

Connemara West 1971-2020: Enabling a resilient community

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Introduction

Established in 1971 on foot of a local fundraising drive, Connemara West, which is owned by 500 local shareholder families is a locally managed community development organisation based in Letterfrack, Co. Galway. Situated almost 60 miles west of Galway city in a stunningly beautiful landscape, its area of operation is the parish of Ballinakill, that is, the postal districts of Letterfrack, Tullycross, Tully, Moyard and Kylemore. The parish is an English speaking area of approximately 2,000 people outside of the Connemara Gaeltacht. For close to 50 years, Connemara West has been an *innovation enabler* and *development catalyst* in this region and helped create a *resilient* community. In some cases, the company directly established projects to address community needs. Over time, some of these projects became independent organisations in their own right and continue to positively impact the community. In other cases, Connemara West partnered with public and private organisations in Ireland and abroad in order to achieve its goals. At other times, stand-alone projects or companies were directly created by Connemara West. Different responses at different times were needed to address community needs and take advantage of opportunities.

Connemara West's mission is *to create a sustainable economic, social and cultural future for North West Connemara* and to deliver on that the company has pioneered education, heritage, culture, tourism, childcare, housing and sports projects. The organisation has a 33 year long educational partnership with Galway Mayo Institute of Technology (GMIT) called the **National Centre of Excellence for Furniture Design and Technology**, which is based in the Connemara West Centre in Letterfrack and is attended on an annual basis by over 200 undergraduate students from around Ireland and abroad. The company also has a 47 year partnership with Aquinas College, Grand Rapids, Michigan which has resulted in thousands of students and their families from Michigan spending up to 4 months each year in the village of Tullycross in North West Connemara, studying Irish history, literature and culture as part of their study abroad in Ireland programme. These exchanges also build connections between communities in the West of Ireland and the mid-West of the United States. Connemara West also has a 32 year partnership with Galway Roscommon Education and Training Board (GRETB) which provides second level and adult education opportunities for 86 students each year in Letterfrack.

The story of Connemara West's evolution over the past six decades is the story of a community being brave, taking risks (some of which worked, some didn't), being generous with their time and financial resources and partnering with others to chart its own destiny. Although it is impossible to outline all the activities that have taken place since 1971, what is outlined below are those key milestones in each decade that were pivotal in terms of either their size, shaping resilience in the locality, or addressing specific challenges or opportunities identified by the community at a particular time.

Laying the foundations – the 1970s

Connemara West was incorporated as a limited company in December 1971. The company's first project was the building and management of nine thatched holiday cottages in the village of Tullycross. The scheme was the brainchild of the late Dr. Brendan O'Regan who was then Chairman of the Shannon Free Airport Development Company and Chairman of Board Fáilte. His idea was to build such Rent an Irish Cottage Scheme projects in rural villages with tourism potential so that when operational they would be catalysts for further development. Connemara West embraced this aim and from the outset was determined to take on the role of a local development body for the parish of Ballinakill in North West Connemara.

Finance was raised locally for the cottages project and contributions were also received from Galway County Council and the Western Regional Tourism Organisation. Connemara West shareholders made the decision that any profits earned should be retained and invested in new community projects, rather than distributed to shareholders. This ethos has continued to the present day. Therefore, like many other community and local development companies

established throughout Ireland at the same time, Connemara West was a social enterprise led by social entrepreneurs long before those two terms became popular. The commercial success of the cottage scheme gave Connemara West the financial and organisational base from which to develop other activities. Connemara West's first employee was a cottage supervisor.

