcing to respond to increased project management and monitoring requirements, and enable implementation of these recommendations.</p>   | <p>Ensuring effective management of the RRDF, and additional work related to recommendations on networking, knowledge sharing, monitoring, and evaluation.</p>   |

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# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Purpose of this paper

This paper is a Focused Policy Assessment (FPA) of the Rural Regeneration and Development Fund (RRDF). The RRDF is a capital investment initiative targeted at supporting the growth and rejuvenation of rural Ireland.

The purpose of this paper is to help improve the understanding and inform the operation of the Fund. This review is taking place in line with best practice under the Public Spending Code (PSC). The PSC states that periodic evaluations of expenditure should take place where the scale of investment justifies it. As the RRDF is a €1 billion investment fund, it is appropriate to review the RRDF during its implementation. Given the length of time the RRDF will be in operation (2018 to 2030), the purpose of this paper is to provide an initial review of its operation.

The following areas are examined in this paper.

- Rationale and objective(s).
- Policy context and operation.
- Analysis of funding and the number of projects.
- Efficiency, by assessing the operation of the RRDF.
- Impact, by reviewing the approach taken to measuring the outcomes of projects.

## 1.2 Paper structure

The structure of this paper is as follows.

- **Chapter 2:** rationale and objective(s).
- **Chapter 3:** implementation to date.
- **Chapter 4:** operational efficiency and measuring impact.
- **Chapter 5:** recommendations.
- **Appendices:** Appendix 1 to 4.

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



### **1.3 Data and stakeholder consultation**

The data used in this paper was provided by the business unit in DRCD who is responsible for managing the RRDF. The funding in this paper refers to approvals from the RRDF and reflects the situation at the end of January 2022, unless otherwise stated in this paper.

The RRDF has procedures in place to provide for price increases due to inflation and unforeseeable variations that might arise during project design and construction. As such, there will be a difference between the latest position on RRDF funding, and the funding outlined in this paper. For example, the funding allocation from the RRDF amounts to €277 million in this paper, which compares to a funding allocation of approximately €280 million as of July 2022.

Feedback from the following external stakeholders has been used to inform this review.

- Donegal, Kilkenny, Roscommon, Tipperary, and Westmeath county councils.
- Mayo, Fingal, and Waterford county/city councils via two committees of the City Management Association (CCMA) i.e. the Rural Development, Community, Tourism, Culture and Heritage Committee; and the Business, Enterprise, Innovation and Urban/Town Economic Renewal Committee.

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## 2 Rationale and objectives

### 2.1 Introduction

This Chapter sets out the rationale, objectives, policy context, and operation of the RRDF.

### 2.2 Rationale and objectives

The RRDF was established under Project Ireland 2040<sup>2</sup> as a major capital investment (€1 billion) fund for rural areas in Ireland. Project Ireland 2040 (consisting of the National Planning Framework (NPF) and the National Development Plan (NDP)) outlines the government's national spatial strategy and plan for sustainable development up to 2040, as well as the investment priorities to support this. The NDP notes that participation of rural communities is vital to successfully achieving the strategic outcomes of Project Ireland 2040. In particular, the RRDF aims to support the NDP's strategic outcome of *Strengthened Rural Economies and Communities*, and the objectives of Our Rural Future - Rural Development Policy 2021 - 2025<sup>3</sup>.

The stated objective of the RRDF is to “provide investment to support rural renewal, strengthen and build resilience in rural communities [supporting job creation in rural areas and addressing de-population of rural communities], and assist in the regeneration of towns and villages with a population of less than 10,000, and outlying areas”.<sup>4</sup>

The RRDF was originally scheduled to run from 2018 to 2027. However, it has since been extended (following an update of the NDP in 2021) to run to 2030. The Department of Rural and Community Development (DRCD) manages the RRDF. It is one of a number of supports provided through DRCD's Rural Development Investment Programme<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> [Project Ireland 2040](#).

<sup>3</sup> [Our Rural Future – Rural Development Policy 2021 – 2025](#).

<sup>4</sup> RRDF Fourth Call Category 1: FAQ.

<sup>5</sup> The RRDF is part of DRCD's Rural Investment Programme, which also includes the Town and Village Renewal Scheme, CLÁR, the Outdoor Recreation Infrastructure Scheme, the Local Improvement Scheme, LEADER, and the Walks Scheme.

## 2.3 Policy context

There is strong support for the RRDF in government policy. Following its establishment, the RRDF has been included as an important support for a number of government strategies and policies. These include:

- The Programme for Government (PFG) - Our Shared Future (2020).
- Our Rural Future - Rural Development Policy 2021 - 2025 (2021).
- Housing for All - a New Housing Plan (2021).
- The Climate Action Plan (2021).
- The Town Centre First Policy (2022).

## 2.4 Operation of the RRDF

### 2.4.1 PROCESS

DRCD has overall policy responsibility for the RRDF. Funding for capital projects is awarded by the Department through a competitive bid process. The Department, assisted by an independent Project Advisory Board<sup>6</sup>, considers the applications submitted, and makes recommendations for funding to the Minister for Rural and Community Development. The successful applicants are informed of their approval in principle, and other applicants are kept informed of the outcomes of the process.

Proposals are invited from local authorities, and other State funded bodies<sup>7</sup>. Proposals must demonstrate a collaborative approach between two or more organisations. The lead partner/applicant of all projects must be a State funded body. To date, local authorities are responsible for delivering the majority of projects (81%).

There is a clear distinction between the role of successful applicants and the Department. Under the terminology of the PSC, the Department is the Approving Authority. It is responsible for managing the RRDF including approving funding for projects. Successful applicants are Sponsoring Agencies. They are responsible for

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<sup>6</sup> The Advisory Board is chaired by DRCD and is comprised of a number of relevant Government Departments, as well as external experts.

<sup>7</sup> A State funded body is a body established by central Government or with central Government approval, and which receives a portion of its funding from the State; this includes, for example, local authorities, Local Development Companies, semi-State companies, and other State agencies.

managing and ensuring their projects progress to completion, subject to the terms and conditions specified by the Department.

The RRDF sets out to complement other funding supports, and therefore prioritises projects that are outside the funding available through other programmes/schemes. Proposals can be made in respect of towns with populations of 10,000 or fewer and their outlying areas (located outside the five city metropolitan areas).

Calls for applications to the RRDF are sought under two categories:

- **Category 1:** provides funding for projects that are ready to commence. These are projects, which have the necessary consents in place, are at an advanced stage of design, satisfy the requirements of the PSC, and are procurement-ready.
- **Category 2:** provides funding to enable the development of project proposals suitable for future Category 1 applications<sup>a</sup>. Funding can be provided towards the cost of project development, including technical or expert assistance, and the purchase of land and property.

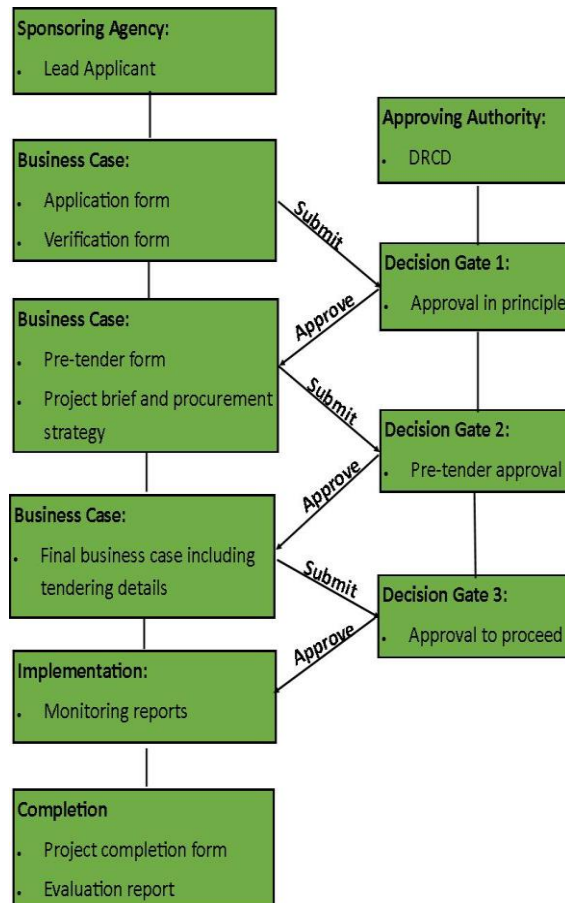
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<sup>a</sup> Proposals that are successful in their Category 2 applications will not automatically secure funding under Category 1 calls. Applications in both calls are assessed through a competitive process.

## Category 1 Process

The RRDF approval process for Category 1 projects is outlined in Figure 1 below.

**Figure 1: RRDF approval process**



### Step 1 - Preliminary Business Case:

Projects have been approved for funding based on the proposal set out in the application form, and the supporting documentation. The lead party must complete a verification form issued by the Department confirming key details set out in the application form. Approval in principle is issued to applicants including terms and conditions of funding.

### Step 2 - Final Business Case:

A pre-tender approval form together with the project brief and procurement strategy must be submitted to the Department for review. A confirmation of pre-tender approval is provided to applicants. On completion of tendering, the preferred tender must be submitted to the Department for review including details of costs and timelines. The project is then approved to proceed to implementation stage.

Step 3 - Implementation: The delivery and monitoring of the project is the responsibility of the lead applicant. Payment is based on vouched expenditure for the delivery of key milestones agreed between the Department and the lead applicant.

Step 4 – Review Stage: A Project Completion Report must be completed and submitted to the Department before the project is fully closed out.

Step 5 – Ex-Post Evaluation: An ex-post evaluation report must be completed by the lead party as committed to in their application.

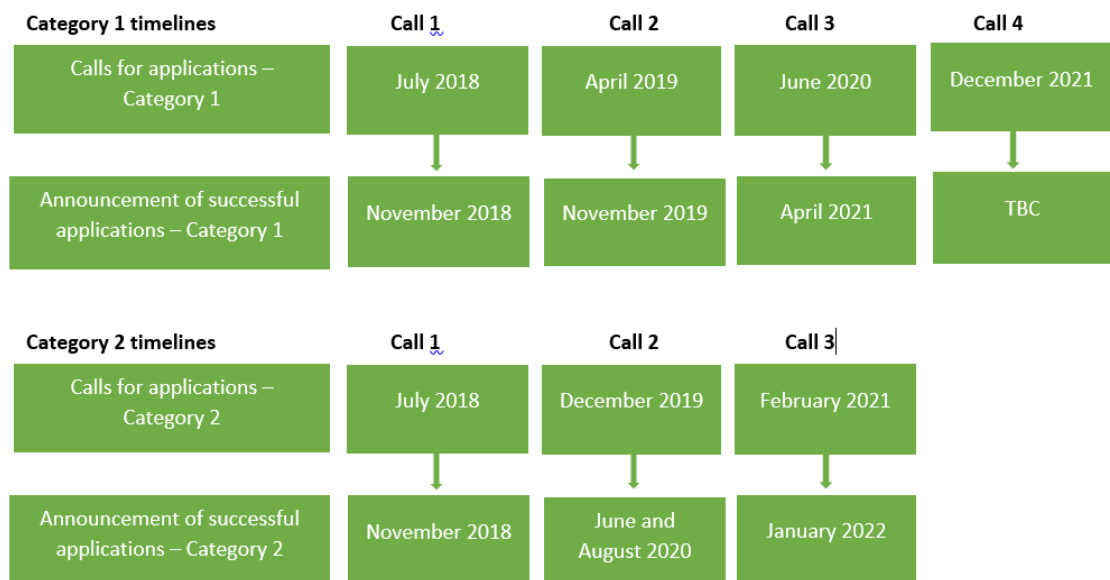
## Category 2 Process

The RRDF process for Category 2 projects is similar to Category 1 above. Once approval in principle has been confirmed, the project must progress through two more stages before the Department will confirm that the project has full funding approval and can proceed to the implementation stage. A pre-tender approval report must be submitted to the Department including the detailed project brief and procurement strategy before the project can proceed to a tendering process. The lead party applicant is then required to make a final business case including the final cost of the project, timelines for completion, and the key milestones where payment will be requested.

