



Guidance for the
Development of

Rural Working Hubs



People | Opportunity | Place | **Connected**

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Remote working is becoming increasingly popular and it creates many positive opportunities for employers, employees and the communities in which they are based. Remote working facilitates work outside of a traditional office environment so instead of commuting to an office each day to work from a designated desk, remote employees can work close to home within their local communities. The Covid-19 pandemic has led to the rapid increase in remote working throughout the country. The inclination for people to retain an element of this post Covid-19 has created the opportunity for local communities to develop rural working hubs to meet the demand for remote working. This in turn brings life and activity back into town and village centres and increases the capacity of the local community to be more sustainable. Longford County Council supports the development of rural working hubs within County Longford and seeks to support communities and organisations in the development of hubs. This guidance has been designed to support organisations seeking support from Longford County Council in the development of hubs as a practical guide.

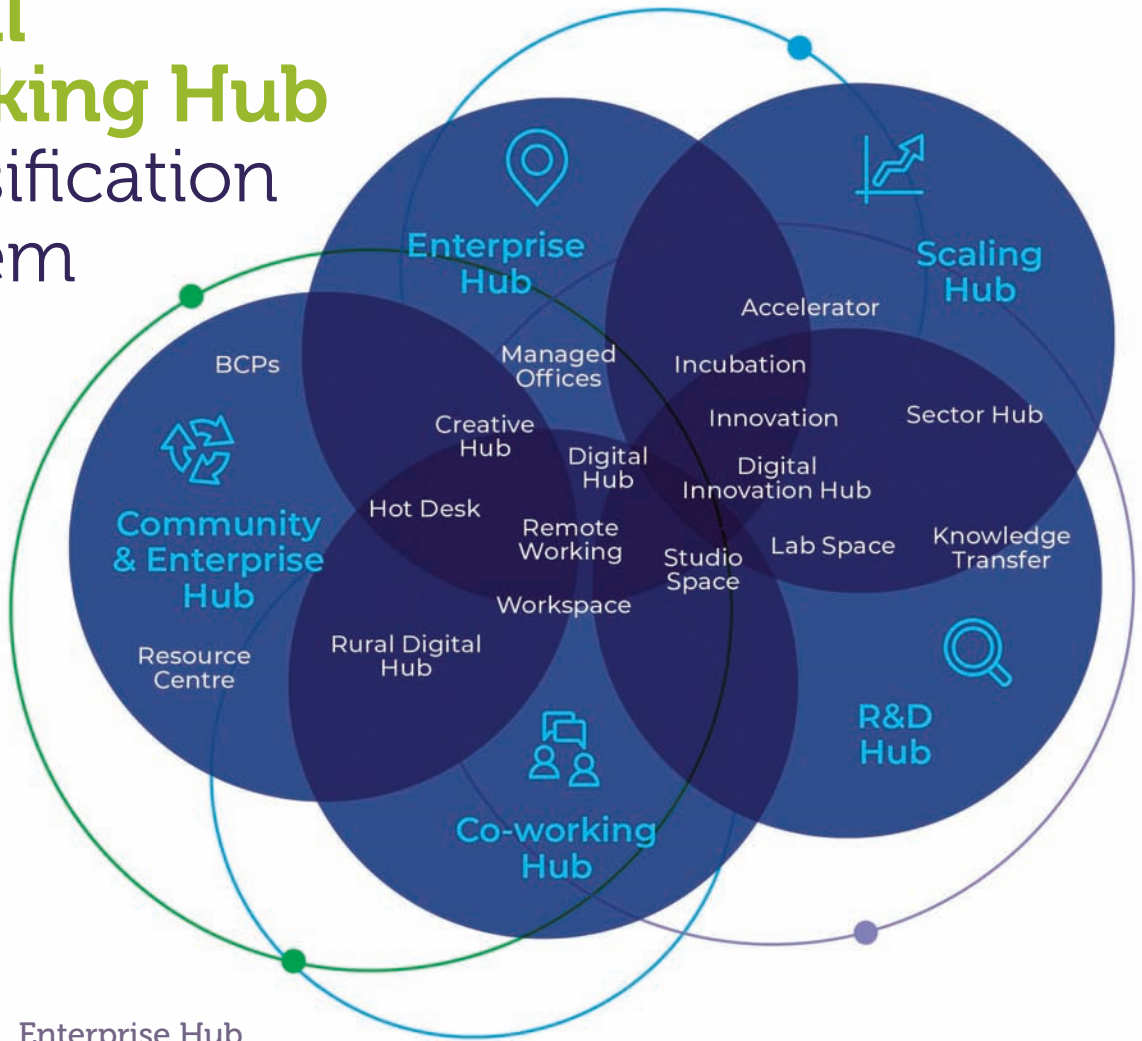
While Longford County Council cannot support private enterprises in acquiring funding for the development of rural working hubs, it is acknowledged that the private sector play an important role in the delivery of rural working hubs. The Council will engage with and provide guidance and advice on planning, broadband availability, supports available, etc. to private sector organisations wishing to develop hubs.

