



The second Thematic Group (TG) meeting showed how the momentum behind Smart Villages is growing - both on the ground - and at a policy level. Participants heard about how rural communities across Europe are developing innovative local solutions and imaginative approaches to cuts in rural transport, energy, social care, education, service integration, as well as to the threat of climate change.

TG members looked at four ways of building a more favourable enabling environment for Smart Villages: setting up systems for integrated service delivery; providing tools for community planning; supporting sustainable business delivery models; and using the RDPs more strategically in combination with other funds. MEPs Tibor Szanyi and Franc Bogovic, ended the meeting by underlying the importance of the Smart Villages concept and by encouraging the TG to continue its work alongside them.

Event Information

Date: 7 December 2017

Location: Brussels, Belgium

Organiser: ENRD Contact Point

Participants: 40 - including EU institutions, European organisations, Managing Authorities, National Rural Networks, Local Action Groups (LAGs) and researchers.

Outcomes: Exchange of examples and identification of some of the key enabling conditions to support social innovation in provision of rural services.

Website: https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/news-events/events/2nd-meeting-thematic-group-smart-villages_en

Revitalising rural services through social innovation

“Smart Villages are at the leading edge of service innovation”

according to [Bill Slee](#) from the Horizon 2020 project [SIMRA](#). A “crisis driven reorganisation of economic activity is taking place in rural areas and the third sector often plugs the gaps”. In Scotland, there are now 5 600 social enterprises – a 10% increase in 2 years. Social innovation is a “collective response of the community and a willingness to invest time and resources to solve local problems”. Across Europe, diverse business models are being used to revitalise ‘local owned services’ thus creating a virtuous cycle of spending, reinvestment and community capacity building. This requires strong social capital as well as institutional support.



Climate action is “a driver for community-led innovation”

according to [Eamon O’Hara](#), from the *ECOLISE* Network. Rural areas are both heavily affected and can make a major contribution to a transition to a low carbon economy. There are already 1 200 transition town initiatives in 48 countries, 15 000 ecovillages around the world and 1 500 renewable energy cooperatives in Europe. But emergent grass roots initiatives are often operating in a policy vacuum and suffer from a reliance on volunteers, an absence of accessible funding, legislative barriers and an unlevel playing field. This requires a “meeting of bottom up and top down- to design enabling policies”.



Community Trusts in Scotland: The case of Braemar Community Ltd (UK), [Simon Blackett](#)

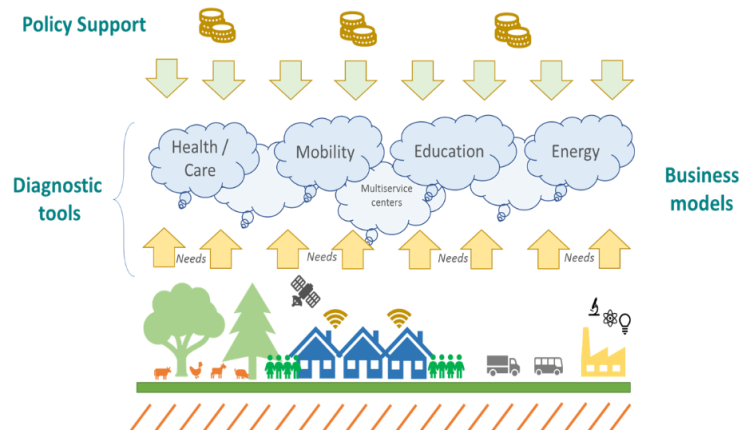
The remote highland community of Braemar with just 400 people has every right to call itself a “smart village”. Just over 15 years ago the residents formed a community trust which took over and now runs their major tourist attraction – Braemar Castle – and many other projects. It raised 800 000 pounds to invest in a local hydro scheme. Profits from their activities are ploughed back into other community projects. One of the latest is to provide better social care to vulnerable residents by using existing resources to employ local people.

Rural Hubs and Multi-service centres in rural Flanders (Belgium), [Dieter Hoet](#), VVSG

Multi-service hubs are a carefully planned and innovative response from the Association of Flemish Municipalities to the collapse of rural services in many of their villages. They worked systematically with local residents to build an effective partnership of organisations and a sustainable business model for the service centres. These provide a tailor- made set of functions such as local store with regional products, a community centre with activities for old people and children. and a mobility hub.

Four ways of building Smart Villages

TG participants suggested four fields of activity for helping rural communities to find innovative solutions for rural services. *Firstly*, think out of the box and find ways of enhancing the links between different services. *Secondly*, engage with local people early-on to co-design and jointly plan services based on a realistic assessment of local needs and assets. *Thirdly*, future-proof rural services must be sustainable and based on sound business models which mobilise available public, private and civil society resources. *Finally*, rural development policies must work closer together to create a genuinely enabling environment. The main recommendations from group discussions in these four key fields are presented below:



1. Strengthening links between services – key steps for creating village hubs and multiservice centres

Based on examples, this group defined a set of key steps for successfully setting up and managing rural hubs and multiservice centres. These steps could also be applied to other services. Their recommendations included: i) mobilising crowd and multi-funding (ii) ensuring a balance between profit and non-profit activities; (iii) establishing cooperation with local enterprises and service providers (iv) Engaging local ambassadors and early adaptors and (v) involving people in collaborative planning.

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EVALUATION
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1. Needs Analysis → Identification of ideas → SWOT → Piloting
 2. Ownership: Making it your mission to see it through
 3. Bring stakeholders and key partners together
 4. Business Plan / Timeframe / Resources / Risk Assessment
 5. Action Plan: Set roles and responsibilities
 6. Awareness Raising – Communication – Outreach
 7. Implementation
 8. Long term implementation management / Sustainability / Continuity

2. Diagnostic tools for helping communities to prioritise their activities

Smart villages are based upon an effective and shared identification of local needs, assets and opportunities. But TG members argued that local communities often lack accessible tools for co-designing and planning their own services. The group reviewed several diagnostic tools (E-townz, SEROI+, and others) and identified their main characteristics: (i) Co-creation/ community involvement; (ii) training and capacity-building for local people to participate meaningfully (using digital on-line tools for expressing their opinions) (iii) ensuring that community planning effectively feeds into wider (regional/ national) development strategies.

3. Sustainable business models for future-proof rural services

Rural villages and communities across Europe are exploring a variety of business models for building sustainable rural services. These include cooperatives and social enterprises, community owned or managed services such as the Scottish Development Trusts, individual private enterprises and hybrids which draw on a mix of private, public and voluntary community resources. Some services and activities may generate a surplus which can be ploughed back into the community but not all cover costs. So, rural communities require support for identifying their 'market' niche and a very special type of business planning.

4. Using rural development policy to create an enabling environment for smart villages

Examples from Austria, Finland and other EU countries highlighted that Rural Development Programmes can and are supporting many of the steps required to build smart villages. The measures for Basic Services and Village Renewal (M7), LEADER (M19) and Cooperation (M16) are being used in various ways to support bottom up planning. M19 and 16 (as well as others) provide resources for engagement and technical support. Innovative business models for rural services are being financed by a combination of M7, M19 and M6. However, RDP resources on their own are not sufficient to cover all service needs, hence they should be used more strategically in coordination with other funds to lever- further public and private finance for smart villages. Rural proofing can be an important step in this direction.



THE SMART VILLAGE PORTAL is a dedicated [website](https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/) that provides links to the many inspiring networks, projects, research and across Europe that are exploring new ways of revitalising rural services.