## Timelines of calls for applications

A timeline of calls for Category 1 and 2 applications and announcements of successful applications is set out in Figure 2 below. There have been four calls for Category 1 applications and three calls for Category 2. The time between calls for applications and announcements of successful applications has varied from 4 - 11 months for Category 1 projects, and 4 -13 months for Category 2 projects.

**Figure 2: Timeline of calls for applications**



Source: DRCD

#### **2.4.2 TERMS AND CONDITIONS**

An information booklet is issued for each call of the RRDF. This sets out the terms and conditions of funding. Some of the key terms and conditions from the Fourth Call Category 1 booklet (2022), and Third Call Category 2 booklet (2021) are briefly discussed below. More details can be found in Appendix 1 at the end of this paper.

Applicants have a limit of three applications they can submit per call. This was introduced for the first time in the second call for applications in 2019. Previously, there was no limit on the number of applications that could be submitted. There is a minimum funding requirement of €500,000 for Category 1 projects but no other thresholds apply.

Match funding is a requirement under the RRDF. This has varied over time and is currently 20% for Category 1 projects and 25% for Category 2 projects (with some exceptions). The types of projects eligible for funding include town centre regeneration, town centre residency, public realm, libraries, tourism/heritage, remote working hubs, and enterprise centres etc.

## **2.5 Finding(s)**

### **FINDING 1: STRONG SUPPORT IN GOVERNMENT POLICY**

There is strong Government support for the RRDF as evidenced by its inclusion in various government strategies and policy. Aside from Project Ireland 2040 and the Rural Development Policy (2021), the RRDF has been referred to in the Programme for Government (2020), the Housing for All Strategy (2021), the Climate Action Plan (2021), and the Town Centre First Policy (2022).

### **FINDING 2: OPERATIONAL PROCESSES FOLLOW PUBLIC SPENDING CODE (PSC) GUIDELINES**

The RRDF has clearly defined processes informed by PSC Guidelines. A project must go through five steps. This includes the sign-off of a preliminary and final business case, project implementation, project review, and ex-post evaluation.

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## 3 Implementation to date

### 3.1 Introduction

This Chapter examines the volume of funding approvals, and the number of projects supported by the RRDF between 2018 and 2022. It should be noted that although the RRDF was established in 2018, 2019 was the first year in which funding was allocated under the RRDF. A small number of case studies are also included in this paper to help explain the type of projects supported. These case studies can be found in Appendix 2 at the end of this paper.

The structure of this Chapter is as follows:

- RRDF annual allocations.
- Total funding (approvals and match funding), and number of projects supported.
- Distribution of projects by bands of funding approvals.
- Distribution of funding approvals and number of projects by region and county.
- Number of projects by type of activity.
- Case studies.

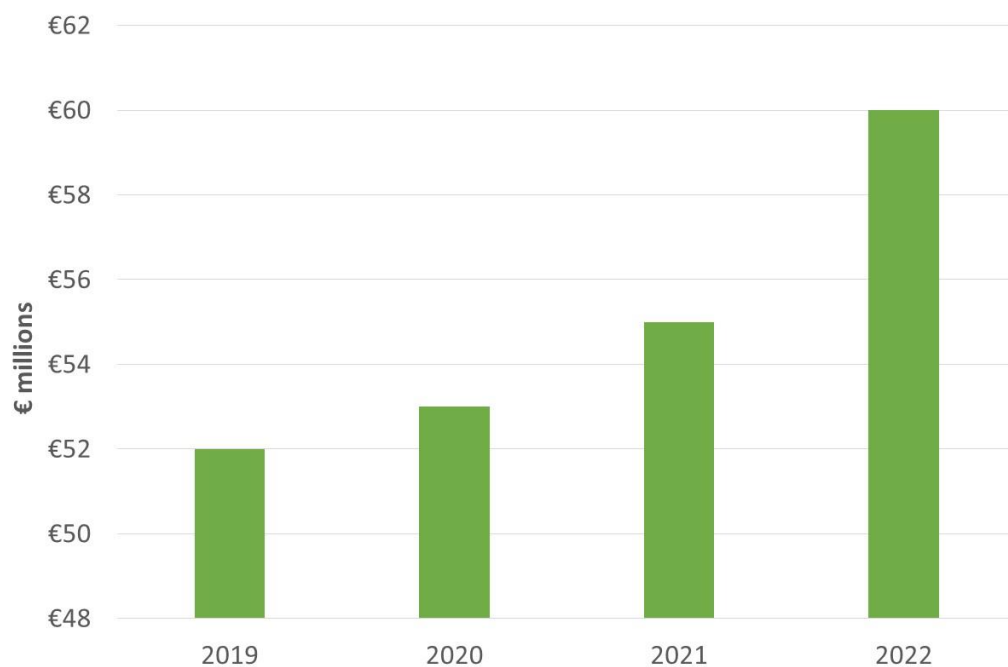


## 3.2 Funding and number of projects

### 3.2.1 RRDF ALLOCATIONS, 2019 - 2022

As noted in Chapter 2, the RRDF was established as a €1 billion capital investment fund. The budget for the RRDF is assigned for a number of years in advance based on an allocation from the central exchequer. For example, an allocation of €300 million has been provided from the exchequer for the period 2021 to 2025. Yearly funding allocations are determined as part of the annual budgetary process in the context of DRCD's capital ceilings. The annual allocations for the period 2019 to 2022 are set out in Figure 3 below.

**Figure 3: RRDF annual budget allocations (€ millions), 2019 – 2022**

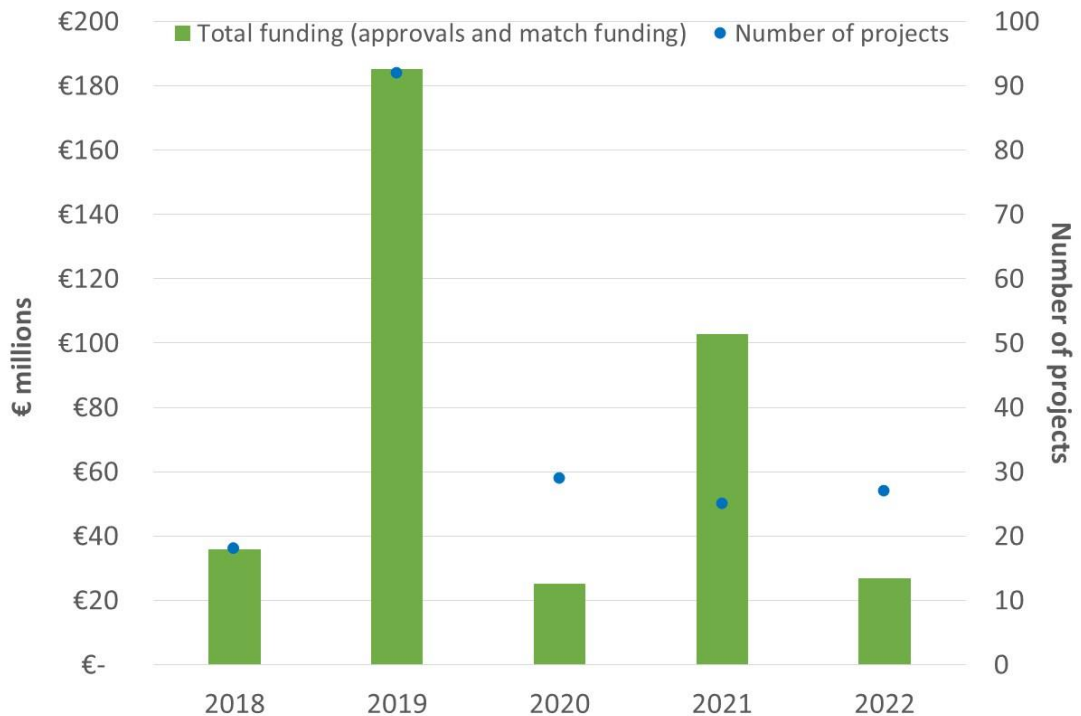


Source: DRCD

### 3.2.2 TOTAL FUNDING (APPROVALS AND MATCH FUNDING) AND NUMBER OF PROJECTS

Between 2018 and 2022, 191 (89 (47%) Category 1 and 102 (53%) Category 2) projects have been approved by the RRDF. Total funding (approvals and match funding) was approximately €375 million over the period. Funding approvals from the RRDF represents €277 million (74%) of this total. Most funding approvals (€222 million or 80%) relates to Category 1 projects. Further details on project funding can be found in Appendix 2.

**Figure 4: Total funding (approvals and match funding) and number of projects, 2018 - 2022**



Source: DRCD

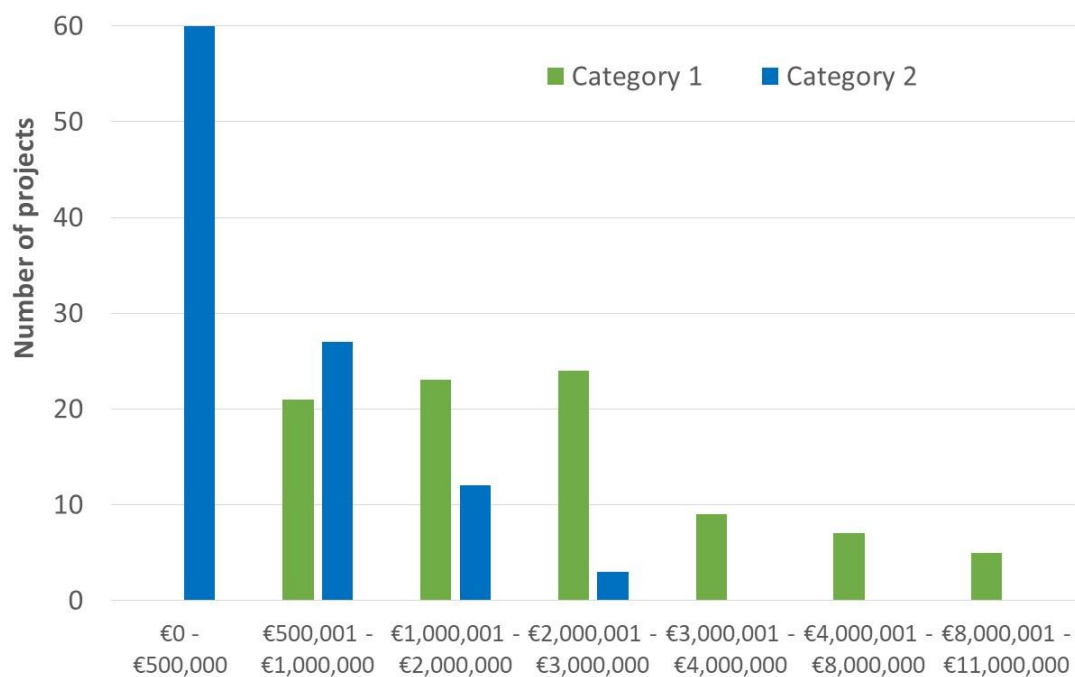
### 3.2.3 DISTRIBUTION OF FUNDING APPROVALS

#### i. Distribution of the number of projects by bands of funding approvals

Figure 5 shows the distribution of the number of projects by bands of funding approvals (i.e. baskets of funding) between 2018 and 2022.

- Category 1:** 21 (24%) projects were up to €1 million. 47 (53%) projects were between €1 million and €3 million, and the remaining 21 (24%) were €3 million and over. Between 2018 and 2022, the overall trend is upwards in terms of the scale of the projects funded under Category 1. The maximum funding approved to-date for a project under Category 1 is €10.3 million.
- Category 2:** 60 (59%) of projects were up to €500,000. 27 (26%) were between €500,000 and €1 million, and the remaining 15 (15%) were between €1 million and €3 million. As with Category 1 projects, the overall trend is upward in the scale of projects supported over the period. The maximum funding approved to-date for a Category 2 project is €2.5 million.

