

Annual Review 2015

Irish Rural Link

Message from Billy Murphy, Chairman

As I write this piece there is much talk, as part of the negotiations to form the next Government, of the establishment a ministry for rural affairs. While this is to be welcomed I sincerely hope the new department will take on responsibility for social inclusion and community development.

Over the past decades community activists have worked for social change locally and nationally and the bedrock of community development are the key concepts of empowerment and participation. These are concepts central to the work of Irish Rural Link that allow us provide supports to diverse groups of people, through our network structures and enable them articulate on the issues that impact on their members.

I get the sense of growing disenchantment among community activists as a result of their increased inability to influence social policy in a meaningful way.

Increasingly community organisations are involved in the delivery of services and programmes to support their community work. At times the service or programme, designed at national level, is all consuming where sustaining the programme is the priority often distracting from engagement in real and present local needs. Increasingly community activists find themselves dealing with the onerous responsibilities as company directors and employers.

With a new Ministry that would embrace social inclusion, community development and rural affairs there is an opportunity for Government to build a new relationship with the community sector which recognises its ability to contribute to future social policy.

From its perspective the community sector needs to continue to give leadership through the empowerment of people who experience exclusion and live in poorly resourced communities.

Recently the IRL led consortium was successful in its bid for the National Rural Network and I would like to take this opportunity to thank our partners, The Wheel, NUIG and Philip Farrelly & Co. for their support and we look forward to working with you on the project.

Finally I would like to thank the Board of Irish Rural Link for their continued support and hard work, particularly as IRL moves into a new and exciting phase as lead organisation for the National Rural Network. On behalf of myself and the board I wish to express our gratitude to Seamus Boland, CEO, and the staff of IRL for their dedication to the cause. Without you our members IRL could not continue to function and I would like to make special mention to the members of the networks who have injected new enthusiasm into the organisation.

Billy Murphy Chairman.



May 2016

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Irish Rural Link's primary aim has always been based on the promotion of rural sustainable communities, with particular emphasis on fighting poverty and social exclusion. In a country still struggling to recover from the horrors of the financial crash, which begun in 2008 and hit its lowest point in 2012, the issue of rural regeneration or lack of it in 2015 was evident.

In its budget submission IRL made it clear that certain indicators in terms of rural sustainability are worrying and if not addressed will mean that the effects of the down turn will be most felt in rural areas.

In its seminar 'Renewal of Towns and Villages' held in Castlepollard, held in partnership with Westmeath Co Council, a number of issues were raised.

These included the declining economic and social fabric of villages, towns and even large provincial towns. The seminar examined solutions, which included the better use of existing resources so that each local authority could spearhead development in their own county.

The CEDRA report, which IRL participated in and published in 2014 promoted the idea of red zones as a means of selecting regions most affected by disadvantage.

IRL have continued to develop the Wetlands member network and the meals on wheels group. The wetlands group was particularly active during the year, holding a number of meetings on each of the member sites. The importance of this group is now recognised by the Department of Parks and Wild life who have supported its work, for which we are extremely grateful. The group have already recognised numerous wetlands adjacent to communities. With the right local planning these areas can be made into a significant community asset.

Similarly the meals on Wheel network, launched by An Taoiseach Enda Kenny in June was a significant milestone reached. Again the work of the meals on wheels members bring vital services to thousands of people living in isolated areas. We were pleased to achieve recognition for this group as a start.

In terms of developing greater access to

policy influence, the formation of these networks is seen as vital to achieving change.

The advantage to the networks is that IRL can focus on their needs and for the network they can pursue their programmes through an organisation, which is recognised by government and agencies as being a responsible rural advocate.

In that context IRL were given the secretariat of the Community Pillar. The 17 national organisations have been working together since 2004 and co-operate with each other in presenting the case in fighting social exclusion and poverty.

In European terms the start of the Rural Development Programme was launched. This time the LEADER part will be managed by the local authorities. The importance of the RDP to rural Ireland cannot be underestimated and despite financial constrictions the current programme offers many opportunities for rural communities.

During the year IRL was again supported by the SSNO programme administered by the Department of Environment, which we are extremely grateful for.

I continue to be grateful for the support of the Board of IRL And its chairperson Billy Murphy for the help to myself and staff.

My thanks to the staff of IRL who continue to commit to ensuring that members receive the best service possible.

