

# connectedhubs

## Guidance for the Development of Hubs and Remote Working Facilities

**Including:** Enterprise Hubs, Scaling Hubs, Co-working Hubs, Research & Development Hubs, Community & Enterprise Hubs, Broadband Connection Points (BCP) and other remote working facilities

**This document is updated on an ongoing basis. Last updated: July 3, 2021**

If you would like to suggest an item for inclusion, please email [liamhoran@wdc.ie](mailto:liamhoran@wdc.ie)


Remote working is becoming increasingly popular and it creates many positive opportunities for employers and 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 and private enterprises to develop remote 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 local communities to be more sustainable. This practical guide has been designed to support organisations and entities seeking to develop hubs.

The term “remote working” is used to describe many different types of work and workplace. The Western Development Commission (WDC) 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 proposes to provide. This will determine the types of infrastructure, such as broadband, that 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 contained on the next page. Further details can also be found at <https://westerndevelopment.ie/key-projects/atlantic-economic-corridor/>.


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- 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.

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- 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.


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- 3**  **Research and Development Hub**  
Specialist Hub usually attached to HEI with focus on clients in early stages of Research and Development of new products and services. 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.

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

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- 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.

## KEY CONSIDERATIONS IN DEVELOPMENT OF REMOTE WORKING HUBS

The following section sets out requirements for communities and other entities to consider in the development phase of a remote working hub:

### a. WHY

- Every promoter needs to identify their own ‘why’ – why do you want to develop a remote working hub e.g. , to generate jobs for your area, to create opportunities for those currently commuting to large towns to stay in local towns or villages, to generate profit etc. This will direct who you have in your hub, e.g. start-ups, entrepreneurs or commuters, and the type of hub you develop. In some cases, it will also help you to 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 a Business Plan

- The proposing organisation should prepare a business plan, outlining the type of clients they expect to attract, the services they propose to offer, the number of users it is anticipated they will accommodate, whether through hot-desking, individual office space, etc.
- 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 fulfil 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?
- 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 to reduce time delays and funding shortfalls.
- 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. Funding programmes will not wish to displace existing providers, whether they are in your county or other providers outside your county who happen to be in the same region as you. The WDC is currently developing a template for surveying commuters and others who may be interested in availing of a hub. Please contact [liamhoran@wdc.ie](mailto:liamhoran@wdc.ie) for further details.
- Are there options for collaboration or colocation of services? Other hubs? Local groups? ETB? Training? Businesses? Events? Public Services?
- Does your hub have a unique selling point (USP)? This could be something to consider at this early stage. This USP could complement a local or regional need or speciality.
- It is important to do a competitor analysis. Are there other hubs in your local area and in the broader region? To help you carry out a full market analysis, go here to view the full list of hubs registered with the Western Development Commission/ConnectedHubs.ie <https://bit.ly/hubs-map>. This map is being updated on an ongoing basis. Any queries, please contact David Murphy, Data & GIS Analyst, WDC.

### c. Availability of sufficient broadband connection

- Through the business plan, identify level of potential usage and therefore the level of internet required to successfully 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 a high-quality internet connection.

#### **d. Resources**

- The key to the success of your hub is the people and community within it. A community builder will be a key figure in driving the success of the hub, whether this is a volunteer on a community group's board or a staff member who 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 several 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 that area.
- Initial financial investment to convert the building, buy and set up equipment (furniture, technical equipment, etc.). Although many community groups may get funding support through the various schemes available, including Town and Village, Rural Regeneration Development Fund and 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 implementation and operational stages. Organisations need to be involved in the design, procurement and strategic planning stages. 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.
- The hub will need to have a manager, either part-time or full-time, or designated person within a community group, to drive the operation of the facility.

#### **e. Booking Systems**

- An online presence will enable people to book space in your hub and increase the visibility of the hub. The Western Development Commission/ConnectedHubs.ie are rolling out a centralised booking system that is made available free of charge for three years for all hub stakeholders who sign up to the ConnectedHubs.ie platform during 2021. 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, thereby reducing costs and ensuring a connected hub network. More details: [www.ConnectedHubs.ie](http://www.ConnectedHubs.ie) The platform will also introduce them to a wider network of hubs where they can access a wealth of shared knowledge relating to the hub sector.

#### **f. Facilities**

- The space should be designed with 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.
- Where possible, 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, canteen/coffee dock, printing, marketing, video conferencing equipment, virtual office, marketing and promotion and business support. This will reflect the business model outlined above and the scale of the hub.
- Where the space allows, there is a potential for a company to grow within the hub, starting off with one person but, as the company develops and grows, it may require space for 2 or 3 people. Therefore, the design and layout of the hub may consider offering spaces of different sizes, depending on the nature/scale of the building plan and the business model of the hub.

- Consider the design thinking process when designing your space – imagine yourself using the space and what you might need to feel comfortable.
- Access to the building is important – consider the best access control option, be it swipe card, keys, codes, mobile phone app etc. Care should be given to the use of Open API's by the provider. It should be a system that can integrate into the chosen IT systems.

#### **g. Management models**

- Community groups should establish themselves as a Company Limited by Guarantee (CLG) - this offers several 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 <https://www.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.
- Private entities can establish themselves under the various widely known models – e.g. sole trader, partnership, limited company etc.