**Figure 5: Number of projects by size of funding approved (€), 2018 – 2022**

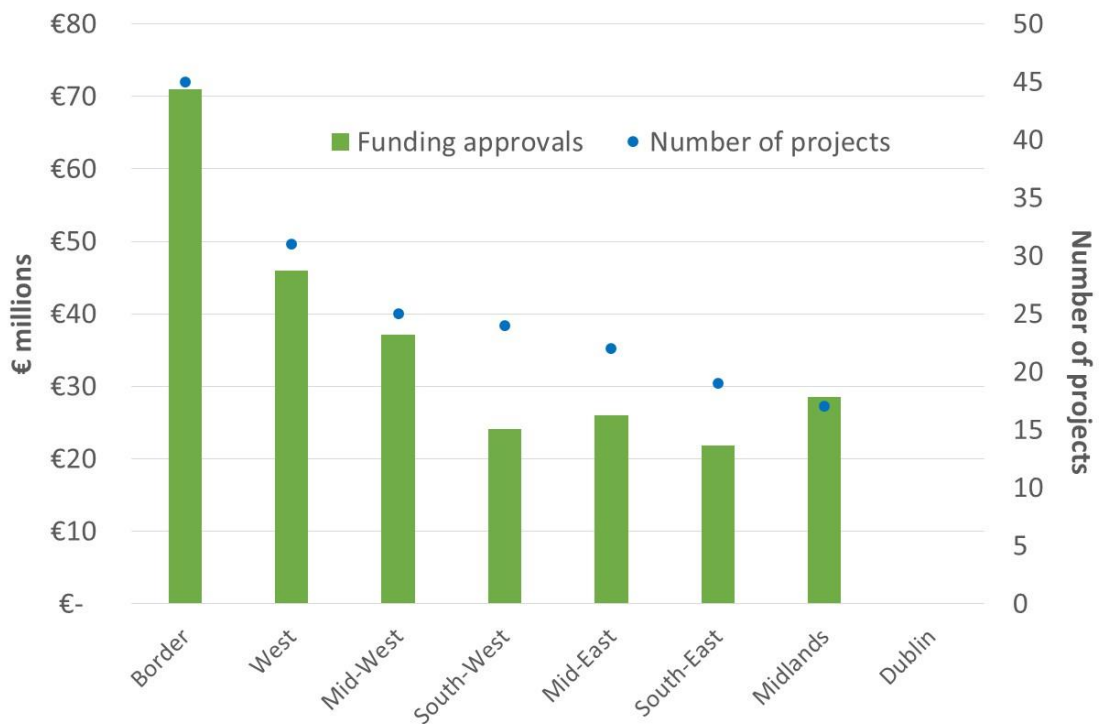


Source: DRCD

## ii. Distribution of funding approvals and number of projects by region

Figure 6 shows the distribution of funding approvals<sup>9</sup> and the number of projects<sup>10</sup> on a NUTS<sup>11</sup> 3 regional basis. 28% of grant funding and 25% of projects are in the Border region, followed by the West (18% and 17%), and Mid-West (15% and 14%) regions. As projects supported through the RRDF are distributed by county, it might be expected that the concentration of the number of projects and funding by region could be affected by the number of counties in each region. However, a pattern is not evident from the data. The Border region has the highest number of counties (five) and number of projects and funding from the RRDF. However, the West and Mid-West regions are comprised of three counties each, compared to four in the Mid-East and South-East, and account for a higher volume of projects and funding.

**Figure 6: Distribution of funding approvals by NUTS 3 region (€), 2018 – 2022\***



Source: DRCD. \* Multi-county projects are not included in this chart.

<sup>9</sup> This funding does not include approximately €23 million of multi-county project funding.

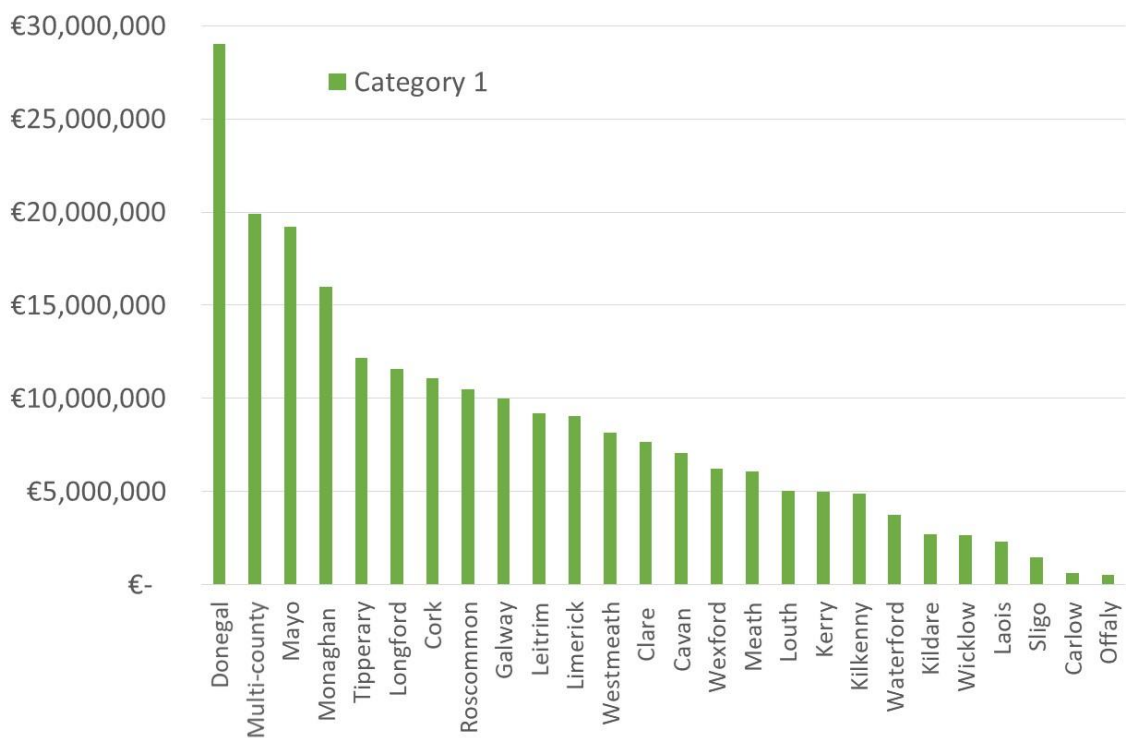
<sup>10</sup> Eight multi-county projects are not included in the number of projects.

<sup>11</sup> See <https://www.cso.ie/en/methods/revnuts23/> for details on NUTS nomenclature of territorial units.

**ii. Distribution of funding approvals and number of projects by county and project location**

Figure 7 shows the distribution of grant funding for Category 1 projects on a county basis. Between 2018 and 2021, Donegal had the largest amount of Category 1 funding approved (13%), followed by multi-county projects (9%), Mayo (9%), and Monaghan (7%). Offaly (0.2%) had the lowest amount of Category 1 funding approved over the period.

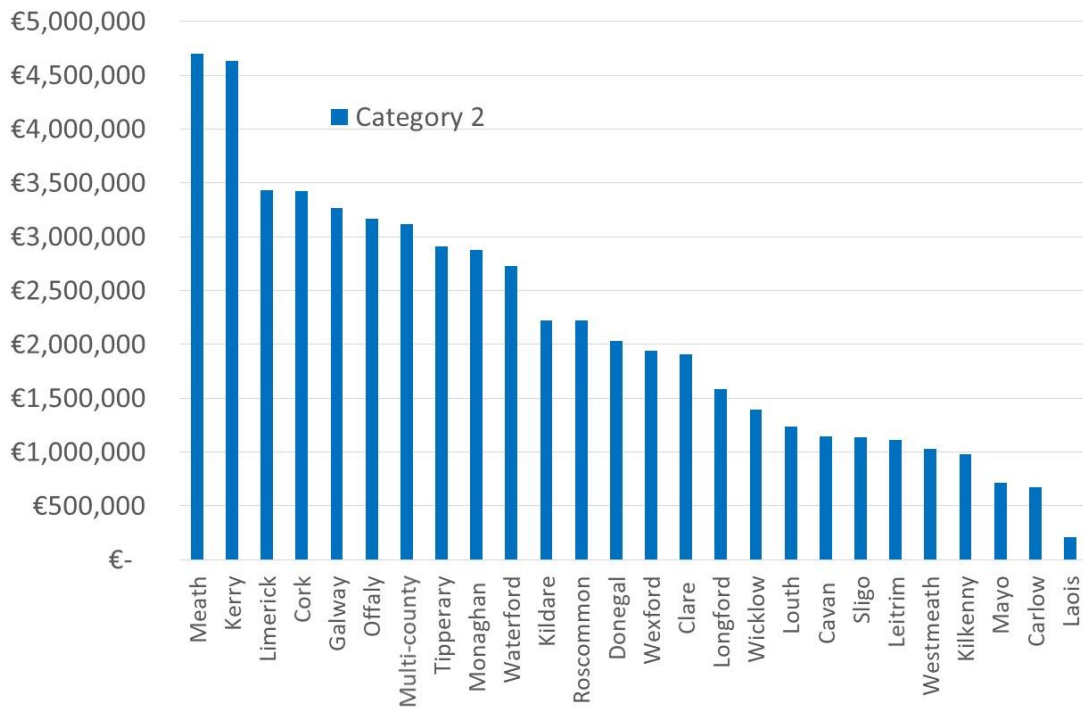
**Figure 7: Distribution of Category 1 funding approvals by county (€), 2018 – 2022**



Source: DRCD

Figure 8 shows the distribution of grant funding for Category 2 projects on a county basis. Meath had the largest amount of Category 2 funding approved (8%), followed by Kerry (8%), and Limerick (6%). Laois (0.4%) had the lowest amount of Category 2 funding approved.

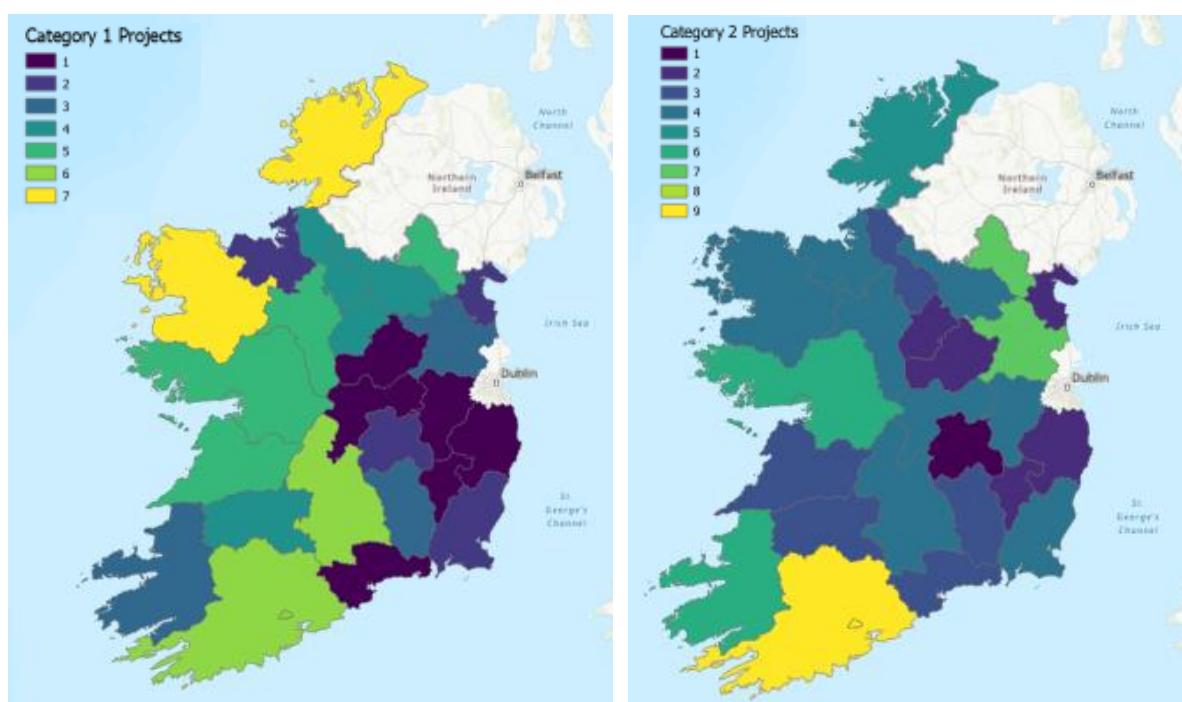
**Figure 8: Distribution of Category 2 funding approvals by county (€), 2018 – 2022**



Source: DRCD

Figure 9a and b shows the concentration of Category 1 and 2 projects on a county basis between 2018 and 2022. The largest number of projects approved for funding per county under Category 1 and 2 is seven and nine respectively. Donegal and Mayo have funding approved for seven Category 1 projects, while Cork has funding approved for nine Category 2 projects.