Seamus Boland
CEO



Executive Board & Staff

Billy Murphy, Chairman, Wexford Local Development

Peter Brady, Secretary, Kilnaleck Community Council

Michael Kenny, Treasurer, NUI Maynooth

Marian Flannery, Asst. Treasurer, Women of the North West

Ann Murtagh, Mullingar, Martin Smyth, Mullaghmeen

Enterprises

Paddy Egan, Kenagh Co-op,

Tara Farrell, Longford Women's Link

Miriam McKenna, Flexibus, Co. Meath

Pat Leogue, County Kildare Partnership

Gerard Quain, Ballyhoura Development

Maria O'Gorman, Duagh FRC,

Dr. Maura Farrell, NUIG

Mary Ryan, TEAGASC

Maureen Lally, Tochar Valley FRC

Chris Uys, Abbeyleix Bog Co opted 2015

Tara Farrell Longford Women's Link Elected 2015

Tom Lavin Highfield CRC Elected 2015

STAFF

Seamus Boland CEO

Maria Pettit Finance & Admin

Chrissy Casey Admin Assistant

James Claffey, Research & Policy

Noel Kinahan, Rural Community Banking Project

Mary Keyes, Policy Ass.

Irish Rural Link Priorities 2015

Overall Aim

To secure the existence of substantial numbers of viable communities in all parts of rural Ireland where every person would have meaningful work, adequate income and social services, and where infrastructures needed for sustainable development would be in place.

Strategic Priority 1—Continue to develop as a visionary organisation in the field of rural community development.

IRL is a key independent and influential rural community based organisation, influencing good practice and progressive and creative policy formation

Strategic Priority 2—Influence Policy Development and Implementation at Local National and European levels towards a sustainable vision.

IRL in voicing rural policy has the skills and strategy to effectively influence sustainable policy development and sustainable policy implementation at national and EU levels

Strategic Priority 3— Facilitate and promote social and economic development initiatives in rural areas.

IRL is the key community based organisation promoting sectoral networks that cohes rural communities of interest for the promotion of social and economic development.

Strategic Priority 4—Strengthen and build the capacity of IRL members .

IRL is supported by a strategically developed active membership representing a profile of rural volunteers, community organisations and professionals working in rural community development.

IRL's Plans

Develop a greater link between all advocates of community based development within Ireland and the EU.

Ensure that groups affected by social inclusion or disadvantage have a continued voice

Assist communities with innovative ideas that support rural communities.

As well as being involved in Social Partnership IRL represents rural interests in a wide range of external Bodies & Boards



Activities in 2015—Seminars /Consultations

2015 was a busy year for Irish Rural Link; we worked in partnership with Department of Communications, Energy & Natural Resources and the EU Parliament Office in Ireland, Westmeath County Council, Dept. of the Environment, & UCIT hosting a number of seminars and public consultations;

A: Rural Social Scheme event Athlone

B: Eirgrid Public Consultations 3 events

C: UCIT Funding event Moate

D: Community Wetlands Seminars 3 events

E: Future of Rural Villages, Castlepollard, Co. Westmeath

F: IRL Annual Conference, Moate, Co. Westmeath

Renewal of Towns & Villages in North Westmeath

IRL held a seminar on the renewal of towns and villages in association with Westmeath County Council in the Hotel Castlepollard in June. The seminar was opened by Cllr. Paddy Hill Cahtaoirleach and was addressed by Seamus Boland, Pat Gallagher CEO Westmeath County Council, Peadar O'Casey Ogonnelloe Project and Hugh O'Reilly Chief officer Westmeath Local Development Committee. The round tables discussion identified a number of development opportunities for North Westmeath including building on the natural landscape as a tourist attraction, the local heritage, a strong sense of community etc. A cooperative approach between local community and the relevant agencies can maximize the local

assets/opportunities for the benefit of North Westmeath.

To truly address this potential the lack of infrastructure will need to be addressed. The local residents in attendance believed that the lack of rural transport and broadband especially limiting the development of the area.

The seminar identified a number of opportunities to assist the development of North Westmeath, the community and Westmeath County Council must now work together



Networks

Currently IRL is encouraging its various members to form single issue networks within the umbrella of the organisation. This is a concept well tried in the Trade Union movement and the Farmer organisations.