The terms “remote working” and “rural working hubs” are used to describe many different types of work and workplace. The Western Development Commission has carried out extensive research on the classification of hubs and it is useful for those planning to develop remote working facilities to identify where in the classification the hub fits and the types of services it is proposed to provide. This will determine the type of infrastructure, such as broadband are required, as well as business supports. A detailed description of the services offered in the various types of hub will be available when consulting with the Local Authority. An illustration of the hub classification is overleaf.

Further details can also be found at:

westerndevelopment.ie/key-projects/atlantic-economic-corridor/

Rural Working Hub Classification System



- 1**  **Enterprise Hub**
 Local enterprise driver providing space, facilities and services for start-up, HPSUs, remote workers. Hosting events and acting as a connector for entrepreneur networks.

- 2**  **Scaling Hub**
 A step up from a general enterprise hub with strong focus on post start-up clients being supported through scaling and investment stages. High level services for acceleration and export development. Global entrepreneurship events and programmes.

- 3**  **Research & Development Hub**
 Specialist hub usually attached to HEI with focus on clients in early stages of research and development of new products and services and provides office or desk space and access to meeting rooms, laboratories etc. A full-time manager and other staff are employed to support business development through incubation and acceleration.

- 4**  **Co-working Hub**
 Provides clients with private offices or desks with access to meeting rooms and event space, with plug and play facilities but not business support. Often co-located with other facilities and shared management.

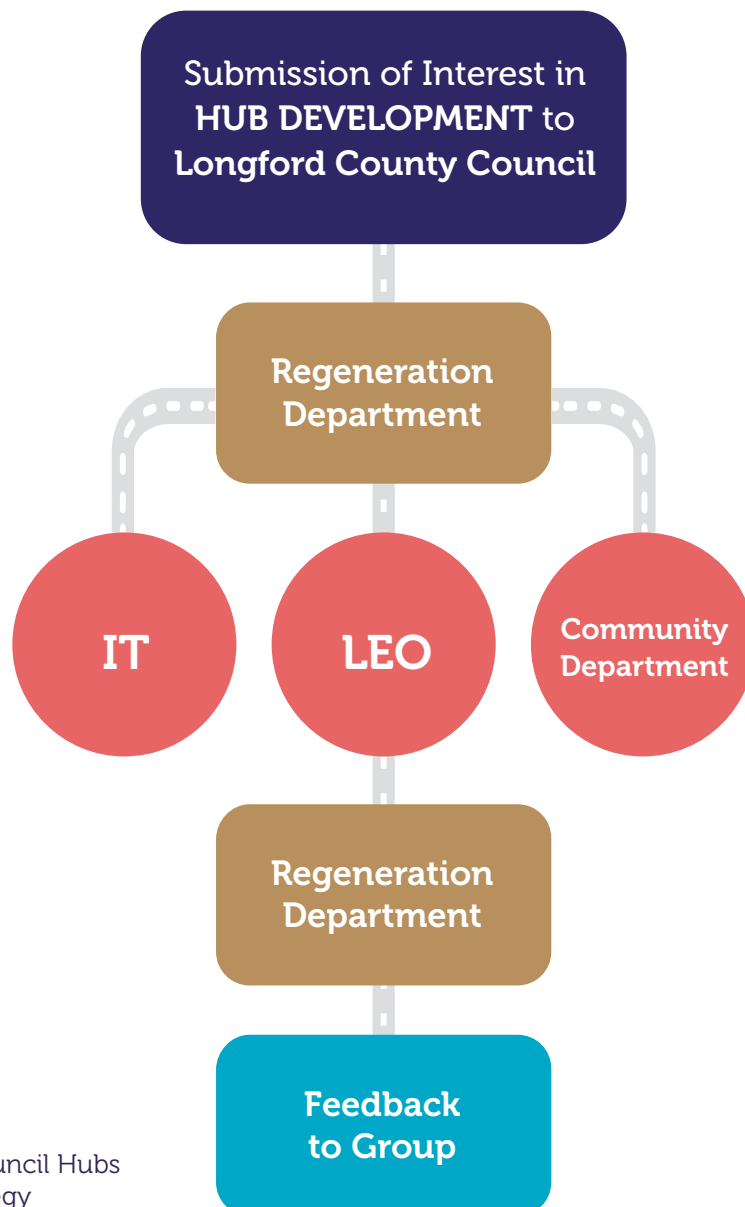
- 5**  **Community & Enterprise Hub**
 A centre whose primary focus is to provide community services and has office space, dedicated and/or hot desks as well as meeting rooms available to clients. The business facilities will complement the community services and provide an income for the community. These hubs can be run by full-time managers, Community Employment staff and in some cases by volunteers. Some of these hubs drive innovative projects in the areas of sustainability and digitisation in their locale.