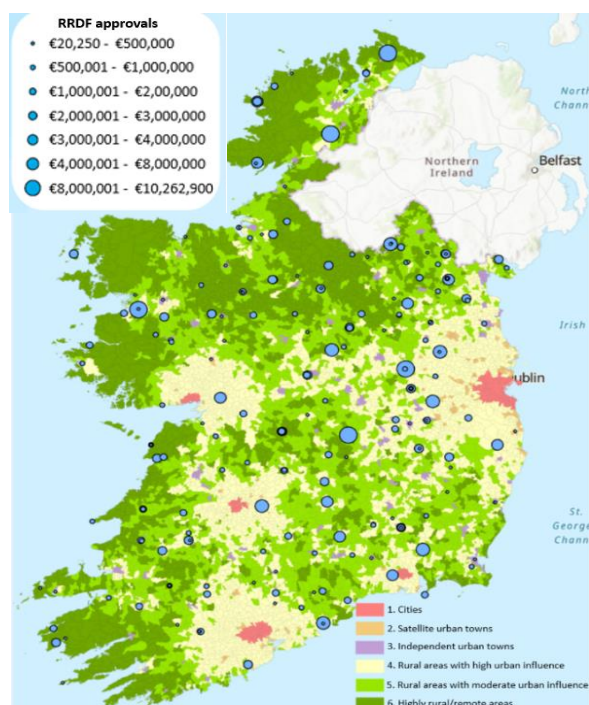
**Figure 9a and b: Distribution of projects by county (Category 1 and 2), 2018 – 2022\***



Source: DRCD. \*Eight multi-county projects are not included in these maps.

Figure 10 shows the distribution of RRDF projects by size of funding approvals across Category 1 and Category 2 projects. The lowest value of funding approved was €20,250 under Category 2, and the largest was €10,262,900 under Category 1. The map shows that there is a wide distribution of projects across Ireland. The locations stated as being eligible for project funding are rural areas with fewer than 10,000 people outside the five metropolitan areas.

**Figure 10: Distribution of projects by size of funding approvals (€), 2018-2022\***



Source: DRCD, and CSO (six way urban rural split of Ireland). \*22 multi-project locations are not included in this map.

### iii. Number of projects by type of activity

Table 1 shows the number of projects supported across ten different types of activities, assigned by the DRCD line unit who manages the RRDF. A project may be categorised as having multiple activities. Between 2018 and 2022, the largest Category 1 and Category 2 activity was town centre regeneration (inc. public realm), followed by tourism/heritage, and community facilities. The smallest Category 1 activity type was town centre housing, and greenway/blueways. The smallest Category 2 activity type was food hub and library. The types of activities supported under the RRDF are concentrated on five areas. 80% of Category 1 and 89% of Category 2 projects include



some or all of town centre regeneration (inc. public realm), tourism/heritage, community facilities, remote working and enterprise centres.

It should be noted that as the RRDF has developed, the prioritisation of projects has changed. This will be reflected in the types of activities supported below. For example, there are a number of activities that are not a priority for funding including sports projects, greenways etc.

**Table 1: Number of projects by type of activity, 2018 - 2022**

| Activity type                                | Category 1 | Category 2 | Total |
|--|------------|------------|-------|
| Town centre regeneration (inc. public realm) | 55         | 77         | 132   |
| Tourism/heritage                             | 36         | 46         | 82    |
| Community facilities                         | 33         | 45         | 78    |
| Remote working hub                           | 25         | 35         | 60    |
| Enterprise centre                            | 20         | 28         | 48    |
| Outdoor leisure/sports amenity               | 19         | 9          | 28    |
| Library                                      | 12         | 4          | 16    |
| Greenway/blueway                             | 4          | 10         | 14    |
| Town centre housing                          | 1          | 6          | 7     |
| Food hub                                     | 5          | 1          | 6     |

Source: DRCD. \*Multiple categories can apply to each project.

### 3.4 Case Studies

A broad range of projects are supported by the Fund. This means that it is difficult to fully convey the work undertaken through the RRDF in this paper. Therefore, to demonstrate the types of outputs funded, three case studies of Category 1 projects are set out in Appendix 2 at the end of this paper. These are summarised below:

#### Case study 1 – Limerick greenway, county Limerick

|                             |   |
|-----------------------------|---|
| <b>Name</b>                 | Limerick Greenway   |
| <b>Year funding awarded</b> | 2018  |
| <b>Objectives</b>           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Support economic development through tourism</li> <li>- Enhance the quality of the amenity to improve quality of life in the communities, people's health and wellbeing, and enhance place-making for local communities</li> <li>- Further community development and social inclusion</li> <li>- Promote sustainable travel</li> <li>- Create awareness and open up access to the natural landscape</li> </ul> |
| <b>Inputs (RRDF grant)</b>  | €2,724,657  |
| <b>Outputs</b>              | Access works, resurfacing, junction realignment and incorporation of a tunnel into the greenway   |
| <b>Project status</b>       | Completed in November 2021  |
| <b>Outcomes</b>             | An evaluation plan is being prepared for the Limerick Greenway. The means and methods of gathering monitoring and evaluation data and implementation of an evaluation plan is being refined   |

Source: Project completion report

#### Case study 2 – Cteic Gaoth Dobhair, county Donegal

|                             |  |
|-----------------------------|--|
| <b>Name</b>                 | Gteic Gaoth Dobhair  |
| <b>Year funding awarded</b> | 2018   |
| <b>Objectives</b>           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Allow for implementation of development programmes to support enterprise creation and SME development</li> <li>- Job creation</li> <li>- Development of the ICT sector in North West Donegal</li> </ul> |
| <b>Inputs (RRDF grant)</b>  | €1,500,000   |

|                       |  |
|-----------------------|--|
| <b>Outputs</b>        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 12 private offices</li> <li>- 143 co-working spaces and hot desks</li> <li>- 50 seater presentation room</li> <li>- Main Canteen and two smaller refreshment areas</li> <li>- Meeting rooms</li> <li>- Multiple private phone booths</li> </ul> |
| <b>Project status</b> | Completed in August 2021   |
| <b>Outcomes</b>       | A detailed summative report (including impacts) will be completed. Metrics will be measured over a four-year period following completion of the hub  |

Source: Project completion report

### Case study 3 – Ennistymon Multi-service innovation centre, county Clare

|                             |  |
|-----------------------------|--|
| <b>Name</b>                 | Ennistymon multi-service innovation centre   |
| <b>Year funding awarded</b> | 2018   |
| <b>Objectives</b>           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Enhance job creation and retention</li> <li>- Deliver community and family resource services to disadvantaged sectors of the community</li> <li>- Contribute to the regeneration and renewal of the town centre</li> </ul>                                      |
| <b>Inputs (RRDF grant)</b>  | €1,023,300   |
| <b>Outputs</b>              | Multi-purpose centre including incubation units, office space, hot-desking facilities, and a family resource centre  |
| <b>Project status</b>       | Completed December 2019  |
| <b>Outcomes</b>             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 7 Micro Enterprises operating from the centre with 15 employees</li> <li>- Support services such as family support programmes, parenting programmes and counselling</li> </ul> <p>There is a commitment to evaluate the project including performance data.</p> |

Source: Project completion report

A table with descriptive examples of five Category 2 projects is also provided in Appendix 2. These are:

- **Kinnegad county Westmeath** - library, education and training facility, and town park.

- **Cahersiveen county Kerry** - three inter-related regeneration projects, Daniel O'Connell Quarter, the Ocean Meets Sky at the Edge of the World Story, and the enhancement of the public realm.
- **Carrick-on-Suir county Tipperary** - a plan to link the Suir Blueway at Healy Park, through the main street to the Ormond Castle Quarter, and along the quays.
- **Cappoquin town county Waterford** - bringing elements of a Cappoquin Regeneration Strategy and Master Plan to detailed design stage.
- **Edenderry county Offaly** - acquisition of a town site and plans for a new community library. A second site acquisition will allow for a variety of uses including leisure, community, cultural and services provision.

Analysis of data and information for developing case studies in this paper shows that there is much information collected on projects but there is room for improvement in terms of the type and quality of data/information gathered. For example, greater clarity on project objectives, more specific details on projects including photos and videos of works, and suitable monitoring and evaluation plans.

## 3.5 Finding(s)

### **FINDING 3: THE RRDF IS SUPPORTING A LARGE NUMBER OF PROJECTS AND COMMUNITIES ACROSS IRELAND**

191 projects (89 Category 1 and 102 Category 2) have been supported by the RRDF at a combined value of €277 million in grant funding (€222 million for Category 1 and €56 million for Category 2).

### **FINDING 4: DISTRIBUTION OF APPROVED FUNDING AND PROJECTS IS CONCENTRATED IN CERTAIN GEOGRAPHIC AREAS**

Excluding multi-county projects, the distribution of funding and projects on a geographic basis indicates that the Border region has the largest amount of funding approved and the largest number of projects. This is followed by the West and Mid-West regions. There is a significant difference in funding approved and the number of projects supported between some regions. For example, this ranges from a maximum of 28% of funding approved in the Border region to 9% in the South-East. The number of projects is highest in the Border region (25%) and lowest in the Midlands (9%).

This regional pattern is reflected by the fact that there is a large variation in number of projects and funding across the counties that make up these regions. For example, the proportion of Category 1 funding approved varies from 13% in Donegal to 0.2% in Offaly. Likewise, the number of Category 1 projects supported varies from seven in Donegal and Mayo to one in a number of other counties. In terms of Category 2, funding varies from 8% in Meath and Kerry to 0.4% in Laois. The number of Category 2 projects also varies from nine in Cork to one in Laois.

### **FINDING 5: BROAD RANGE OF ACTIVITIES SUPPORTED, CONCENTRATED IN CERTAIN PROJECT TYPES**

The line unit who manages the RRDF have categorised projects into ten broad types of activity. The vast majority of projects (80% Category 1 and 89% Category 2) are represented by some or all of the following five activities: town centre regeneration (including public realm), tourism/heritage, community facilities, remote working hubs, and enterprise centres. As noted in Chapter 2 of this paper, the RRDF has been included as a support for Housing for All, the Climate Plan, and the Town Centre First policy in 2022. In this respect there are few projects under the RRDF currently categorised as having a town centre housing aspect, and none as climate action oriented. It is difficult to assign projects as having a dedicated climate action focus.

However, projects under the RRDF can have various elements that support a more low carbon, environmentally sustainable economy e.g. greenway/blueways, public realm etc. It should be expected that, as the RRDF develops overtime, more projects will provide greater support for the areas outlined in these government strategies and policies.

#### **FINDING 6: A LOT OF DATA AND INFORMATION GATHERED BUT IMPROVEMENTS ARE POSSIBLE**

To help explain the types of projects and activities supported by the RRDF, a small number of cases studies of Category 1 projects are set out in Appendix 2. A table providing summary descriptions of the types of projects supported under Category 2 is also included. An examination of a small sample of application forms and project completion reports for this purpose indicates that the data and information available for projects could generally be improved. These improvements include the reporting and/or quality of reporting in the following areas:

- Defining specific, measurable, and targeted oriented project objectives.
- Greater details on completed projects i.e. specifics on what was funded, including detailed photographs and videos of works/completed projects.
- Reporting costings itemised by the main areas of where funding was spent.
- Providing more informative reporting on the lessons learned so that it can be used to inform other projects i.e. what worked well and not so well, what delayed project timelines and how could they be mitigated in the future etc.
- Measurement of outputs and outcomes. This includes developing an appropriate monitoring and evaluation plan to support this.

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## 4 Operational efficiency and measuring impact

### 4.1 Introduction

This Chapter examines the operational efficiency and approach to measuring outcomes of the RRDF. This is undertaken by examining (i) the RRDF delivery model and processes/criteria that apply, as well as (ii) the current and future approaches to measuring project outcomes.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, the views of local authority stakeholders were sought to inform this paper. These are incorporated into the analysis below, and are summarized in Appendix 3.