In essence it allows each group to focus on the issues close to their every day experience, without the overall worry of maintaining a National Network.

Because of new legislation, new networks will need approximately €20,000 for start-up purposes. This involves legal registration, charitable status application, company registration and all of the processes involved.

It also allows the rural family, largely made up of rural community

issues to work as a united front when required and strengthens the representational power because of the larger membership Newly formed IRL networks include:

- The Wetlands Forum
- Rural Transport
- Meals on Wheels
- Wild Atlantic Way

Benefits to IRL Networks are: That we will support experts, who are knowledgeable about their area of interest. It allows the interest groups to participate at the heart of policy making and in that context bring greater integrity to the problems and opportunities that may materialise.

The wider membership of IRL is also better informed and because of that

is more likely to take into account the issues that affect rural communities. The agreed policy, because it is accepted by the wider rural family is more likely to be successful in terms of its influence..



Community Wetlands Forum

The forum was established under the umbrella of Irish Rural Link in September 2013. The forum came together as a result of the work already undertaken by Irish Rural link on behalf of community groups affected by the Peatlands directive and in the development of wetlands as an enhanced asset in the community. The rationale supporting a Wetlands Community Forum is based on the development of wetlands using the tools of community development as a means of ensuring that all actions taken have the full support of the community. It means that the community become engaged in acquiring a greater knowledge of the value of wetlands and can use this to their own benefit. It also means that the community becomes involved as early as possible and that the necessary local stakeholders are included.

In establishing a network of wetland groups it is proposed that the aim is to: Facilitate the sharing of knowledge, ideas and organisational methods. It will also introduce groups to the latest research, national and international experts, similar networks and funding possibilities. It will also provide skills in the use of community development principles as a means of bringing all parts of the community with them. Clearly the group currently in its infancy will need support, particularly

some funding. As of now there is a group of 11 local networks with interest in more joining. These include Abbeylax, Corlea, Cabragh, Laois/Offaly wild life trust, Clough-jordan, Kenagh, Boora, Clara, Kerry, Westmeath and Kildare. The forum boasts a range of members from around the country which can be seen as a positive sign for the proposed expansion.

In 2015, the forum established: Wetland sites in communities and communities who wish to evaluate their own areas. The co-ordination of targeted events, seminars on community involvement.

The provision of direct assistance to groups who wish to explore new projects.

Irish Rural Link will launch The Community Wetland Website today
www.communitywetlandsforum.ie



Wild Atlantic Way Network

Our Host Communities Network will look to work with the agencies and organs of state to ensure the great Wild Atlantic Way initiative continues to develop as a high quality international tourism attraction and economic generator for our future generations.

The Network will engage positively with all stakeholders on issues of concern such as;

The development of a strategy for

coastal protection for vulnerable WAW villages

Tourist traffic management on the WAW; additional roads investment

Sanitation/water investment in our communities

Communications Investment – in public transport; broadband and mobile coverage. The retention of our local post offices plus the provision of ATMs.

WAW Village enhancements schemes investment

The positioning and content of WAW

signage in our communities

The development of quality standards for WAW host communities

The promotion of the WAW to the most sustainable tourist target markets

The development of new products along the WAW

The development of community tourism ventures and support for private tourism promoters

And any other issues that members feel passionately about!

National Meals on Wheels Network

On Tuesday 6th October, Minister for Economic Development and Rural Transport Ann Phelan launched the National Meals on Wheels Network under the umbrella of Irish Rural Link, in Buswells Hotel. The Minister stated that meals on wheels is a vital service that must be supported as it delivers a number of benefits to communities and people around the country especially those who are most isolated. At the launch members of the Meals on Wheels Network stated that their budgets have been reduced for successive years while the demand placed on their services have significantly increased. Members called on government to provide an appropriate budget than reflects demand.

The launch was attended by Western Meals on Wheels Network Castlebar, South Kerry Meals on Wheels, Flexibus Local Link Louth Meath & Fingal Rural Transport Company, Longford Social Services, Elphin Social Services, Rathmines Meals on Wheels, Navan Meals on Wheels, Irelands oldest recipient of Meals on Wheels Ann Byrne at 100 years old, TD's and Board Members of IRL.

The launch was covered by TV3, Irish Farmers Journal and RTE.