Longford County Council Rural Hubs Working Group Strategy



Longford County Council has adopted a cross departmental approach to the development of rural working hubs, identifying the Regeneration Department as the primary contact for queries on the development of hubs. Any proposal for a hub will be considered by an internal working group to ensure that full consideration of the feasibility and sustainability of a project is considered, as outlined in the diagram below. Organisations interested in seeking support from Longford County Council for the development of a hub should contact—

Longford County Council Regeneration Department: ruralworkinghubs@longfordcoco.ie



Key Considerations in the Development of Rural Working Hubs

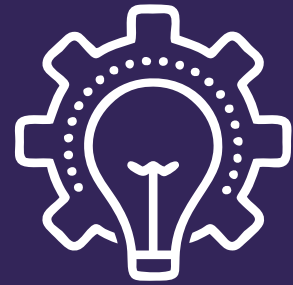
The following section sets out requirements for communities and organisations to consider in the development phase of a rural working hub—

A | Why?

Every group needs to identify their own 'why?'—why do you want to develop a rural working hub? **Example:** to generate jobs for your area, to give opportunities for those currently commuting to large towns to stay in village, etc. This will direct who you have in your hub, e.g. start-ups, entrepreneurs, commuters and the type of hub you develop. This will also help you identify what you hope to do for your community through this project, thereby being able to measure success, e.g. how many jobs should be created, more children in the local primary school, etc.

B | Development of Business Plan

- 1| The proposing organisation should prepare a business plan, outlining the type of clients they expect to attract, the services it is proposed to offer, the number of users it is anticipated they will accommodate, whether it is hot-desking, individual office space, etc.
- 2| Organisations need to ensure it is meeting a market need. The ability to attract funds is one part of the equation but the ability to cater for identified market segments is more important. Ultimately it will be those centres that were located in areas that fulfilled a market need that will have the highest chance of success. Regionally then a global view needs to be established that considers—
 - Is there sufficient volume of a particular segment group to support each individual centre, **or**
 - How does a region target different segment groups whose needs might be catered for by individual centres.
- 3| Hub developers should consult with and survey potential users prior to the development of the hub to ascertain the demand for hub space and the needs of those users, whether users require private office space, open plan hub working, private booths for calls, etc. It is important that this is clear prior to detailed plans being developed and planning permission or funding sought so as to reduce time delays and funding shortfalls.
- 4| Commuter surveys and studies can be of enormous benefit in the assessment of the potential for a remote working hub and the subsequent development of a business plan.



C | Availability of Sufficient Broadband Connection

- Through the business plan identify level of potential usage and therefore the level of internet required to deliver the product. Confirmation should be sought from service providers of the availability of the level of internet required to deliver the service they wish to provide, e.g. dedicated fibre service or broadband and the ongoing cost of the provision of high quality internet.