### 4.2 Operational efficiency

The operational efficiency of the RRDF is undertaken by examining the following areas.

- Delivery model.
- Application process and success rate of applicants.
- Scale and scope of projects supported.
- Progress made towards project completions.
- Approach to Category 2 projects.
- Funding adjustments.

#### 4.2.1 DELIVERY MODEL

The overall approach to managing the RRDF follows PSC guidelines. Each year funding is awarded by the Department through a competitive process. Proposals are invited from applicants that must be led by a State funded body. Successful proposals for Category 1 funding must go through a number of stages for approval to proceed. This includes approval in principle, followed by pre-tender approval, and implementation of projects that are subject to monitoring e.g. quarterly tracking reports. Project completion reports must be submitted to the Department, and project sponsors are required to conduct ex-post evaluations of their projects. The RRDF is also subject to on-site inspection by the Department's financial auditor, and the Inspection, Compliance, and Business Development unit of DRCD. Discussions with local authority stakeholders reveal that, in general, they view the overall process as working well and DRCD as efficient and, having considered the above, no suitable alternative delivery model was identified.

However, there was a consistent view of a need for the development of a stakeholder network group or annual conference to discuss relevant issues, and share knowledge/identify best practice.

#### 4.2.2 APPLICATION PROCESS AND SUCCESS RATE OF APPLICANTS

A number of issues were raised in discussions with local authorities that suggests there may be room for improvement in the application process. These include:

- Changing of priorities in each RRDF call for applications could limit their ability to plan and submit applications. In this respect, a timetable of expected calls for applications would be helpful for planning their project applications.
- Consideration of increasing the time to respond between the opening and closing of call windows to better enable them to respond.
- Greater guidance could be given on how much information is needed/sufficient in applications. Local authorities are unsure of what is the sufficient amount, and most vital pieces of information to submit.
- Whether there could be flexibility on the amount of detail required, tailored to the costs of the projects.

Local authorities indicated that the success rate of applications is a reflection of a competitive bid process. It is also a reflection of the limited budget in each call. Nonetheless, the data indicates that the level of success among some local authorities is low. Table 2 provides an analysis of local authority RRDF applications between 2018 and 2022.

**Table 2: RRDF applications, 2018 - 2022**

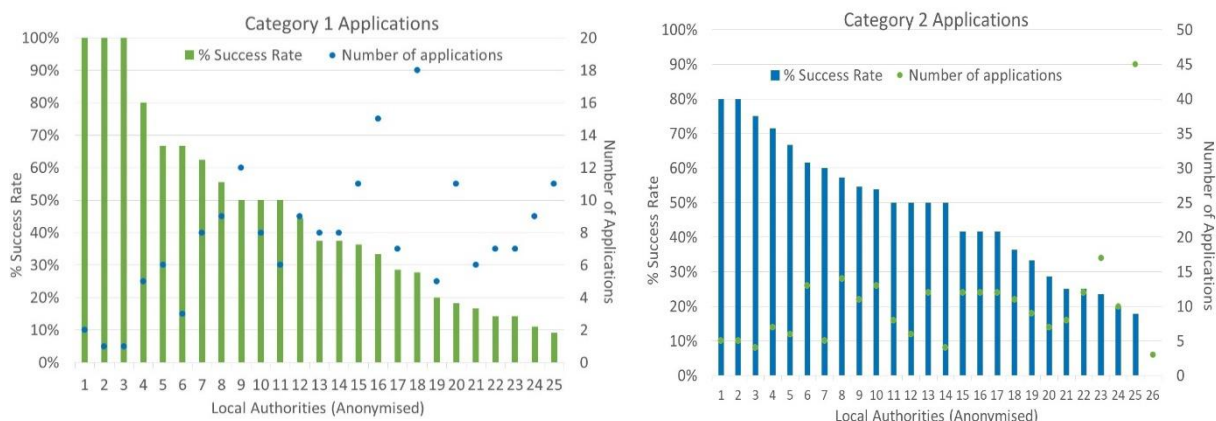
| RRDF call           | No. of applications | No. of applications approved | Percentage approved |
|---------------------|---------------------|------------------------------|---------------------|
| Call 1 – Category 1 | 125                 | 38                           | 30%                 |
| Call 2 – Category 1 | 69                  | 26                           | 38%                 |
| Call 3 – Category 1 | 66                  | 25                           | 38%                 |
| <b>Sub-total</b>    | <b>260</b>          | <b>89</b>                    | <b>34%</b>          |
| Call 1 – Category 2 | 165                 | 46                           | 28%                 |
| Call 2 – Category 2 | 76                  | 29                           | 38%                 |
| Call 3 – Category 2 | 53                  | 27                           | 51%                 |
| <b>Sub-total</b>    | <b>294</b>          | <b>102</b>                   | <b>35%</b>          |
| <b>Grand total</b>  | <b>554</b>          | <b>191</b>                   | <b>34%</b>          |



Table 2 reveals that the percentage of approved applications has averaged 34% for Category 1 and 35% for Category 2 over the period. However, the rate of success has increased over the period from 30% and 28% for Category 1 and 2 in the first RRDF call, to 38% and 51% in more recent calls.

Figure 11a and b shows that there is wide variance in success rates among local authorities. This suggests there may be a need for capacity development in this area, particularly for some local authorities. There are a number of examples of local authorities submitting multiple applications with very low rates of success. While it is not true in all cases; in general, those counties with the lowest levels of funding are displaying higher than average rates of refusals.

**Figure 11a and b: Success rate for Category 1 and 2 applications - local authorities, 2018 – 2022**



Source: DRCD

#### 4.2.3 SCALE AND SCOPE OF PROJECTS SUPPORTED

Considering the ambition of the RRDF, the scale and type of projects funded suggests that, individually, projects could be considered to be relatively modest in their potential for a transformative effect. Local authorities did however indicate that the scale of funding under the RRDF is not available through other sources of funding and so it provides additionality. Some local authorities indicated that the scale of projects funded are up to the applicants, but there are a number of other considerations that, when combined, may have an impact on the scale and scope of the projects funded. These are discussed below.

### **a) Annual RRDF allocations and perceptions of what can be funded**

A number of local authorities indicated that it is a judgement for them on what projects to put forward for funding based on costs of the projects involved. There is a perception that larger, more costly, projects will not be funded in any one call due to the size of annual allocations. For example, one local authority indicated that they had a view that there may be an optimum point for projects to secure funding at €2-3 million under Category 1.

### **b) Match funding requirements and other resource constraints**

Discussions with local authorities indicate that match funding requirements are becoming an increasingly significant concern for their ability to fund and submit projects under the RRDF. This is due to high and rising inflation, and costs of borrowing. Scarcity of resources to build and undertake large projects is also a growing concern. There are difficulties securing contractors and other skilled workers to undertake projects and difficulties of securing fixed quotes for works.

It was stated that Category 2 projects can take time to develop into applications for Category 1 but this should be increasing in the future and will result in an increase in the scale of projects requested for funding. A question was raised as to whether the RRDF could provide some level of funding specifically dedicated for capacity development among applicants to help them improve the quality and the scale of projects submitted to the Fund.

In addition, while this was not an issue identified in discussions with local authorities, the minimum requirement of €500,000 for projects under Category 1 projects may be set too low if the desire is to increase the scale of projects submitted to the RRDF.

### **c) Widespread geographic distribution of project funding**

Another element that may contribute to the scale of projects submitted is widespread geographical distribution of projects. Discussions with local authorities indicate that some were of the view that widespread geographic distribution of funding is a nature of public funding initiatives such as the RRDF. However, some were also of the view that it has the potential to dilute the impact of the Fund as a whole. It was indicated that project selection should be based on merit only, and one local authority stated that they would like to see some element of positive discrimination to fund projects in disadvantaged areas.

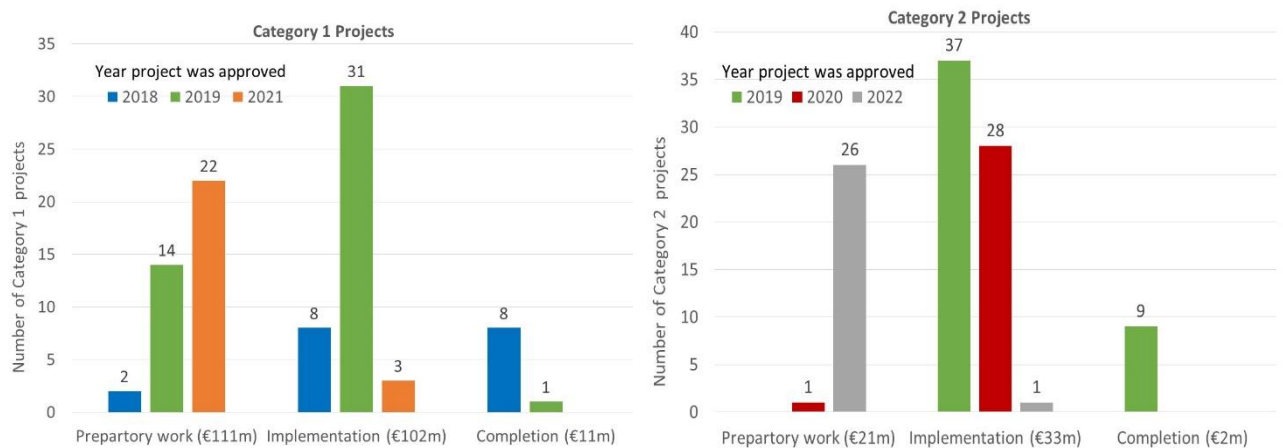
#### d) Type of activities funded

In terms of scope, some of the types of projects supported by the RRDF are broadly similar to those that can be supported through other Department programmes. However, as confirmed in discussions with local authorities, the scale of projects funded under the RRDF cannot be matched by those programmes. The RRDF is a valued source of funding which allows for projects that otherwise would not be completed. Some local authorities did state that the scope of the RRDF is broad enough, and that there may be over emphasis on some project areas at the expense others e.g. strong focus on remote working hubs and town centre regeneration with less on towns public realm that are outside the immediate town centre for example. There was a view in some cases that the Fund should not be facilitating what might be considered mainstream projects e.g. libraries. It was also stated that more focus should be placed on projects outside of towns as projects they also drive regeneration of areas as a whole. In this respect, it was stated that projects should be part of wider masterplans to ensure they maximize their potential impact.

#### 4.2.4 PROGRESS MADE TOWARDS PROJECT COMPLETIONS

Between 2018 and 2022, 191 (89 Category 1 and 102 Category 2) projects were approved for funding. Figure 12 outlines where RRDF projects are at in the approval stage as of July 2022.

**Figure 12a and b: Number of Category 1 and 2 projects by stage of completion (at July 2022) and year project was approved**



Source: DRCD

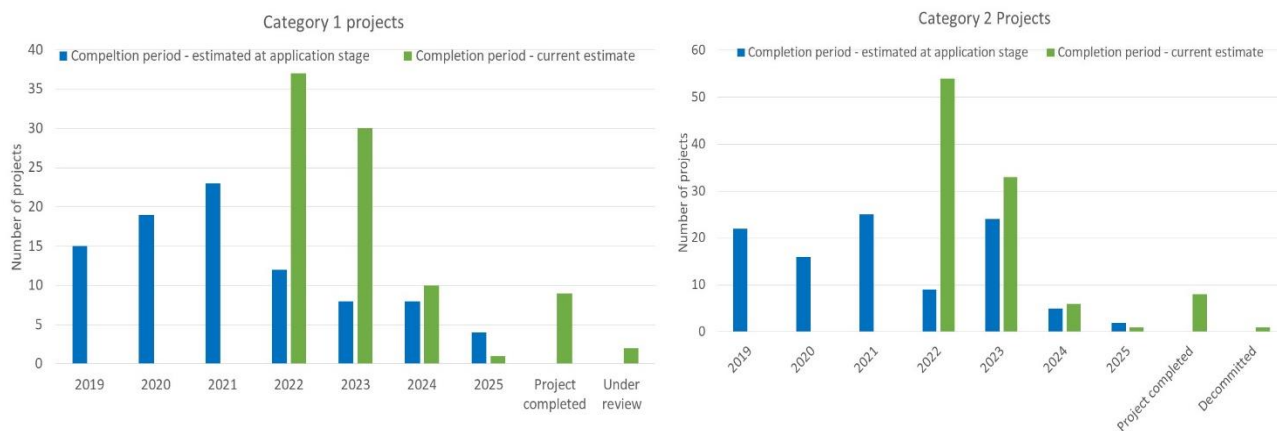
65 (€132m) projects are in the preparatory phase (planning, design, tendering, and review) phase, 108 (€135m) projects are being implemented (Category 1 projects are on site and Category 2 have appointed consultants to deliver the project), and 18 projects (€13m) have been completed (project completion reports have been submitted). Generally, there has been slow progress towards project completions to date. Since the start of 2022, there has been increased progression from the preparatory to implementation phase, particularly among Category 2 projects. It is expected that there will be an increased level of project completion in the near future.

