



Western People

Established 1883

A template for rural renewal

The news that the Cairn International Trade Centre in Kiltimagh has an occupancy rate of 90% and is generating 70 full-time jobs in the local area is a timely boost to community enterprises the length and breadth of the country. Built at a cost of several million euro and opened at the height of the recession in 2009, many believed this state-of-the-art centre, located on the outskirts of Kiltimagh, was little more than the proverbial 'white elephant'; an expensive and foolish foray into the world of big business by a voluntary organisation that should have known better.

The project's naysayers had a field day when it was turned down for decentralisation, and for years it looked as if many of the centre's units would remain idle forever. Indeed, there must have been occasions when the management and board of IRD Kiltimagh wondered if they really had bitten off more than they could chew. But if there were moments of doubt, they were well disguised as IRD Kiltimagh went out and sold this centre as a place that offered Dublin-style facilities in a rural setting. The fact that 11 different firms are now based in the Cairn Centre tells its own story and is a ringing endorsement of IRD Kiltimagh's visionary strategy.

The similarities with the nearby Ireland West Airport Knock are uncanny and the Cairn International Trade Centre has demonstrated yet again that the West of Ireland has a bright future — if only those in power had the same wherewithal and resourcefulness as groups like IRD Kiltimagh. It is — as this week's front page headline states — a classic case of "Build it and they will come"; an inspirational tale of one community's determination to fight back in the face of a devastating recession.

Obviously, the availability of high-speed broadband has been one of the key attractions for companies locating in the Cairn Centre, but sadly such modern technology is still not widely available across large swathes of the West of Ireland. The failure to roll out an adequate broadband infrastructure is one of the truly shameful legacies of successive governments since the turn of the millennium. Every political party and denizen of Dáil Éireann is culpable because they have simply not made enough noise about the shocking lack of high-speed broadband, and the hugely negative effect it is having on rural job creation.

If a similar situation had prevailed half a century ago in relation to the provision of electricity, towns like Ballina, Castlebar and Westport would not have attracted companies such as Hollister, Baxter and Allergan. It is one of the ironies of the past 100 years that the State managed to roll out rural electrification at a time when there was little or no money in the country yet we have abjectly failed to provide broadband — the electricity of the 21st century — at a time of unprecedented wealth. Yes, there has been a lost decade since 2008, but that is still no excuse for the lack of high-speed broadband in so many parts of Mayo and other western counties. There was also a lost decade in the 1950s but rural electrification continued regardless and most areas were connected to the National Grid by the start of the 1960s. Two decades after Castlebar was in the throes of the Information Age competition, Mayo is still waiting to have proper broadband facilities; and as long as that wait goes on, new employment opportunities will be few and far between.

The success of the IRD Kiltimagh initiative should be held up as a template for every community in Ireland. A town with a population of 1,100 has managed to create 70 jobs in the past decade — that's more new employment than has been generated in many towns of much larger populations. In addition, IRD Kiltimagh is now supporting almost 160 full and part-time jobs in the local community, a fact that should not be lost on those in power who have dragged their heels when it comes to creating rural jobs.

Of course, there is an irony in all of this. The management of IRD Kiltimagh battled in the early days of this project to have a government department decentralised to the Cairn Centre, but were told the facility was not suitable — whatever that was supposed to mean. Faced with indifference at national level, they set off on a mission to fill the centre on their own, and now they have all but achieved their aim. It is a wonderfully positive story and it is an inspiration to every rural community that is feeling a sense of despair in the face of the never-ending winds of recession that have beset the western seaboard since 2008.

We should celebrate the success of the Cairn Centre and hope that other communities will be similarly inspired to create a bright new future for their people.