D | Resources

- The key to the success of your hub is the people and community within it. A community builder will be the key asset to the success of the hub, whether this is a volunteer on the board or a staff member that will dedicate time working with and talking to people, sparking connections between people and increasing the visibility of your hub and the services you offer. In the case of smaller hubs, consideration should be given to a number of hubs working together to share a community builder who supports a number of hubs in the area and promotes the development of remote working in the area.
- Initial financial investment to convert the building, buy and set-up equipment (furniture, technical equipment, etc.). Although many communities may get funding support through the various schemes available, including Town and Village, Rural Regeneration and Development Fund, Enterprise Ireland, organisations must be aware of the requirement for match funding under any of those schemes. Organisations may need to get a loan to meet the match funding requirement and the business plan must factor in the cost of repayments on the loan and the level of activity required in the hub to ensure it is sustainable.
- Human resources required for both implementation and operational stage. Although support is available from Longford County Council on the implementation stage, organisations still need to be involved in the design, procurement and strategic planning. As the project moves from implementation to operation stage, consideration needs to be given to office design, marketing and PR, financial management and business support.
- Longford County Council will not be involved in the day-to-day operation and management of the facility. Therefore, the community will need to have a manager, either part-time or full-time, or designated person within the community group, in place to drive forward the operation of the facility.

E | Booking Systems

- An online presence to enable people to book space in your hub and increase the visibility of the hub. The Western Development Commission have developed a booking system, that is a centralised system and will be available to all hubs across the country. Groups should consider using this system as it will increase the visibility of the hub to a wider audience, reduce requirements on hub developers to develop individual booking systems, reducing costs and ensuring a connected hub network. Details of the hub network can be found at connectedhubs.ie.

F | Facilities

- The space should be designed to have a mix of space and spaces that have potential for mixed use and are flexible. Good quality but movable furniture is one element that allows your space to become more flexible.
- Create 'collaboration collision points' within your hub to encourage interaction among hub users, e.g. the kitchen/coffee area. This will help build the community within your hub.
- A dedicated meeting space is attractive to many hub users. Consideration also needs to be given to what additional services the hub might offer, e.g. a receptionist service, marketing and promotion, business support. This will reflect the business model outlined above and the scale of the hub.
- Where the space allows, there is a potential that a company can grow within the hub, starting off with one person but as the company develops and grows, may require space for 2 or 3 people. Therefore, the design and layout of the hub may consider offering spaces of different size, depending on the nature/scale of the building plan and the business model of the hub.
- Consider the design thinking process in designing your space—imagine yourself using the space and what you might need to feel comfortable.

G | Management Models

- Groups should establish themselves as Company Limited by Guarantee (CLG) - this offers a number of advantages, including that they have legal identities separate from its members, individual members are almost totally protected against liability, they can buy and sell property in the name of the organisation, they can take or defend legal proceedings in its own name and companies are generally democratic organisations—they have a membership. The establishment of an organisation as a CLG is also an important pre-requisite for many funding streams. Further information on the development of a CLG can be found at cro.ie/Registration/Company/Required-Steps
- Community led hubs need a strong governance structure that allows for a long-lasting commitment to meet challenges as they arise. This will include the possible allocation

of responsibilities to individual members, a succession plan to allow for the retirement of officers and a commitment to an active management and oversight role from all committee members. Community groups that cannot see beyond the development phase can quickly run out of steam putting the sustainability of the facility in jeopardy.

H | Branding & Marketing

- Branding and marketing of the hub are key to telling the story of what the hub has to offer and increasing visibility of the hub. This should be done at an early stage as it will help define the potential offering of the hub. The level of branding and marketing depends on the scale of the hub and the potential offerings.