Discussions with local authorities indicate that progress has mainly been affected by factors that are external to the RRDF process. These include the impact of Covid-19, high inflation, constrained supply of resources and skills (e.g. consultants, project designers, and contractors), and planning permissions. However, in some instances it was stated that the lead in time between calls for applications and the sign off for projects to proceed by DRCD have been more lengthy than expected. This can reflect both a need for repeated engagement with applicants to ensure their submissions are adhering to PSC requirements, and the large volume of work involved in managing the RRDF. The approval process and associated requirements can affect project progression.

Project sponsors (i.e. applicants) are key to the successful delivery of projects. Figure 13a and b below shows the expected project completion dates, which were submitted to the Department in applications compared to current expected completion dates. It should be noted that project funding is drawn down in tranches based on agreed milestones as a project progress to completion.

69 Category 1 projects were originally expected to be completed by end of 2022. Currently, nine Category 1 projects have been completed. However, current expectations are that 37 additional projects will be completed by the end of 2022. 72 Category 2 projects were expected to be completed by the end of 2022. Currently nine have been completed, though current expectations are that 54 additional projects will be completed by end of 2022. The current estimate is that the majority (89%) of Category 1 and 2 projects not yet completed will be completed by the end of 2023.

**Figure 13a and b: Project completion dates, 2018 – 2022**



Source: DRCD

#### 4.2.5 APPROACH TO CATEGORY 2 PROJECTS

Table 3 shows the number of Category 2 projects submitted for Category 1 funding over the period 2018 – 2022.

**Table 3: Category 2 projects submitted for Category 1 funding, 2018 - 2022**

| Status  | Number of projects                            | Category 2 funding (€ millions) |
|---|---|---------------------------------|
| Successful under the third Category 1 call                                | 7 (two for particular phases of the projects) | €2.1m                           |
| Unsuccessful under the second and third Category 1 call                   | 2   | €0.5m                           |
| To be assessed - submitted under the most recent (fourth) Category 1 call | 14  | €6.1m                           |
| <b>Total</b>  | <b>23</b>                                     | <b>€8.7m</b>                    |

Source: DRCD

There have been three Category 2 calls to date. One each in 2019, 2020, and 2021. 102 Category 2 projects have been allocated €55.8 million funding under the RRDF. 23 of these projects (€8.7 million) have since been submitted for funding under Category 1.

Most of these Category 2 projects (14 or 61%) have been submitted in the most recent (2021) Category 1 call, and are under assessment. Seven projects have been successful wholly or in part, and two have been unsuccessful. However, it appears to be too early to make a judgement on whether the Category 2 process is working as intended. Discussions with local authorities indicate that there has been a lag with Category 2 projects being submitted to Category 1 but the impact of the process will become clearer with more time.

Category 2 funding is viewed as very important for improving the quality of submissions and the development of projects of greater scale. There is an element of risk whereby Category 2 projects might not be funded under Category 1. However, the expectation is that feedback will help address any issues, and applications can then be resubmitted in later calls.

#### **4.2.6 FUNDING ADJUSTMENTS**

As projects progress through their various stages of approval, original estimated costs may vary. Requests for additional funding are considered on a case-by-case basis. In net terms, adjustments have resulted in an additional €9.7 million liable to the RRDF. 34 (18%) projects (30 Category 1 and 4 Category 2 projects) had adjustments upwards and four (2%) were adjusted downwards (1 Category 1 and 3 Category 2 projects). The average additional funding requested from 34 projects is approximately €292,000. The minimum and maximum ranges from circa €600 to €743,000. In a small number of cases, adjustments are very high e.g. in two cases over 50% higher than the original request. Discussions with local authorities indicate that it is becoming increasingly difficult to accurately estimate costs due to difficulties in securing fixed quotes for works. With expectations of high inflation and supply chain impacts to continue in the near future, it can be expected that costs of works will increase as projects progress to completion.



balanced with a need show the project has or has not produced the intended outcomes in a more timely fashion. In this respect, more immediate results could potentially be identified in a shorter timeframe while broader impacts could be assessed over a longer timeframe.

It can be difficult to identify results for the broad array of activities funded. Research by the ESRI<sup>12</sup> (2021) indicates that there are specific challenges associated with measuring the causal impact of both community and rural development programmes. However, it is suggested that a combination of quantitative and qualitative tools, including case studies, can be used where possible. Local authorities stated that as there are broad categories to which all projects relate, there should be uniformity of certain metrics reported. A network for sharing information and best practice would help identify common questions to be answered and indicators to ensure consistency/uniformity in reporting. Local authorities also indicated that identifying and measuring outcomes requires resources and expertise. It was stated that the establishment of a research agreement with universities or research bodies through the RRDF could help with improving the measurement and understanding of outcomes and impact.

## 4.4 Finding(s)

### **FINDING 7: NEED FOR A MECHANISM TO DISCUSS PROJECT ISSUES AND SHARE KNOWLEDGE AMONG STAKEHOLDERS**

There is a consistent view among local authorities of the need for a stakeholder network or annual event to discuss issues relevant to the RRDF, and share knowledge/learn best practice.

### **FINDING 8: POTENTIAL FOR IMPROVEMENTS IN THE APPLICATION PROCESS**

Discussions with local authorities reveal there are a number of issues that, from their perspective, could be improved. This includes:

- Developing a timetable of planned calls for applications.
- Increasing the time for response between call windows.
- Greater guidance from DRCD on how much information is sufficient and vital for successful applications.

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<sup>12</sup> Review of international approaches to evaluating rural and community development investment and supports (2021).



- Providing flexibility on the amount of detail required, tailored to the costs of the projects.

Although it has improved overtime, there have been examples of high levels of unsuccessful applications being submitted to the Department. While there are examples of successful re-applications following Department feedback, this may nonetheless point to a need for capacity development, particularly among some applicants.

#### **FINDING 9: THE SCALE AND SCOPE OF PROJECTS HAS BEEN RELATIVELY MODEST TO DATE**

Individually, projects can be considered relatively modest in scale and scope. There are a number of elements that, collectively, may be contributing to this. This includes:

- The setting of annual allocations for calls for applications and related perceptions among stakeholders that larger projects cannot therefore be funded.
- Match funding requirements, and resources constraints such as scarcity of contractors and costs of borrowing are becoming an increasing concern among local authorities and limiting their potential to submit projects for consideration.
- Local authorities suggested that provision of funding targeted at capacity development among applicants could help with improving the development of projects of scale.
- Together with the issues above, an approach that involves a widespread geographic distribution of projects has the potential to limit the scale of projects funded in individual calls for applications.
- The scope of projects funded is broad, but there may be overemphasis on some areas (e.g. remote working hubs) at the expense of others. There may be a need for more focus to ensure that projects that are part of wider regeneration masterplans to maximize potential impact. The Town Centre First Policy can have an important role to play in this regard.

#### **FINDING 10: THE OVERALL PROJECT COMPLETION RATE IS LOW BUT PROGRESS TOWARDS COMPLETIONS IS ACCELERATING**

In general, the progression of projects to completion has been slow. It should be noted however that projects have recently been progressing more rapidly, with many Category 2 projects moving from approval to implementation phase. Current estimates are that the majority (89%) of projects not yet completed will be completed by the end of 2023. Discussions with local authorities indicate that project progression is mainly due to issues outside of the RRDF process. This includes the impact Covid-19, other international developments affecting costs and supply of resources, and planning permission issues. However, in some instances local authorities have indicated that the

turnaround between announcement of successful applications and sign off from the Department to proceed with projects has been longer than anticipated. This can reflect both a need for repeated engagement with applicants to ensure their submissions are adhering to PSC requirements, and the large volume of work involved managing the RRDF.

#### **FINDING 11: A GREATER NUMBER OF CATEGORY 2 TO CATEGORY 1 SUBMISSIONS ARE EXPECTED IN THE NEAR FUTURE**

The number of Category 2 projects that have been submitted for Category 1 funding has been low to date. However, local authorities indicate that they expect this to increase as more Category 2 projects come closer to completion. In their view, Category 2 funding is vital to help get projects off the ground and should result in the submission of projects of greater scale.

#### **FINDING 12: FUNDING ADJUSTMENTS HAVE BEEN HIGH IN A LIMITED NUMBER OF CASES**

Requests for additional funding from successful applicants are assessed on a case-by-case basis. This has resulted in 34 projects having upward adjustments. However, in a very small number of cases this adjustment has been high e.g. over 50% in two cases. Local authorities indicate that they are now having difficulties in securing fixed quotes for works. This, together with high inflation and general supply constraints means that requests for additional funding is likely to continue in the short term.

#### **FINDING 13: POSSIBLE IMPROVEMENTS FOR THE EX-POST EVALUATION PROCESS**

Nine Category 1 projects have been completed to date, and there have yet to be ex-post evaluation of the outcomes of these projects. There is no timeline stipulated for evaluation reporting. Furthermore, discussions with local authorities indicate that they require expertise in this area. It was suggested that a stakeholder network could help in this regard by identifying and sharing best practice. It was also suggested that a research framework established under the RRDF e.g. with the university sector, could help improve the measurement of outcomes and impact. In addition, as RRDF projects fall into a number of broad categories there may be potential for consistency in reported metrics.

#### **FINDING 14: PROJECT SPONSORS ARE KEY TO THE SUCCESSFUL DELIVERY OF PROJECTS**

Having regard to the issues outlined in this Chapter, it is clear that project sponsors (i.e. successful applicants) are key to the successful delivery of projects under the RRDF. Project sponsors are responsible for managing projects to completion in line with the terms and conditions agreed with the Department. There are a number of issues identified above within the control of the Department. Collectively, these could help improve the operation of the RRDF. However, many of the key issues affecting project delivery relate to external factors outside of the RRDF process. While unforeseen circumstances can arise, it is also incumbent on project sponsors to adhere to agreed commitments, as much as reasonably possible.

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## 4 Recommendations

There are 14 findings in this paper, as outlined below. Two at the end of Chapter 2, four at the end of Chapter 3, and eight at the end of Chapter 4. Based on these findings, nine recommendations are set out for consideration in Table 4.

### Chapter 2

- Finding 1: Strong support in Government policy.
- Finding 2: Operational processes follow Public Spending Code (PSC) Guidelines.

### Chapter 3

- Finding 3: The RRDF is supporting a large number of projects and communities across Ireland.
- Finding 4: Distribution of approved funding and projects is concentrated in certain geographic areas.
- Finding 5: Broad range of activities supported, concentrated in certain project types.
- Finding 6: A lot of data and information gathered but improvements are possible.

### Chapter 4

- Finding 7: Need for a mechanism to discuss project issues and share knowledge among stakeholders.
- Finding 8: Potential for improvements in the application process.
- Finding 9: The scale and scope of projects has been relatively modest to date.
- Finding 10: The overall project completion rate is low but progress towards completions is accelerating.
- Finding 11: A greater number of Category 2 to category 1 submissions are expected in the near future.
- Finding 12: Funding adjustments have been high in a limited number of cases.
- Finding 13: Possible improvements for the ex-post evaluation process.
- Finding 14: Project sponsors are key to the successful delivery of projects.

