

# Westmeath Local Development Strategy - LEADER 2014-2020

Westmeath Local Development Strategy Vision:

*“A county with an active and inclusive society supported by strong communities and a vibrant economy with equal access to basic services and an environment which is cherished and protected by everyone”.*

**The LAG composition:** Westmeath Local Community Development Committee (LCDC) is the Local Action Group for the LEADER Programme 2014-2020 for the sub regional area of County Westmeath. The LCDC is a Committee of Westmeath County Council in accordance with Section 49 of the Local Government Act 2001 (as amended). The LCDC comprises of 17 members, 8 from the statutory sector and 9 from the non-statutory sector. The statutory sector comprises of elected representatives (3), WCC executive (1), Local Enterprise Office – LEO (1), Dept. of Social Protection – DSP (1), Education and Training Board ETB (1) & Health Service Executive HSE (1). The non-statutory sector is comprised thus: PPN Community & Voluntary (2), PPN Social Inclusion (2) PPN Environment (1), Local Development Company (1), the Farming/Agriculture sector (1), Business/Employers (1) and the Trade Unions (1). Westmeath County Council (WCC) is the lead financial partner and Westmeath Community Development Ltd is the lead implementation partner for the Programme.

**The LAG area:** For the purposes of the LEADER 2014-2020, the geographical area concerned is the administrative area of County Westmeath including Mullingar the principal town and administrative headquarters and Athlone, the largest town. Known as the “Lake County”, Westmeath is situated in the centre of Ireland. It has borders with counties Meath, Longford, Cavan, Roscommon and Offaly and covers an area of 1,756 square kilometres. The landscape is distinctive in that it comprises of rich pastureland with rolling hills, lakes, rivers, woodlands and bogs. Its rich environment supports a wide range of diverse and species rich habitats including also wetlands and eskers. The Royal Canal traverses the county encircling Mullingar. The highest point of the county standing at 258m is located in Mullaghmeen Forest in the north of the county.

The population of the county is 86,164 with the two main towns forming the main population centres with 23% of the population living in Mullingar and its environs and 18.1% in Athlone. These two towns also provide much of the economic and commercial activity for the county. Other population and service centres include Moate, Kilbeggan, Castlepollard and Kinnegad. There are many picturesque villages including Tyrrellspass, Multyfarnham and Finea which are dotted on the landscape and these too provide services to the rural population in their hinterland.

Agriculture is important to the area with 70% of the land area used for farming (128,371 hectares), supporting thousands of jobs in the rural economy, both directly in food and drink processing and also in the wider agri-industry. The County possesses a significant stock of renewable energy resources including forestry products. Approx. 6% or 13,874 hectares in Westmeath is forestry, 8,631 hectares of which are in private ownership.

Tourism is becoming an increasingly more important sector in Westmeath with 95,000 overseas visitors visiting the county in 2013 generating 43m to the local economy. The majority of overseas visitors to the area come from Britain, mainland Europe and north America. The county’s major lakes include Lough Ennell, Owel, Derravaragh, Lene, and Sheelin have traditionally been popular for Angling. Lough Ree, also popular with anglers attracts water sports enthusiasts as well as leisure cruiser traffic. Golf and equestrian activity are also popular pursuits by visitors to Westmeath. Cycling and walking are become increasingly more important to the tourism economy of the county aided by the improvements to infrastructure along the tow path of the Royal Canal and the development of the Greenway from Mullingar to Athlone. Westmeath is also steeped in heritage and history and hosts significant visitor attractions in Belvedere House, Athlone Castle and Kilbeggan Distillery. It also contains important heritage sites such as Fore Abbey and the Hill of Uisneach. Westmeath’s accommodation base is mainly in the hotel, B&B, and self-catering sectors, the majority of which is concentrated around the two main towns.

Westmeath has a wealth of creative people, cultural amenities and resources. There are many writers, artists, musicians and film makers now living in Westmeath and there is a new found interest by the people of the county in these areas. In the craft sector there are over 40 makers working full or part time in a variety of disciplines including jewellery makers, textile and knitwear makers, ceramists and wood turners. There is a developing artisan food sector also in the county and an established network of producers producing a range of breads, jams and chocolate products.

Although there is a vibrant community sector in many parts of the county with active committees in many towns, villages and rural areas, there are areas experiencing disadvantage and isolation due to limited service provision or a lack of local job opportunities.

**Total Funding Available:** The total funding available for the Programme 2014-2020 is €7,384,205 with €5,563,495 available for projects under the various Themes and Sub-themes of the Programme: €3,668,465 for Economic Development, Enterprise Development & Job Creation, €1,469,030 for Social Inclusion activity and €426,000 for Rural Environment initiatives.