I | Innovation

- There are increasing numbers of hubs being developed throughout the country, in both urban and rural settings. Although there is increased demand for hub space, as there is also increased availability of such space. Hub developers need to consider where they fit within that space and how to increase the visibility of their hub among the increasing number of hubs to ensure the sustainability of the hub. Therefore, it is worthwhile to consider whether they can provide a niche offering and bring innovation to their hub, to differentiate themselves from neighbouring hubs, e.g. looking at the opportunities of the area surrounding them, there may be a specific focus on training space, or on creative industries or the offering in terms of a green building and how that might increase the attractiveness of the hub to potential users.
- Hub developers should explore opportunities for collaboration with external stakeholders, which can increase the offering of their site as well as the visibility, e.g. connections that can be built with local third level education providers, e.g. Athlone Institute of Technology as potential outreach centres, larger companies in the area, organisations such as the Guinness Enterprise Centre who offer a number of support programmes, e.g. the Prosper Series which is an initiative that develops a network of entrepreneurial support among Ireland's counties.

J | Sustainability

- Consideration needs to be given at a very early stage as to the sustainability of the proposal, how much the day to day costs will be, based on the service offering, the level of internet being provided, the staff employed, the condition and services within the building and therefore how many desks need to be occupied on a daily basis to ensure the organisation can meet its running costs. While funding may be available for capital works for start-up or expansion stage, there is generally little support available for ongoing costs. The business plan needs to consider these and if the figures are showing that the space available will not generate the required return, the group may need to look at alternative options.

Challenges in Establishing Rural Working Hubs



Although rural working hubs bring many opportunities to communities and rural areas, there are challenges in both developing and maintaining them that organisations need to be aware of at the outset, some of which are outlined below—

- Convincing funders and other relevant stakeholders about the added value of a rural working hub in a particular rural area—the business case needs to demonstrate the demand for a hub.
- Ensuring the awareness and visibility of the hub to potential users, as there are many new offerings available—operators need to consider hosting events to raise awareness of the facility.
- Sustainability of hub—ongoing operational costs need to be considered at the outset and the level of usage to be able to maintain the operation. Funding is often available for the capital costs at the outset but there is generally no funding for ongoing operational costs.
- Insurance of a hub—many insurance companies require users of a hub that are based there regularly to have their own insurance and many hub users may not be aware of this requirement.
- Although many people currently commuting would prefer to work remotely from a hub, there still remains a challenge around who is responsible for paying for the hub—an employer or employee.



Recommendations on the Development of Rural Working Hubs



Setting up a remote working hub can bring considerable benefits for rural towns and areas however, there are a number of lessons and recommendations worth considering—

- The initial investment can be large and not easy to secure. Communities need to research the various funding schemes that may be available, most often costs can only be covered through using multiple resources and programmes. In exceptional cases, private investors (especially those with specific connection to the rural area) may be identified who see potential in the area and rural digitisation opportunities.
- Remote working hubs are not 'one-size-fits-all' tools. Communities need to consider whether remote working hubs are the right approach for the area. Some of the considerations include, **(1)** appropriate fast or superfast broadband connection depending on the use and number of users of the rural hub; **(2)** an appropriate building at a convenient location that can be made available. The development of a vacant or derelict building in the town centre as a rural working hub offers the opportunity to bring activity back to the main streets of our towns and villages and in alignment with Government policy, including Our Rural Future—Rural Development Policy 2021–2025.
- In addition to the development of the hub, communities need to consider their rural location, to ensure that it is attractive for living and especially has good quality basic services or good potential of improving services (not only for new entrepreneurs but also for their families).
- A feasibility study may be needed to assess the suitability of the remote working hub: needs of local businesses and sectors, interest from the local population, and the condition of local services. Remote working hubs cannot only boost the economy but can strengthen the local community.
- Strong committed leaders and community engagement from the start is crucial to the success of rural working hubs, including commitment from local leaders and organisations. Hub developers need to involve local citizens and local organisations from the start. This will ensure the commitment, involvement and ownership of the hub by the community so that the hubs do not remain empty or underutilised buildings.
- It is not sufficient to develop the hub, developers must market the hub and the rural location in which it is located, through active marketing and ensuring staff are trained in the promotion and marketing of the hub.
- Development of a community around the hub, e.g. Grow Remote Chapter.