Minister Ann Phelan & James Claffey IRL at the launch of the National Meals on Wheels Network

Irelands oldest recipient of Meals on Wheels Ann Byrne at 100 years old



Minister Ann Phelan with Meals on Wheels Organisations and Local Link—Louth Meath & Fingal RTI Clients at the launch of the Meals on Wheels National Network.

Western Meals on Wheels Network Launched



IRL are delighted that An Taoiseach Enda Kenny launched the newly formed Western Meals on Wheels Network in Castlebar in June 2015.

IRL are pleased to represent the views of the meals on wheels groups all over the country. These groups provide a valuable service to those that are most isolated.

The aim of the Western Meals on Wheels is to provide a local; community led professional facility to assist people who require services to maintain optimum health and Independence.

Members of the new Network include; Forum Social Care; Mayo Abbey CRC; Brickens Care for the Elderly; Castlebar Social Voluntary Services, Ballina Community Centre, Seirbhisi Curam Chill Chomain, South West

Mayo Development Company, Louisburgh/Killeen Meals on Wheels, Oughterard Meals on Wheels, Ballinasloe Social Services, Westport Social Services, Elphin Social Services, Solas FRC, Longford Meals on Wheels, Ballyshannon Meals on Wheels.

According to An Taoiseach, Enda Kenny 'Meals on Wheels are a very important part of social services provided throughout the country. It's very good that Meals on Wheels falls under the IRL Umbrella, I think that very commendable.'



Gabrielle Kane NUIG presents her Thesis 'Valuable Volunteers—The Importance of Meals on Wheels to Rural Aging' to Deirdre Waldron, Castlebar Social Services.

BeneFIT 4 Computer Training Programme

Benefit 4 – the programme to get Ireland on Line, is an Initiative run in conjunction with Department of Communications –

Participants from all over the country are trained in venues in their own community.

The main objective of the BeneFIT Programme is to get more people online. We focus on key target groups like older people, job-seekers, people in the rural community and the disadvantaged.

“Irish Rural Link’s Internet Computer Training course is aimed at people who have never used a computer before, with the objective of being able to use computer programs such as Ms Word, navigate the World Wide Web, searching for information and sending emails.

To date, Irish Rural Link has delivered this type Internet training to over 4,000 participants around the country for all different age groups. Its aim is to deliver this type training to the most isolated

areas including the islands”.

For information on Benefit 4 Training in your area Please call Mary Keyes on (090) 6482744 or email maryk@irishrurallink.ie



Dyson Msanba, Peggy Dowling Class Tutor, Chrissy Casey IRL, Jenny Kirwan, Manager St. Kierans Community Centre, Athlone, Martin Slevin, John Tynan Class Tutor, Kitty Tumelty, Dean Carroll, Beda Heavey, Christine O’Callaghan, Mona Joyce Chairperson St. Kierans Community Centre. Benefit 4 Certificate presentations. November 2015



Christine Casey IRL, Kathleen Fitzgerald Participant, John Tynan & Peggy Dowling

BeneFIT 4 Computer Training Programme



Benefit 4 Participants from Lackagh, Co. Galway received their Certificates in June - Class Tutor Geraldine Delaney (Centre standing)



**IRL's most mature participant
Sonny O'Brien receiving his
Certificate from Minister Pat
Rabbitte at a class on Inish Mor
in 2014**

And

**IRL's youngest Participant
receiving his Certificate IN
Lackagh, Co. Galway in 2015**

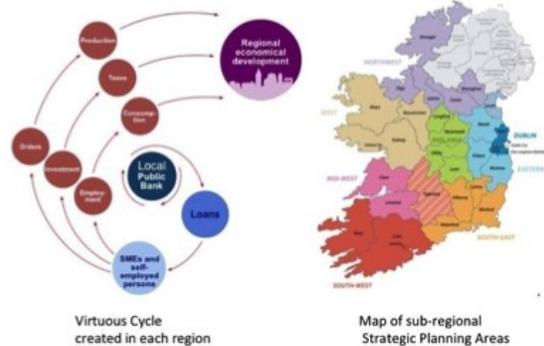


Rural Community Banking Initiative

IRL's Local Public Banking Initiative in cooperation with SBFIC* (Savings Bank Foundation for International Cooperation) is seeking to propose a network of Local Public Banks which emulate the best practice as carried out by the Sparkassen banks in Germany. These banks would be focused on fulfilling the demand of SMEs for credit and promote a more even economic development across our rural communities. Our work to date has included the following:

Concept Document: This document, drawn up by SBFIC, outlines the main characteristics and functions of the proposed network of regional banks. To successfully establish a Local Public Banking System with stakeholder involvement there will need to be a broad consensus and public support. IRL and SBFIC have jointly submitted the Concept document for inclusion in the Action Plan for Jobs in all eight regions as well as at a National level. Summary Concept Paper available on our website at: <http://www.irishrurallink.ie/resources/local-public-banks-concept-summary/>

- ▶ Stakeholder orientated not shareholder orientated, no dividends to be paid
- ▶ Regionally based: Local deposits for local loans
- ▶ Profits reinvested in local community
- ▶ Focus on lending to SMEs the backbone of Irish economy
- ▶ Lending based on cashflow analysis, not purely collateral based
- ▶ Decisions made at local level



Submission to Action Plan for Jobs:

This submission to the Action Plan for Jobs recognises that the proposed banking network fits into the aims of this government initiative as it addresses the generally accepted need for greater competition in credit lines for SMEs. The model being proposed encourages stakeholder participation both in the “design phase” of the process and also on an ongoing basis as they will have a say in how the banks’ surpluses are reinvested in their local community.

Representatives of IRL and SBFIC took part in the Dublin Action Plan for Jobs stakeholder forum in December and met with Minister Richard Bruton. This provided an opportunity to outline our proposal for consideration. IRL was also invited to attend the launch of the Dublin Action Plan for Jobs in January. This provided further opportunity to network with potential stakeholders such as Enterprise Ireland, ISME and SFA.

Proposal to Government:

The document outlines the three phases which are to be followed to set up the network of Local Public Banks: Design Phase, Set-up Phase and Implementation Phase.

The Proposal outlines in detail what would be required for the Design Phase including the financial and other resources required. The main objectives of the Design Phase is to flesh out all relevant elements of the proposed concept, the underlying business model, potential stakeholders and co-operation partners and to derive a robust business plan. It is envisaged this would take up to six months to complete.

The working relationship between IRL and SBFIC will greatly facilitate the execution of this phase particularly in relation to the engagement with stakeholders as IRL has an extensive network of members and affiliated groups throughout the country.

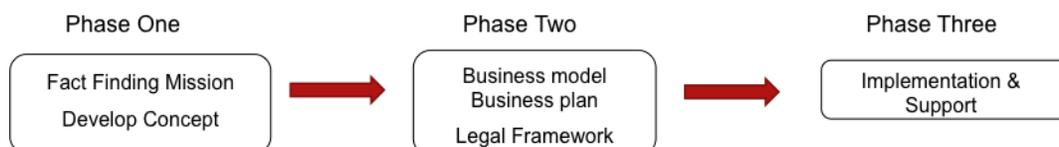


Figure 2: The Phases IRL and SBFIC propose to follow to establish Local Public Banks

Rural Community Banking Initiative

Current status:

As we believe this initiative requires cross-party support we have engaged with all the main political parties to ensure there is widespread knowledge of the model being proposed and strong political support for it. This is an on-going process to keep them engaged and up to date as to our progress. You may have noticed during the recent General Election that some of the Manifestos have taken into account our proposals albeit that the different parties put their own interpretation on it.

We are actively following up on our submission to the Action Plan for Jobs to ensure that the nature of the model of bank being proposed is properly understood and included in all individual regional plans as well as the National Plan. We also continue to engage with other potential stakeholders e.g. Enterprise Ireland, ISME, An Post & Chambers of Commerce.

IRL have engaged with a number of academics for research purposes from two Dublin universities (TCD & DCU) to explore the legislative framework and whether there is new legislation required to implement the banking model proposed and also investigate the business model being proposed in the Irish context.

*SBFIC: Savings Bank Foundation for International Cooperation:

This is a not-for-profit foundation which is the consulting arm of the DSGV (German Savings Bank Association). The SBFIC advocates for the Sparkassen concept globally, and promotes core Savings banks issues e.g. financial inclusion, equal opportunities & education. It recognises that local banking serves the people and the real economy (SMEs) directly and 'fuel' entrepreneurs and brings this message through its work across the world.