Under LEADER 2014-2020, the LAG has set out 9 key local objectives under each sub-theme of the Local Development Strategy for County Westmeath.

Theme	Sub-theme
<b>1. Economic Development, Enterprise Development &amp; Job Creation</b>	1.1 Rural Tourism
	1.2 Enterprise Development
	1.3 Rural Towns
	1.4 Broadband
<b>2. Social Inclusion</b>	2.1 Basic Services for hard to Reach Communities
	2.2 Rural Youth
<b>3. Rural Environment</b>	3.1 Protection and Sustainable use of Water Resources
	3.2 Protection and Improvement of Local Biodiversity
	3.3 Development of Renewable Energy

The **Rural Tourism** objective will seek to make the county more attractive to tourists with a focus on improving the tourism product, marketing the product and improving the capacity of private providers and communities to develop and deliver tourism services. This will be achieved through supporting the development of outdoor recreation and water based activities as well as the enhancement of heritage attractions and facilities. Both existing and new operators will be supported and it is anticipated that 20 such businesses will benefit from supports. Tourism businesses will be encouraged to network and undertake collective marketing actions. The sector will also be supported with various training programmes where it is envisaged that 40 such businesses will benefit.

The objective under the **Enterprise Development** sub-theme will be to develop and enhance the SME sector in consultation and collaboration with Westmeath LEO with a focus on the provision of capital and other supports to the artisan food and craft sectors and creative industries and by supporting innovation including the development of the renewable energy sector and diversification into non-agricultural activities by farmers. This will be achieved through animation and capacity building, training and mentoring supports as well as capital grant aid for existing and new entrepreneurs across

these sectors. It is envisaged through these supports will assist in sustaining over 70 part-time and full time jobs in the artisan food and craft sectors as well as supporting new entrants to the sectors.

The objective for the **Rural Towns** sub-theme will focus on improving the fabric of Rural Towns and their hinterlands. This will include improvements to streetscapes and the creation of recreational spaces. The re-generation and upgrading of heritage and other buildings for the economic and social benefit of communities living in and around Rural Towns and villages will also be encouraged. Training programmes for communities will be undertaken aimed at benefitting 40 persons engaged in community activity around the county. An Action Planning initiative aimed at stimulating activity in rural towns will be piloted in the county. Capital grant aid will also be provided for communities to undertake tidy towns' plans and projects where it is envisaged that 20 areas will benefit from supports under this action. New and innovative community-led events will also be supported with marketing and capital funds aimed at attracting an additional 8,000 visitors to the area.

Under the **Broadband** sub-theme the objective is to assist the economic and social development of rural areas in the county through the provision of ICT training and other supports to communities and enterprises. It is envisaged that over 40 individuals will benefit from ICT training as well as 15 businesses with improved on-line capabilities.

The Social Inclusion Theme of the Programme has 2 main objectives is aimed at providing supports for hard to reach communities and rural youth. Under the sub-theme **Provision of Basic Services targeted at Hard to Reach Communities** supports will be directed to people living in disadvantaged and remote areas helping to counteract social exclusion. The provision of animation, capacity building, training supports and capital grant aid for community and recreational facilities will be the focus under this objective. It is envisaged that 10 areas will benefit with improved facilities and 60 persons benefiting from training supports enabling them to participate more actively in their communities.

The **Rural Youth** objective aims to improve the pathways for rural youth that will lead to employment, better access to services and an improved social structure for young people in the county. This will be achieved through community participation and leadership training. Supports will also be provided for Youth clubs/cafes to improve their facilities.

Under the Environment Theme there are 3 objectives around water conservation, biodiversity and renewable energy.

Under the **Protection and Sustainable use of Water Resources**, the objective is to promote, raise awareness and support the protection and water conservation through a community led response that will minimise environmental impact. This will entail the undertaking of education and awareness programmes aimed at benefitting 20 communities with capital funds available also for innovative projects that protect and conserve water.

The aim of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Environment objective is to protect, maintain and enhance **local biodiversity** in Westmeath. Education and creating awareness around biodiversity will be a key focus. Schools, community groups and volunteer bodies will be encouraged to prepare local biodiversity plans and prepare habitat surveys for their respective areas. Capital grants will also be available where it is envisaged that approx. 30 such initiatives will be carried out.

The 3<sup>rd</sup> objective is centred round the **development of Renewable Energy** where the efficient and rationale use of energy will be promoted in the county with a view to increasing the use of renewable energy by both community groups and individuals. Education and awareness initiatives will be carried out targeting 100 people in the county. Feasibility studies and capital projects will also be supported.