Support and Funding for Development of Rural Working Hubs

Funding Opportunities

There has been an increased focus on remote working since the onset of Covid-19 and with that increased funding opportunities and supports. Some of the funding opportunities available within Ireland are outlined below. The various funding calls open at different times during the year. Therefore, it is recommended that you engage with Longford County Council early in relation to your proposal, to ensure that it is 'shovel ready' when the funding call opens. Further information on the various funding streams can be found on the links below—

- **Regional Enterprise Development Fund**—Enterprise Ireland
enterprise-ireland.com/en/funding-supports/REDF/
- **Rural Regeneration & Development Fund**—Dept. of Rural & Community Development
gov.ie/en/policy-information/c77144-rural-regeneration-and-development-fund/
- **Town and Village Renewal Scheme**—Dept. of Rural & Community Development
gov.ie/en/policy-information/01125e-town-and-village-renewal-scheme/
- **Just Transition**—Department of Environment, Climate & Communications
gov.ie/en/publication/ed10d-just-transition-fund/
- **Leader Programme**—Leader can fund feasibility studies for groups exploring the option of developing a hub. Leader calls are open all year, during the lifetime of the programme lcr.ie/
- **Local Enterprise Office**—localenterprise.ie/Longford/
- **Clár**—The Clár Programme provides funding for small scale infrastructural projects in rural areas that have suffered significant levels of population decline
gov.ie/en/policy-information/91ba52-clar/?section=2021-clar-measures

Hub developers need to research the various funding streams available and may need to consider the use of a number of funding streams to meet the funding costs. Organisations also need to be aware of the requirement for match funding under the various funding schemes and need to consider at an early stage how that match funding will be funded. Community loan finance is a very important option for groups that may need bridging finance or where there is a shortfall in financing. There are a number of options—

- **Clann Credo**—Provides community loan finance, considering the impact of a project on your local community and does not require personal guarantees clanncredo.ie/
- **Community Finance Ireland**—A social enterprise operating across the entire island of Ireland, creating a community finance system towards ensuring that positive social impact is felt in communities communityfinanceireland.com/

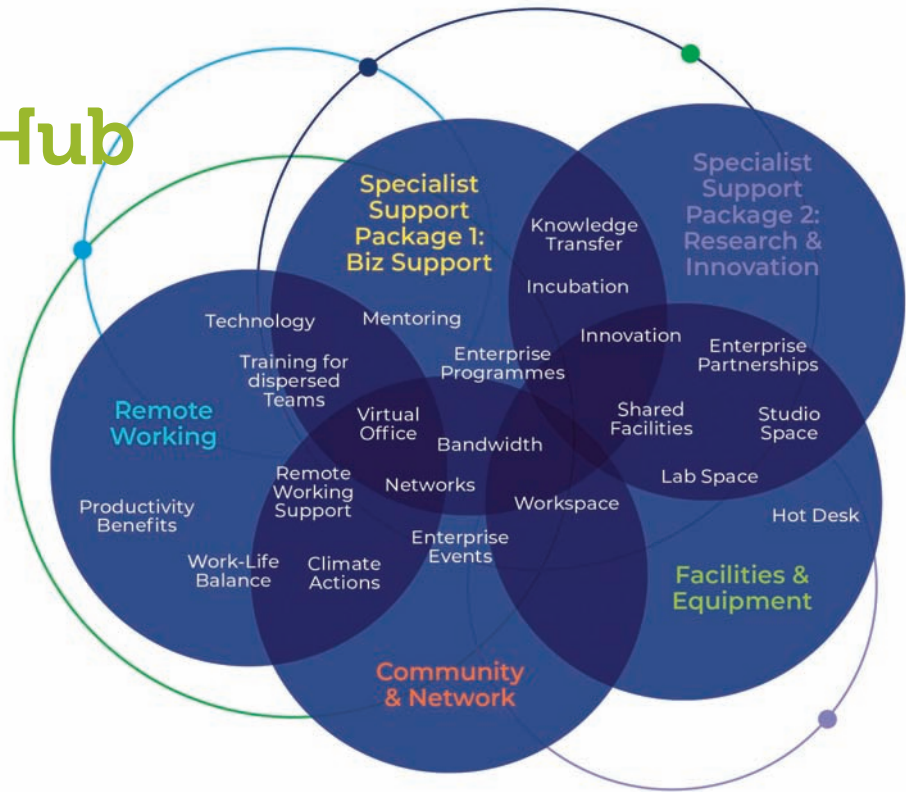


Support Documents & Guidance

Remember that you are not alone in this journey and there are organisations and individuals that are willing to share their experience and expertise with you. Some useful contacts are highlighted below and it is advisable to make contact with them early in your journey on the development of a rural working hub.