Connemara West Cottages, Tullycross village



In 1977, Teach Ceoil, a training and performance centre for the traditional arts was built in Tully village. In the same year Connemara West was among four bidders competing for the buildings and adjoining nine acres of land of the former Industrial School in Letterfrack. In 1978, Connemara West became the proud owner of this complex of derelict buildings with leaking roofs, broken windows, no electricity or running water and no heating. The extensive repairs were carried out incrementally over several years. These buildings now form the nucleus of the Connemara West Centre in Letterfrack. At the same time, the Board of Directors of Connemara West encouraged the government to purchase additional land associated with the former Industrial School and develop it as Connemara National Park. The State finally purchased the land and additional mountain and bogland from Kylemore Abbey amounting to a total of 2,750 hectares. Connemara National Park was officially opened in 1980 with its main entrance and reception in Letterfrack village. Today it attracts close to 300,000 visitors per annum and is a major visitor attraction and provides much needed local employment.

Connemara West Centre, Letterfrack village



Teach Ceoil, Tully village



It was envisaged that at least part of this large building (28,000 sq ft or 2,601 m²) or associated smaller premises would be used as the location for micro craft enterprises to provide employment and training for local people. Various craft workshops were established including wood turning, ceramics, sculpting, weaving, leatherwork, pewter ware, fireplaces, wrought iron and soft toys, as well as a craft co-op and a patchwork venture. The building was also the location for a farmer's co-op, fisherman's co-op and the first EU Anti Poverty Project, in which Connemara West was a partner. This EU funded Project, called the **West Connemara Community Action Project**, provided finance for Connemara West to employ its first full-time office secretary and also facilitated the opening of the Connemara West office in 1980 to provide office services such as typing, photocopying and faxing to the local community. Funding from the Department of Education supported the employment of a Development Officer. Early renovation work on the former industrial school, including the installation of a new heating system and electrical rewiring continued during this project.

The 1980s - Building on strong foundations

In the early 1980s, youth unemployment, early school leaving and emigration were identified as particular problems for North West Connemara. To improve the employment chances of local youngsters, a Craft Training course was established in 1982 and ran until 1985 in the Connemara West Centre. The course, which provided comprehensive woodskills training for 15 local young people, was designed and managed by Connemara West under contract from the Youth Employment Agency (YEA). Connemara West had sole responsibility for the development and management of the course. The 15 young people obtained City and Guilds Certificates in Cabinetmaking. However, this course was a once-off arrangement.

In 1985, Connemara West successfully applied to the Combat Poverty Agency for project funding under the Second EU Anti Poverty Programme. As a result, a four year project called the **Community Resource and Education Project** was established. This project facilitated specific activities such as the compilation of a community information directory, the hosting of a Wood Sculpture Symposium, the drawing up of development plans for the villages of Letterfrack, Tullycross and Tully and the establishment of Connemara Community Radio (for more on the radio, see below). This project, by financing the employment of two project staff, also enabled development and planning work to be carried out on future education courses (see below) and laid the foundation for much of the activities that were to develop in the Connemara West Centre over the following decade and a half.

After the successful once-off woodskills course ended, Connemara West engaged in a strategic research exercise focused on exploring the training and skills requirements of the furniture industry that could be serviced from

Letterfrack. A proposal for an Education Programme in Fine Woodworking and Design was developed and circulated to agencies that were considered possible collaborators and funding sources (e.g. Kilkenny Design, Crafts Council of Ireland, Industrial Development Authority, ANCO¹, Youth Employment Agency and Galway Mayo Institute of Technology (GMIT)). In 1987, Connemara West and GMIT initiated a partnership to deliver, initially, a two year National Certificate in Furniture Design and Manufacture. This partnership was, and still is, a unique and innovative model of education provision. The initiative has developed to the stage that in 2019 there were 230 students pursuing a choice of 3 BSc degree level courses in furniture design, manufacturing, technology, management or teaching at the GMIT facility in Letterfrack². The expansion in student numbers and course options was facilitated by an ambitious €6m building programme at the Connemara West campus, completed in 2000, funded primarily through the Operational Programme for Agriculture, Rural Development and Forestry. This is not the only education initiative on the campus. In the late 1980s, a programme for early school leavers, which later evolved into the Youthreach inter-agency education programme, was established by the Galway Roscommon Education Training Board (GRETB) and in 2002 GRETB established a Further Education Centre. In 2019 these 2 programmes accommodated 86 students.