#### **h. Branding and Marketing**

- Branding and marketing of the hub are critical components of 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, 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 their 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 as potential outreach centres, larger companies in the area.

#### **j. Sustainability**

- Consideration needs to be given at a very early stage 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 REMOTE WORKING HUBS

Although remote working hubs bring many opportunities to communities and local areas, there are challenges in developing and maintaining them that organisations need to be aware of at the outset. Some of these are outlined below:

- Convincing funders and other relevant stakeholders about the added value of a remote working hub in a particular 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 required level of usage 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?

## LESSONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF REMOTE WORKING HUBS

- Setting up a remote working hub can bring considerable benefits for local areas. However, the initial investment can be large and difficult to secure. Community groups and private organisations 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 local area) who see potential in the area and local digitisation opportunities may be identified.
- Remote working hubs are not ‘one-size-fits-all’ tools. Community groups and private organisations need to consider whether remote working hubs are the right approach in their area/site. Some of the considerations include (1) appropriate fast or superfast broadband connection depending on the use and number of users of the 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 remote working hub offers the opportunity to bring activity back to the main streets of our towns and villages and is in alignment with Government policy, including Our Rural Future – Rural Development Policy 2021-2025.
- In addition to the development of the hub, community groups may need to consider their local area, 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. This should look at the 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.
- To assist you with census information, go here: <https://bit.ly/3h7jdP3>. You can zoom into your local area and also zoom back out to see the broader region. Take some time to view all of this, you will find it insightful and helpful.

- Strong committed leaders from the start are crucial to the success of remote working hubs. In the case of community groups, this will include commitment from local leaders and organisations. Hub developers should consider involving local citizens and 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 location in which it is located, through active marketing and ensuring staff are trained in the promotion and marketing of the hub. Opportunities to engage with sponsors of the hub should be considered.
- Development of a community around the hub – e.g., Grow Remote Chapter. The ConnectedHubs.ie platform has a strong community focus for hub owners/managers and hub users, and active involvement in this community should be promoted.

## EXAMPLES OF SUCCESSFUL HUB DEVELOPMENTS

There are many good examples of hubs 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. If you would like to visit a similar facility, ConnectedHubs.ie can facilitate you with suggestions and introductions. Please contact National Hub Executive, Liam Horan ([liamhoran@wdc.ie](mailto:liamhoran@wdc.ie))

## 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 your local authority 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

(<https://www.enterprise-ireland.com/en/funding-supports/REDF/>)

### Rural Regeneration and Development Fund – Department of Rural and Community Development

(<https://www.gov.ie/en/policy-information/c77144-rural-regeneration-and-development-fund/>)

### Town and Village Renewal Scheme – Department of Rural and Community Development

(<https://www.gov.ie/en/policy-information/01125e-town-and-village-renewal-scheme/>)

### Just Transition – Department of Environment, Climate and Communications

(<https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/ed10d-just-transition-fund/>)

### LEADER programme

(<https://lclrl.ie/>)

LEADER can fund feasibility studies for groups exploring the option of developing a hub. Leader calls are generally open all year around during the lifetime of the Programme.

### Clár

(<https://www.gov.ie/en/policy-information/91ba52-clar/?section=2021-clar-measures>)



The Clár programme provides funding for small scale infrastructural projects in rural areas that have suffered significant levels of population decline

Western Development Commission Community Investment

(<https://westerndevelopment.ie/investment-funds/community-investment/>)

Many community groups and social enterprises in the Western Region have excellent ideas about how they can improve the socio-economic lives of their communities. The WDC's Community Loan Fund was developed to give these groups access to the capital they need to help them turn those ideas in reality.

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** – this 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 for community loan finance that groups can investigate, including:

**Clann Credo** – Provides community loan finance, considering the impact of a project on your local community and does not require personal guarantees (<https://www.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 (<https://communityfinanceireland.com/>).

### **Local Enterprise Offices (LEO)**

Your Local Enterprise Office is an excellent resource. In some instances, they have provided funding for feasibility studies and mentors.

(<https://www.localenterprise.ie/>)

## **SUPPORT DOCUMENTS AND 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.

### **ConnectedHubs.ie.**

Please contact us with any queries. Liam Horan ([liamhoran@wdc.ie](mailto:liamhoran@wdc.ie)) is their National Hubs Executive.

### **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 ([www.enterprisecentres.ie](http://www.enterprisecentres.ie)). NACEC has recently appointed a national hubs network manager and offers opportunities for engagement for hubs and advice from peers.

### **Grow Remote ([www.growremote.ie](http://www.growremote.ie))**

Grow Remote are 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, which are all about connecting people, opportunities and building community. This typically happens through meetups and events.

### **The Department of Enterprise, Trade and 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. (<https://enterprise.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Workplace-and-Skills/Remote-Working/>)

### **Laois Offaly Education and Training Board**

Courses available on 'being remote ready'

*This guidance document has been developed in conjunction with Lorraine O'Connor, Regeneration Officer, Longford County Council, whose leadership and support we acknowledge; and the local authorities of the Atlantic Economic Corridor.*