**Table 4: Recommendations**

| Recommendations  | Objectives   |
|--|--|
| <p><b>1. Project delivery, planning, and accountability</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focus on capacity building with delivery bodies to ensure delivery of existing RRDF projects, including assurance that sufficient internal resource is dedicated to project delivery within these bodies.</li> <li>• Have a long-term outlook for funding calls (e.g. three year plans), with more stability on criteria and significant time between calls, to allow better project planning at local level.</li> <li>• For Category 1 projects, consider introducing rewards and penalties to encourage project completions. This could involve financial rewards/penalties, and/or allowing a greater or lesser number of applications in future calls depending on the progress applicants have made with existing projects.</li> <li>• For Category 2 projects consider introducing a requirement for all projects to be completed within 18 months of approval to proceed or funding will not be provided.</li> </ul> | <p>Addressing relatively slow progress with both Category 1 and Category 2 projects to date.</p> <p>Increasing accountability for progress at the level of lead managing authority.</p> <p>Ensuring RRDF funding is targeted at projects and delivery bodies where it can be most impactful.</p>                           |
| <p><b>2. Engagement with stakeholders</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establish and manage networking opportunities for lead bodies, with the objective of sharing ideas, learning best practice and understanding the most impactful rural development projects. This could include regular network meetings and/or an annual conference. This work should also involve compiling, sharing and publishing information such as best practice case studies.</li> </ul>   | <p>Building capacity and knowledge in lead authorities with regard to project generation and delivery and best practice in rural development projects across the country.</p> <p>Facilitating networking and knowledge sharing on project ideas, application processes and measuring impacts and outcomes of projects.</p> |
| <p><b>3. Scale and scope of projects</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use the above networks to generate ideas for good projects that support priority policy objectives such as the Town Centre First Policy and climate action.</li> <li>• Prioritise projects for funding which are part of wider masterplans e.g. the Town centre First Policy.</li> <li>• Consider reducing match funding requirements for larger projects and for specific priority policy areas (e.g. to 10%).</li> </ul>   | <p>Generating ideas for projects of scale, and in policy areas which are currently underrepresented (e.g. climate action, town centre housing).</p>  |

|   |  |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reduce the frequency of calls for applications and consider increasing the minimum RRDF requirement of €500,000 to €1,000,000 for Category 1 projects.</li> <li>• Monitor the level of application and success rate of Category 2 to Category 1 projects over the next 18-24 months to determine if the process is working as intended and if not, consider appropriate adjustments.</li> </ul>  |  |
| <p><b>4. Approach to funding adjustments</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consideration should be given to imposing a limit on the monetary value or percentage increase (whichever is lower) on permitted funding adjustments for projects when moving from the approval-in-principle to approval to proceed stage of projects.</li> </ul>   | <p>Effectively managing overall RRDF budgets.</p>  |
| <p><b>5. Improve understanding of impact / outcomes</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensure all applications have a clear monitoring and evaluation plan (see example in Table 8A in Appendix 4), and that approved projects have measureable (SMART<sup>13</sup>) project objectives/metrics. A baseline should be established, with regular monitoring of metrics following project completion.</li> <li>• Initial reports of project outcomes should be completed within 18 months and final reports no more than 36 months following project completion.</li> <li>• Consideration should also be given to once-off evaluation of larger projects by DRCD and the potential for a long-term research framework e.g. with a third level institution(s), to provide expert guidance on measurement and evaluation of projects.</li> <li>• Improvements in the quality of reporting in project completion reports are also needed. This includes information on outputs completed, associated costs, photographs and videos of completed works, and key lessons learned.</li> </ul> | <p>Clear measures of outcomes and impacts for the specific projects funded, allowing future assessment of socio-economic benefits of these projects.</p> <p>Better understanding of impact of RRDF as a whole, and the impact of different project types on rural development.</p> |
| <p><b>6. Resourcing requirements</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consider resourcing to respond to increased project management and monitoring requirements, and enable implementation of these recommendations.</li> </ul>  | <p>Ensuring effective management of the RRDF, and additional work related to recommendations on networking, knowledge sharing, monitoring, and evaluation.</p>   |

<sup>13</sup> Specific to the area being assessed; measurable factors that can be observed; achievable whereby data can be collected and resources are available to do this; relevant to the area being assessed; and time bound by having a clear timeframe for assessing performance.

## 5 Appendix 1

The following data and information is set out in this Appendix.

- Table 5A: Terms and conditions of the RRDF.

**Table 5A: Terms and conditions of the RRDF**

|   | <b>Category 1</b>  | <b>Category 2</b>  |
|---|--|--|
| <b>Funding and no. of applications</b>                  | <p>Min (€500,00) – Max (none)</p> <p>Generally 80% funding with 20% match funding</p> <p>Max of 3 applications allowed per lead applicant</p>  | <p>Min (none) – Max (none)</p> <p>Generally 75% with 25% match funding (80% with 20% match funding allowed where community contributions account for more than 50% of match funding)</p> <p>Max of 3 applications allowed per lead applicant</p>   |
| <b>Type of projects supported (non-exhaustive list)</b> | <p>Town and village regeneration such as refurbishment, redevelopment, town centre residency, walking/cycling links, cultural/heritage assets, business infrastructure (e.g. remote working facilities) and other infrastructure needs, projects supporting jobs, co-location facilities (e.g. libraries, community services etc.), economic, tourism and community development projects, agri-food sector projects etc.</p> | <p>Projects developed as part of an agreed regeneration strategy or town plan, projects which envisage enterprise, cultural, community, tourism or recreation uses; priority for projects which create a focal point for increased activity or footfall in town or village centres, bringing derelict or disused properties in town or village centres back into use, contributing to increased residency in town or village centres, development of historic or heritage town or village cores etc.</p> |
| <b>Type of projects not given priority</b>              | <p>Projects which can avail of other funding streams such as sports projects, projects benefitting small segments of population,</p>   | <p>N/A</p>   |

|  |   |  |
|--|---|--|
|  | tourism projects without support from a secondary source and do not support town and village centre regeneration, greenways, beach facilities, single purpose community developments, roads and car parking not linked to town centre regeneration or not facilitating greater civic spaces/public transport, cultural facilities outside town and village centres, new builds outside settlements etc. |  |
|--|---|--|

Source: DRCD Information Booklets (Category 1 Fourth Call, and Category 2 Third Call)



## 6 Appendix 2

The following data and information is set out in this Appendix.

- Table 6A: Number of projects, and RRDF approvals / match funding (€ millions), 2018 – 2022.
- Three case studies of Category 1 projects and a descriptive table (6B) of examples of Category 2 projects.

**Table 6A: Number of projects, and RRDF approvals / match funding (€ millions), 2018 – 2022**

|                                       | 2018         | 2019          | 2020         | 2021         | 2022         | Total         |
|---------------------------------------|--------------|---------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|---------------|
| Category 1 – no. of projects          | 18           | 46            | 0            | 25           | 0            | 89            |
| Category 2 – no. of projects          | 0            | 46            | 29           | 0            | 27           | 102           |
| <b>Total no. of projects</b>          | <b>18</b>    | <b>92</b>     | <b>29</b>    | <b>25</b>    | <b>27</b>    | <b>191</b>    |
| Category 1 – RRDF € millions          | €25.1        | €112.1        | €0           | €84.5        | €0           | €221.7        |
| Category 2 – RRDF € millions          | €0           | €15.8         | €18.5        | €0           | €21.5        | €55.8         |
| <b>Total RRDF</b>                     | <b>€25.1</b> | <b>€127.9</b> | <b>€18.5</b> | <b>€84.5</b> | <b>€21.5</b> | <b>€277.5</b> |
| Category 1 – match funding € millions | €10.7        | €51.8         | €0           | €18.0        | €0           | €80.5         |
| Category 2 – match funding € millions | €0           | €5.5          | €6.5         | €0           | €5.4         | €17.4         |
| <b>Total match funding</b>            | <b>€10.7</b> | <b>€57.3</b>  | <b>€6.5</b>  | <b>€18.0</b> | <b>€5.4</b>  | <b>€97.8</b>  |

Source: DRCD

## **CASE STUDY 1 – LIMERICK GREENWAY (COUNTY LIMERICK)**

### **Description**

The project involves infrastructure works on the 40km Limerick Greenway. The works have four elements.

- Works to incorporate the Barnagh Tunnel into the Greenway.
- Resurfacing the Greenway.
- Access works at Ardagh village.
- Junction realignment at Rathkeale.

### **Objectives**

The stated objectives of the works were to:

- Improve the infrastructure of the Limerick Greenway to support economic development focused on the tourism potential of West Limerick.
- Enhance the quality of the Greenway as an amenity which is safe and accessible to all, to improve quality of life in communities, health and well-being of people, and enhance place making for local communities in West Limerick.
- Further community development and social inclusion – by building up organisation and networks of community groups and businesses in the towns and villages along the route.
- Promote sustainable travel (for work, school and recreation) between towns and villages in rural West Limerick impacting positively on health and well-being and the environment.
- Create greater awareness of, and open up access to, the natural landscape/environment of West Limerick, its heritage and culture and showcase and protect this for the current and future generations.

### **Inputs (funding)**

Grant funding totalling €2,724,657 was provided through the RRDF. Match funding amounted to €681,164.

### **Outputs**

- Widening and reconstructing the Greenway and resurfacing with asphalt concrete pavement.
- Upgrade and construction of farm crossings (105 crossing total) to facilitate farm machinery and animals to cross the Greenway.
- Drainage upgrades for the full 40km of the Greenway.

- Repair and upgrade of five pedestrian bridges.
- Road junction improvements at public and private roads.
- Laying ducting for fibre optic cable.

Before works

Limerick/Kerry Border and Ardagh Station

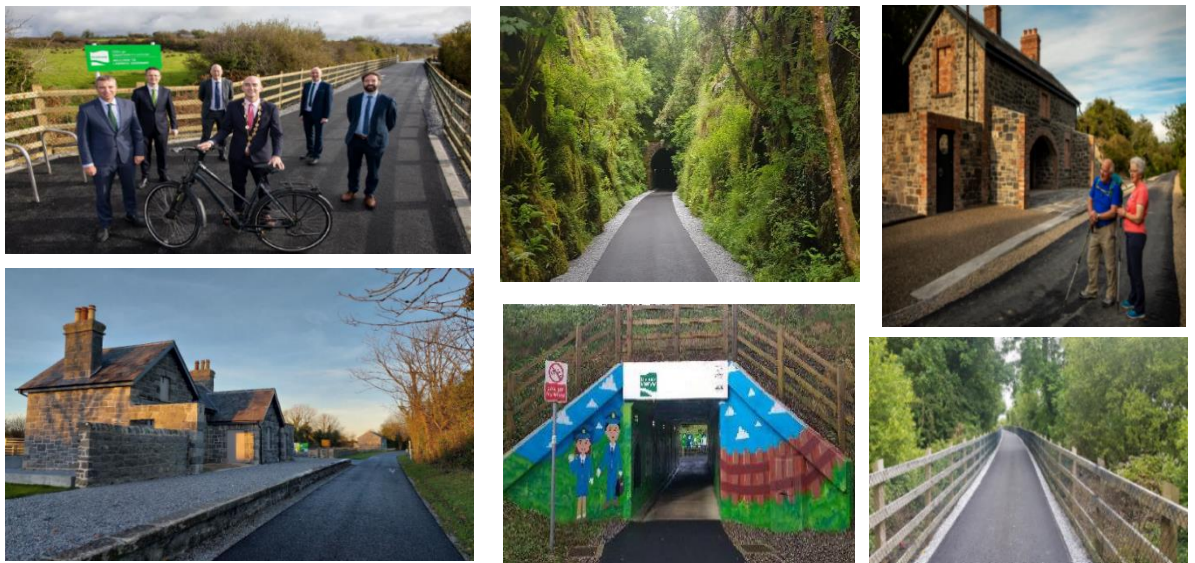
Barnagh Tunnel and Station House



After works

Limerick/Kerry Border and Ardagh Station

Barnagh Tunnel and Station House



## **Outcomes**

Limerick City and County Council is in the process of preparing an evaluation plan for the Limerick Greenway to be delivered in 2025. The evaluation plan will be agreed within the Council and with its partners. Evaluation will involve a mix of internal data gathering and collation by the Council and partners, and use of external consultants (business surveys, independent evaluation drawing on monitoring and other data generated by the partners).