GMIT Letterfrack students



Drawing on further findings from the strategic research exercise mentioned above, other initiatives targeted at the furniture industry were developed by Connemara West. For example, a commercial unit specialising in furniture restoration and conservation was established in 2000. The main objective of the unit, now called Conservation|Letterfrack³ is to provide a complete conservation and restoration service for furniture, wooden artefacts and architectural woodwork to the highest international standards. This enterprise, although a division of Connemara West, is a commercial operation.

¹ANCO was a forerunner of FÁS

² For more information see <http://www.gmit.ie/letterfrack-campus.html>

³ See <http://www.conservationletterfrack.ie/index.html>



The 1990s – Deepening resilience

In 1989, Connemara West invited five statutory agencies (FÁS, Co. Galway VEC, City of Galway VEC, Galway County Council and the Western Health Board) to join with the local community to submit a proposal for a large rural project under the Third EU Anti-Poverty Programme. The project, which is now called FORUM Connemara CLG and was based in the village of Letterfrack, commenced activities in 1990. FORUM Connemara CLG, now an independent local development company, delivers not only the LEADER programme for western County Galway but also social inclusion programmes such as the Ability Programme, three FÁS schemes (social care, essential housing repairs and Youth in Action), the Rural Social Scheme and an Adolescent Support Programme.⁴ It also partners in the North Connemara Locally Led Agri-Environmental Scheme and the European Innovatoin Partnership Fresh Water Pearl Mussel project. Since it began its work in 1990, FORUM Connemara CLG has had an incalculable impact on the social and economic well-being of the residents of North West Connemara.

The Connemara Community Radio Group was established in 1987 as part of the Community Resource and Education Project. The project found that a credible, accessible and local forum was needed to provide information, allow debate and permit questioning of developments and issues that impact on the area. In 1988, the radio service went on air for three months. Then following a long interval off air, the station was eventually licensed for 30 months as part of the Independent Radio and Television Commission (IRTC)⁵ Community Radio Pilot project and began broadcasting on July 1st 1995. Connemara Community Radio (CCR), as it is now known, has broadcast consistently since 1995, moving into a purpose-built studio facility on the Connemara West campus in 2001. This building was funded with resources from Connemara West and the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs. CCR is now a separate stand alone organisation funded through a Community Services Programme Evaluations of CCR have consistently confirmed its contribution to social capital building and as a key source of locally relevant information and advice.

⁴ For more information see www.forumconnemara.ie

⁵ The IRTC functions are now subsumed into the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland

In 1999, Foscadh Community Development Ltd, a partnership between Connemara West, FORUM Connemara CLG and Tullycross Credit Union was established with a view to undertaking an ambitious project that included building 30 social houses to cater for the elderly, families in need of housing and returning emigrants. This project also included plans for a community services and leisure centre, a sports field and an astro-turf pitch on a site adjacent to the Connemara West campus.

2000 to 2020 - Consolidation & New Directions

The first part of this period witnessed the completion of some existing planned projects. In 2001, Diamond Hill Housing Association CLG a partnership between Connemara West and Forum Connemara CLG was incorporated to provide social housing although it wasn't until 2016 as a result of collaboration with Clúid Housing Association that the first 14 social housing units were completed. In 2004, Foscadh Community Development began development of a new community sports field. In 2006, Connemara West secured funding for a Community Creche in Letterfrack, which was opened in 2009. In 2012, the community astro turf pitch, part of the Foscadh Community Development project, was opened. In 2016, planning permission was granted for the construction of a Community Services and Leisure Centre to complement the sports field and astro turf pitch in Letterfrack. Construction of that centre began in 2018 and was completed in late 2019.