<http://www.sparkassenstiftung.de/en/home.html>

Irish Rural Link Annual National Rural Awards

These awards aim to recognise the hard work, energy, enthusiasm and dedication given to improving and developing local communities around the country.

Over the last 10 years, National Rural Award recipients were groups that have made a real impact on the quality of life of the rural communities in which they work. Irish Rural Link hopes that this award will go some way to acknowledge the efforts that these groups have made to enhance the lives of those living in their communities.

This years competition is closed for entries—2015 Winners will be announced this month.—Watch www.irishrurallink.ie for next years competition

Grundtvig Programme

In the past number of years IRL has participated in the '**European rural network for community and lifelong learning for the support of local economies**' with five other European partners (Czech Republic, Latvia, Sweden, Estonia, Poland). This involved a 'kick off' meeting in the Czech Republic in August 2014, where partners were introduced and expectations explained. These were as follows;

- Make contacts, exchange methods, know how, experience
- Best practice examples
- Find inspiration for our initiatives
- Sharing experience and good practice

- Develop a handbook of good practice
- Community development
- Bring Czech experience to other partner countries
- Encourage networking as different levels – international – schools
- Citizenship exchange methodologies
- Sustainable rural livelihood
- Strategies for community development

Identification of strategy of immigration

In 2015 the EU Rural Parliament launched a Rural Manifesto which was supported by IRL and 40 other EU countries. The Manifesto can be found here: <http://www.irishrurallink.ie/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/European-Rural-Manifesto-2015-final.pdf>

IRL was represented by 6 members of the Board, Billy Murphy, Peter Brady, Dr. Maura Farrell, Maria O'Gorman, Gerald Quain, Miriam McKenna.

Peatlands Council

Irish Rural Link along with other stakeholders, such as IFA, environmental organisations, The Turf Cutters association, Department of Parks and Wild Life were invited by Government to sit on the Peatlands Council in 2011. The task is to implement the Habitats Directive as signed into Irish Law in 1996.

To date the Peatlands Council, chaired by IRL have published the National Peatlands Strategy.

2015 Annual Conference

IRL Annual Conference 2015 was themed 'Rural Towns & Villages'

The conference was opened and addressed by Ann Phelan TD, Minister for Rural Development. There were presentations from Pat O'Callaghan, Ferbane Action Group,, Peter Dolan, Moate Action Group, Peadar Casey, Village Planner Ogonnella project Co. Clare,

Philip Geoghegan, Wicklow Uplands Council, Moynalty Tidy Towns Committee, Winners 2013

And NUI Galway Student presentation on findings and outcomes from their research into Moate.

The conference; **'Future of rural towns and villages'** allowed participants to reflect on the many issues facing rural communities. Towns losing Garda stations, banks and financial services. Shops and pubs in trouble and for many young people job opportunities are scarce.

The conference looked at how the town of Moate has responded to these problems. The conference heard how the town of Ferbane stood firm in the face of the Ulster Bank closure. It also heard from the winner of the 2013 Tidy Towns' competition on how communities can fight back and make their area a source of pride. In addition the conference was addressed by Village Planners, Peadar Casey - the Ogonnelloe Project, Co. Clare & Philip Geoghegan, Planning & Urban Design.

'Tidy Towns are a great example of the transformative power of active citizenship; we now see that spirit can lead to re-generation and renewal – creating a shared vision and a better environment built', - President Michael D. Higgins 2013.

Training Skills for Community & Enterprise

Survival of rural based organisations depends on having skills to manage core activities in an efficient way. The expertise of our staff has proven invaluable for many groups who encounter barriers due to remoteness, funding and finance, or effective management.

Modules in Skills for Community & Enterprise

Train the Trainer (FETAC)

Media and Communications

Policy and Advocacy Skills

Making the Planning System work for your Community

WWW.irishrurallink.ie

Community organisation

Engagement of Volunteers

Finance and Fundraising in Communities

Community Needs and Resource Analysis

Strategic Planning and Evaluation Skills

Any organisation/ Individual wishing to avail of these training programmes should contact the office on (090) 6482744/5

Membership

At end of December 2015 IRL Group Membership stood at 614

Metrics

Media in 2015 -

Press Releases 39

Media Appearances 115

Newsletters 2

Blogs 5

Website Launch 1

Submission - 7

National Committees 3

Research Projects 2

B4 Participants 1100

New Member networks 3