An annual implementation/monitoring report on the Greenway will be prepared, based on the following:

- Routine reporting of monitoring data, drawing on user numbers (generated quarterly).
- Mini-surveys of users to be reported annually (profile of users, frequency of use, duration of stay, spend, satisfaction with experience).
- Survey of businesses, indicatively planned for end of 2022 and 2024.
- Engagement exercises with communities / community groups to examine local community impact with reports to be collated annually (2022, 2023, and 2024).

## **CASE STUDY 2 – CTEIC GAOTH DOBHAIR (COUNTY DONEGAL)**

### **Description**

The project provides dedicated office space, shared space and work stations with fibre-enabled broadband. It provides shared administration, development, training and meeting facilities. The facility is managed by Údarás na Gaeltachta. This is a phase two development of an existing digital hub. That is, the project builds on investment in an existing state owned facility that houses community facilities (Childcare, Art Gallery and Community Library) on the ground floor and a digital hub on the first floor.

### **Objectives**

The project has three main objectives:

- Implement a range of development programmes in support of enterprise creation and SME development.
- Facilitate the creation of 120 direct jobs and 105 indirect jobs over 3 years.
- Provide workspace for the development of the ICT sector in North West Donegal.

## Inputs (funding)

Grant funding totalling €1,500,000 was provided through the RRDF. Match funding amounted to €500,000.

## Outputs

The works provide for 1,725 sq. metres of mixed dedicated office space, shared space and work stations including:

- 12 private offices.
- 143 co-working spaces and hot desks.
- 50 seater presentation room.
- Main Canteen and two smaller refreshment areas.
- Meeting rooms.
- Multiple private phone booths.

### Completed works – office design



## **Outcomes**

A detailed summative report is to be completed. This will include the impacts generated and use a case study approach.

The metrics against which progress will be measured over a 4-year period following project completion include:

- The number of graduate / post-graduate jobs created.
- The number of graduate / post-graduate jobs filled.
- The number of jobs at other grades created.
- The number of jobs at other grades filled.
- The number of employees and business owners personally re-locating to live in the Donegal Gaeltacht.
- The number of families re-locating to live in the Donegal Gaeltacht.
- Increase in enrolment in local naíonraí and schools as a direct result of re-locations.
- The annual turnover of the client companies availing of the facilities (for more than 6 months in any year).

## **CASE STUDY 3 – ENNISTYMON MULTI-SERVICE INNOVATION CENTRE (COUNTY CLARE)**

### **Description**

The purpose of this project was to deliver a multi-functional space where high-speed broadband, enterprise and community services can be delivered under one roof. A large vacant building in the centre of the town was identified for conversion into the facility.

### **Objectives**

The project was designed to:

- Enhance job creation and retention.
- Deliver community and family resource services to disadvantaged sectors of the community.
- Contributing to the regeneration and renewal of the town centre.

## Inputs (funding)

Grant funding totalling €1,023,300 was provided through the RRDF. Match funding amounted to €441,100.

## Outputs

The construction of the centre commenced in 2019 and was completed in December 2019. The facilities available at the opened centre include incubation units, office space, hot-desking facilities, and a family resource centre.

### Before works



### After works



## Outcomes

The project application indicated that the project would have an economic impact (job creation) and social impact (addressing social infrastructure needs in the area). The project will support micro-enterprises and job creation, provide social/family services, and provide for an annual accredited training course in tourism/job creation. There is a commitment to evaluate the project on a quarterly basis including performance data.

Some initial information on the project indicates that there are seven micro enterprises currently operating from the centre with 15 employees and 12 remote working spaces available daily. The family resource centre provides designed facilities for community groups and delivers a range of support services such as family support programmes, parenting programmes, and counselling. The centre also provides community rooms and training spaces used by a wide range of groups and organisations within the community.

### Quotes from users

*“The Ennistymon Multi Service Centre provides reliable broadband and office facilities to enable me to work remotely. As a long term remote worker, living in the area, the centre allows me to work away from the distractions of home and also the opportunity to network with other remote workers in the centre.” - Hot Desk user*

*“The Ennistymon Multi Service Centre has provided the space for the company to expand, along with meeting, boardroom space and high speed broadband. The range of companies and workers operating out of the centre allow opportunities to network and collaborate, and enables local companies to meet to share ideas and experiences. The centre has the potential to attract investment in the long term, providing the facilities to attract companies who wish to operate from the area.”- Incubation Unit user*

### **DESCRIPTIVE EXAMPLES OF CATEGORY 2 PROJECTS**

To help explain the type of projects supported under Category 2, the table below provides a high-level summary of five Category 2 projects supported by the RRDF.

**Table 6B: Descriptive examples of Category 2 projects, 2018 - 2022**

| <b>Year</b> | <b>County</b> | <b>Project Name</b>                          | <b>RRDF / Match funding (€ 000s)</b> | <b>Description</b>   | <b>Project Status</b>                                |
|-------------|---------------|--|--------------------------------------|--|--|
| 2019        | Westmeath     | Kinnegad Regeneration                        | €720 / €240                          | This project has developed regeneration projects in Kinnegad including developing a library, an education and training facility, and a town park | The project has been approved for Category 1 funding |
| 2020        | Kerry         | Cahersiveen Town Centre Regeneration Project | €2,056 / €685                        | This proposal is for the development of three inter-related regeneration projects in Cahersiveen. The  | In progress  |



|      |           |   |               |   |  |
|------|-----------|---|---------------|---|--|
|      |           |   |               | Daniel O'Connell Quarter, the Ocean Meets Sky at the Edge of the World Story, and the enhancement of the public realm   |  |
| 2020 | Tipperary | Carrick-on-Suir Regeneration Plan         | €366 / €122   | The proposal is to design a plan to link the Suir Blueway at Healy Park, through the main street to the Ormond Castle Quarter, and along the quays  | In progress. Application for Category 1 funding was submitted in the fourth call in 2022 |
| 2020 | Waterford | Cappoquin Town - Regeneration and Renewal | €1,208 / €403 | The proposal is to bring a number of key associated and inter-linked projects to detailed design stage. These projects are all elements of a Cappoquin Regeneration Strategy and Master Plan  | In progress. Application for Category 1 funding was submitted in the fourth call in 2022 |
| 2022 | Offaly    | Edenderry Regeneration Phase II           | €2,149 / €537 | This project involves the acquisition of a town core site and development of plans for a new community library. A second site acquisition will also allow for a variety of uses including leisure, community, cultural and services provision | In progress  |

Source: DRCD

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## 7 Appendix 3

The following data and information is set out in this Appendix.

- Table 7A: Summary of local authority responses.

**Table 7A: Summary of local authority responses**

| <b>Summarised responses</b>  |
|--|
| <p><b>Delivery model</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The RRDF is very important for providing a resource to fund projects in rural Ireland.</li><li>• Overall, the process is working well.</li><li>• DRCD is efficient.</li><li>• There is a need for a face-to-face/online network or annual conference to discuss operational issues and share knowledge/best practice.</li></ul>   |
| <p><b>Application process</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Changing priorities in calls for applications can affect project planning.</li><li>• A timetable of planned calls for applications would help applicants better prepare responses.</li><li>• Timelines to respond to calls for applications can be tight. Consideration could be given to increasing the time for response.</li><li>• The process can be laborious and costly.</li><li>• Greater guidance is needed on how much information is sufficient in applications.</li><li>• The application process may be more detailed than required considering the scale of projects supported.</li><li>• Can flexibility be provided in the amount of information required depending on the cost of projects?</li><li>• The success rate of applications is a reflection of the competitive bid process.</li><li>• Can consideration be given to widening the criteria for application to allow towns in the Dublin region apply for funding? There is a situation whereby some of these towns cannot apply for either the RRDF or the URDF.</li></ul> |
| <p><b>Scale and scope of projects</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The RRDF provides additionality as the scale of funding is not available through other programmes/schemes.</li><li>• Funding for individual projects has been modest to date. As development plans for towns progress there should be projects of greater scale coming through. It should also be noted that high inflation will increase project funding requirements.</li></ul>  |

- It is a judgement, which includes consideration of costs, on what projects to put forward in calls for applications.
- There is a perception that larger, more costly, projects will not be funded under any one call, considering the overall size of annual funding available and wide distribution of projects across geographic areas.
- There may be a sweet spot of €2 - €3 million for projects being funded under Category 1.
- Match funding requirements are an increasingly significant concern, which limit the ability to submit projects for funding. This is due to high inflation and costs of borrowing.
- Would it be possible to fund projects without match funding where they can be demonstrated as having strategic importance.
- Scarcity of resources is also an issue e.g. contractors, project designers, consultants etc.
- It is now very difficult to secure fixed quotes for costs of works.
- Could the RRDF provide funding for capacity development among applicants to help them improve the quality and scale of projects submitted.
- Widespread geographic distribution of funding is the nature of public funding initiatives. It is good to see funding distributed. But there are some views that it has the potential to dilute the impact of the fund as a whole if funding is very dispersed in the context of annual funding limits.
- Project selection should be based on merit only. However, could some element of discrimination be included to target disadvantaged areas.
- The types of projects supported are broadly similar to other schemes of funding but the scale of projects are not comparable.
- The RRDF allows for projects that otherwise would not be completed.
- The scope of the RRDF is broad enough. There may be over emphasis on some areas at the expense of others e.g. remote working hubs.
- The RRDF should not facilitate mainstream projects like libraries, which can be funded elsewhere. There is a dual approach to seeking funding for libraries through the Department, which is cumbersome.
- More focus should be placed on projects outside of immediate town centres as they drive regeneration of areas as a whole i.e. they are linked.
- Focus is needed on climate action projects to help meet EU targets.
- There is a need for a more joined-up (e.g. projects part of masterplans) approach to funding areas to ensure maximum impact. In this respect, the approach to developing town plans through the Towns Centre First policy is welcome.

#### **Progression of projects to completion**

- The progression of projects to completion mainly relates to issues external to the RRDF process. This includes the impact of Covid-19 and other

international developments, supply and cost constraints including limited supply of technical resources and skills, planning permissions etc.

- The RRDF approval process can affect project progression. In some instances, the lead in times between calls for applications and sign off for projects to proceed can be lengthy.

#### **Category 2 approach**

- Category 2 funding is very important for improving the quality of submissions and development of projects of scale.
- There is an element of risk but if Category 2 projects are unsuccessful initially, feedback should allow applicants to address concerns and resubmit under future Category 1 calls.
- There has been a lag with Category 2 projects being submitted to Category 1 but the process will become clearer with more time.
- Funding of Category 2 projects creates expectations. Perhaps Category 2 projects could be prioritised for Category 1 funding.

#### **Funding adjustments**

- High inflation and supply issues are having a serious impact on costs.
- It is increasingly difficult to estimate costs accurately due to difficulties in securing fixed quotes for works.

#### **Evaluation of projects**

- Have not enough experience with measuring the outcomes of projects.
- As there are broad categories that projects fall into, there should be uniformity/consistency of metrics/measurement generally.
- A network for sharing information and best practice would help identify commonality across projects and ensure consistency.
- A timeline could be set by the Department for reporting of short-term outcomes following project completion, with a longer timeframe for more medium to long-term outcomes, if required.
- Targets and timeframes should be set in applications including monitoring plans.
- Could a research framework be established under the RRDF e.g. with the university sector, which would allow applicants to draw on expertise to assist with identifying the potential impact of their projects and how to measure it. This would help improve the quality of reporting.

Source: DRCD discussions with local authorities

## 8 Appendix 4

The following data and information is set out in this Appendix.

- Table 8A: Example of a monitoring and evaluation plan template.

**Table 8A: Example of a monitoring and evaluation plan template**

|  | <b>Indicator</b> (list indicators chosen for measuring the outputs and outcomes) | <b>Baseline</b> (record of indicator before project begins, if any) | <b>Target</b> (to indicate how successful in meeting objectives) | <b>Data source / method</b> (from where / how will you get the data) | <b>Who is responsible and when</b> (responsibility and when will it be reported) | <b>Where</b> (where will it be reported) |
|--|--|---|--|--|--|--|
| <b>Objective(s)</b> - intended result and impact   |  |   |  |  |  |  |
| <b>Output(s)</b> – changes in service and/or product   |  |   |  |  |  |  |
| <b>Outcome(s)</b> - changes attributable to service or product i.e. what was the result and impact |  |   |  |  |  |  |

Source: DRCD