Astro Turf Pitch, Letterfrack village



Social Housing, Letterfrack village



From 2012, Connemara West began to formulate a new education-led development strategy. At the centre of the strategy is the promotion of the region as a *Learning Destination* through the development of a **Global Learning and Digital Hub** in the village of Tullycross. The Hub is a strategic regional project based on the Irish diaspora, heritage, culture, learning and local amenities which will attract off-peak visitors to this Wild Atlantic Way destination and drive economic development for Connemara and the wider Western Region. It will focus on attracting academic, corporate, wellness and co-working visitors and events to the Hub. At the centre of the project is the plan to build a new Education Centre (300 m²) by redeveloping an old parochial house. The second element of the project is upgrading and extending Connemara West's existing stock of nine thatched cottages (1,290 m²) on the site. The Hub will have the capacity to cater for an average of 40 residents at any given time. It will contain a 50-seat auditorium (with multifunctional wellness/meditation capability); Wi-Fi-enabled learning hub/library; group study and breakout rooms; video conferencing facilities; a conference room and a coffee dock. In addition, the Centre will provide hot-desking and co-working space for businesses. The Hub has received funding from the Irish government's Rural Regeneration and Development Fund and philanthropic sources in Ireland and the US. The local community, through Connemara West, has also invested heavily in the project. The project has 6 Irish partners - the Western Development Commission, NUIG, GMIT, Galway County Council, FORUM Connemara CLG, Tomar Trust and 3 US partners - Aquinas College, Lourdes University and The Friends of Connemara.

Global Learning & Digital Hub, Tullycross village



Already, 6 US colleges base their study abroad programmes in the village and a conference is held each annually since 2015. Additional colleges, businesses, well-being visitors and events will come on stream over the next few years. In addition, the local community will be able to avail of a variety of blended learning and education opportunities delivered in the Hub together will exposure to the colleges and companies using the Hub. This new strategy has been recognised by government. For example, Connemara West lead an action (Action 165) in the government’s action plan for rural development, *Realising our Rural Potential* to examine the potential to promote rural Ireland as the destination of choice for US colleges wishing to avail of a rural based learning or study abroad experience. In addition, Connemara West is one of the best practice case studies in the *National Planning Framework, Ireland 2040 Our Plan*, as an innovative model of global engagement by a rural area.

Visiting Global Learners



The activities of Connemara West have had a significant impact on the locality. In visible terms, the Connemara West campus in Letterfrack hosts an impressive physical infrastructure including the buildings that host Connemara West itself, GMIT Letterfrack, FORUM Connemara CLG, Connemara Community Radio, Youthreach, crèche and Conservation|Letterfrack. Other infrastructure, such as the nine thatched cottages and Teach Ceoil are located in the nearby villages of Tullycross and Tully, two and three miles away, respectively. Total employment attributable to all the organisations based at Connemara West's campus is over 240 making it one of the largest employment centres in Connemara. Over the past six decades, through the various projects and partnerships, Connemara West has positively impacted the lives not just of its own community members but many thousands of others from around Ireland and the United States. Most importantly, the community of Ballinakill, building on the strong foundations, ethos and example of the initial group of social entrepreneurs who started this journey, is continually building its capacity to address needs, grasp opportunities and develop resilience to respond to challenges.

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Michael O'Neill is a retired founding Director of Connemara West.

For further information see www.connemarawest.ie or contact kevin.heanue@connemarawest.ie

Testimonials

"Connemara West could have given lessons to the Regional Committee in Europe on how to, in fact, have effective policy and it is the local people who have done so much to create a very positive atmosphere".

President Michael D Higgins speaking in Letterfrack on November 11th 2017, at the celebration of Connemara West's 30 year educational partnership with GMIT Letterfrack

"Connemara West has created and delivered innovative rural development initiatives and models targeting a sustainable economic, social and cultural future for North West Connemara."

The Irish Government National Planning Framework, part of Project Ireland 2040

"This case study.....was included as an exemplar of innovation, regional enterprise and community development in a remote rural area"

Written response from Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government to Parliamentary Question (Reference 10041/18) about Connemara West's inclusion in the National Planning Framework