- **National Association of Community Enterprise Supports (NACEC)**—A network of community centre enterprises in Ireland, to support and develop the interests of community enterprise centres on a national basis. NACEC has recently appointed a national hubs network manager and offers opportunities for engagement for hubs and advice from peers [enterprisecentres.ie](https://www.enterprisecentres.ie)
- **Grow Remote**—A not for profit organisation, whose aim is to enable us to work, live and participate locally. They do this by making remote work (employment) both visible and accessible. There are Grow Remote chapters throughout Ireland, including Longford, which are all about connecting people, opportunities and building community. This typically happens through meetups and events. You can make contact with the Longford Grow Remote Chapter through [Facebook—Grow Remote Longford](#) or check out the main website [growremote.ie](https://www.growremote.ie)
- **Midland Network of Co-Working Facilities (MNCF)**—The MNCF was established in 2019 to bring together all member facilities as a collective offering. The collective promotion adds to the value proposition that can be presented to companies based in Dublin, other coastal cities and elsewhere, interested in second sites/flexible working/remote working arrangements for staff living in the Midland Region. They provide a support network for sharing of information among hubs within the Midlands region. Further information can be obtained by contacting info@midlandsrep.ie and at [midlandsireland.ie/enterprise/hubs-midlands-network-of-co-working-facilities-mncf/](https://www.midlandsireland.ie/enterprise/hubs-midlands-network-of-co-working-facilities-mncf/)
- **The Department of Enterprise, Trade & Employment**—Published The Guidance for Working Remotely. The Guidance for Working Remotely webpage now includes an employer checklist which outlines key considerations for employers considering adopting remote working arrangements over the long term. The webpage will continue to be updated regularly to act as a live resource to employers and employees [enterprise.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Workplace-and-Skills/Remote-Working/](https://www.enterprise.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Workplace-and-Skills/Remote-Working/)
- **Laois Offaly Education & Training Board**—Courses available on 'Being Remote-ready'.
- **Guinness Enterprise Centre (GEC) CoConnect Programme**—A collaboration between the GEC and enterprise centres to develop regional start-ups and support the growth of the entrepreneurial network across Ireland.

Rural Working Hub Support Packages



Matrix of Hub Classifications & Support Package Offering

Services and Support Packages	AEC Hubs Classification				
	Scaling Hub	Enterprise Hub	Co-working Hub	R&D Hub (HEI/ Research Element)	Community Enterprise
Central/Shared Services					
Full Time Manager	Y	Y	Desirable	Y	
Part Time Manager			Y		Desirable
Voluntary Manager					Y
Reception Service (mail/information/printing/lockers)	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
HSB Broadband	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Back Office IT Suite (booking/event promotion /cloud docs, etc.)	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Meeting Rooms	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Canteen/Kitchenette	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Breakout Space	Y	Y			
Facilities & Equipment					
Full Time Manager	Y	Y	Desirable	Y	
Part Time Manager			Y		Desirable
Voluntary Manager					Y
Reception Service (mail/information/printing/lockers)	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
HSB Broadband	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Back Office IT Suite (booking/event promotion /cloud docs, etc.)	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Meeting Rooms	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Canteen/Kitchenette	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Breakout Space	Y	Y			
Community Event Space	Y	Y			Y
Parking	Y	Y			Y
Childcare Facilities (co-location)		Desirable			Desirable



📍 THE BUILDING BLOC, SLIGO

Examples of Successful Rural Working Hubs

There are many good examples of hubs throughout the region and nationally, at varying scales and with different offerings. It is highly recommended that groups proposing to develop a hub engage with existing hub developers to learn from them. Examples of successful hubs developed which those planning to develop remote working facilities should consider researching include the following—

- **The Hive, Carrick-on-Shannon, Co. Leitrim**
- **Tulsk Digihub, Co. Roscommon**
- **The Base Enterprise, Stranorlar, Co. Donegal**
- **The Building Bloc, Sligo**
- **The Portershed, Galway**



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