



Tionól Reigiúnach Oirthir agus Lár-Tíre  
Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly



# Next2Met Policy Learning Event #4

## Showcasing Digitalisation in the Midlands, Ireland: Healthy Placemaking, Climate Action, Economic Opportunity

### 26<sup>th</sup> May 2021

## Event Report



### SAVE THE DATE

#### Next2Met

#### Policy Learning Event #4

26th May 2021 | 10:00-12:30 GMT+1 (11:00 CET)



Organised by the Eastern  
and Midland Regional  
Assembly, Ireland



SESSION 1: Fostering Regional Attraction – case examples from the Midlands Region, Ireland

SESSION 2: The EU Recovery Plan: key messages from a regional approach perspective

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## 1. Introduction

[Next2Met](#) is an innovative interregional exchange project which aims to increase regional attractiveness – for knowledge, opportunities, and capital – in territories located close to metropolitan areas. Compared to metropolitan regions, these ‘next to met’ areas face particular challenges including a lack of tools and critical mass of research, development and innovation, and therefore struggle to retain experienced small and medium-sized enterprises and highly qualified people. The Next2Met project brings together six regional and local actors and one Advisory Partner sharing this common challenge and working together to implement policy solutions based around digitalisation, cooperation and specialisation to support the regions involved to become more attractive ‘next to met’ areas.

On 26 May 2021, Next2Met partners and stakeholders came together for the fourth Nex2Met Policy Learning Event. This online event was hosted by the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly (EMRA) in Ireland. 57 participants registered for the event from across Europe<sup>1</sup> and represented the private and public sectors. The purpose of the event was to showcase digitalisation good practices from the Irish Midlands region in order to inspire action and foster intersectoral and interregional exchange in line with the Next2Met objectives.

During the event, EMRA representatives and local stakeholders presented a variety of projects developed across EMRA’s three core key principles – healthy placemaking, climate action and economic opportunity. Participants then interactively explored key questions on the topics of ‘rural working hubs’ and ‘clusters’ in breakout rooms. Before the event wrapped up, an overview of the EU Recovery Plan and key messages from a regional perspective were outlined. This document provides a summary report of the event and outlines the next steps for Next2Met.

## 2. Event Promotion

This event was widely promoted across the social media channels of Next2Met and its partners, with a particular focus on engaging stakeholders across the Irish Midlands region. Promotion pieces were covered in the [Laois People](#) newspaper and on the [Shannonside FM news website](#). In addition to the news article in the Shannonside FM, a radio interview on the event with Dr Owen

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<sup>1</sup> There were participants registered from Austria, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Malta, Norway, Poland and Spain.

Douglas, EU Projects Officer at EMRA, was broadcast on Shannonside FM's Business programme 'The Bottom Line' on the 25<sup>th</sup> of May. These engagements with local and regional media outlets helped to target key stakeholders in the Midland region and opened event participation to a broader audience. It also served to raise awareness of the Next2Met project to potential stakeholders outside of the established network.

### 3. Event Opening

The event kicked off at 10am Irish time on Zoom. **Dr Owen Douglas**, moderator of the event, opened with a general welcome and outline of meeting etiquette to attendees (i.e. video and microphone settings, instructions on posing questions, etc.). Following this, **Malachy Bradley**, Senior Planner and Assistant Director of the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly (EMRA) provided introductions to the Eastern and Midland region and outlined the role of EMRA in enabling regional planning and sustainable development.



**Harri Kuusela**, Lead Partner of the Next2Met Project then gave participants an overview of the project and the next steps, which includes Action Plan development, pilot actions and a workshop during the European Week of Regions and Cities in October 2021. These insightful introductions set the tone for the remainder of the event.

### 4. Session 1 – Showcasing Digitalisation in the Midlands, Ireland

The first session of the event was dedicated to showcasing Good Practice examples of digitalisation approaches and strategies from both public and private sector actors, as well as analysing the challenges and opportunities experienced in the Midlands region in relation to COVID-19. These five presentations addressed EMRA's three core principles of healthy placemaking, climate action and economic opportunity.

The first presentation was by **Catriona Hilliard**, Broadband Digital Officer at Offaly County Council and **Paul Delaney**, Sales Director, Cellnex Ireland. Addressing the theme of ‘**healthy-placemaking**’, the speakers introduced participants to the ‘[e-denderry project](#)’. The presentation took the form of a ‘short story’, whereby Catriona and Paul outlined some of the key activities and outputs of Phase 1 of the project using lively slides and engaging multimedia, including short, embedded videos. The presenters described how the ‘e-denderry’ project uses sensors and the Internet of Things to better manage spaces such as parking bays, air quality, street public bins and inside building.

The second presentation by **Barry Kennedy** from [Irish Manufacturing Research](#) (IMR) introduced the participants to the way in which the organisation provides a portfolio of research, training and consultancy services to Irish-based manufacturers across its thematic pillars of digitisation, sustainable manufacturing, design for manufacturing, automation and advanced control. Demonstrating the principle of ‘**climate action**’, Barry introduced participants to IMR’s projects related to improving sustainability within Irish manufacturing. He also discussed the [CIRCULÉIRE](#) project, which is the National Platform for Circular Manufacturing to accelerate the transition towards a net zero-carbon circular economy in Ireland. These initiatives aid in keeping manufacturing and industry in Ireland alive and resilient for the future.

**John Daly**, Economist for the Three Regional Assemblies of Ireland, gave the session’s third presentation on the challenges and opportunities from COVID-19 in the Midlands. He explained the economic impact the pandemic has had on the Midlands region through examination of labour and commercial markets. However, out of the health crisis, there are emerging opportunities from the pandemic mitigation activities. John used several economic indicators – such as improved in human capital levels, job creation through retrofitting buildings, and public transport improvements – to demonstrate how remote working and a low-carbon recovery can act to simultaneously improve the region’s economy and enhancing the quality of life through the use of technology.

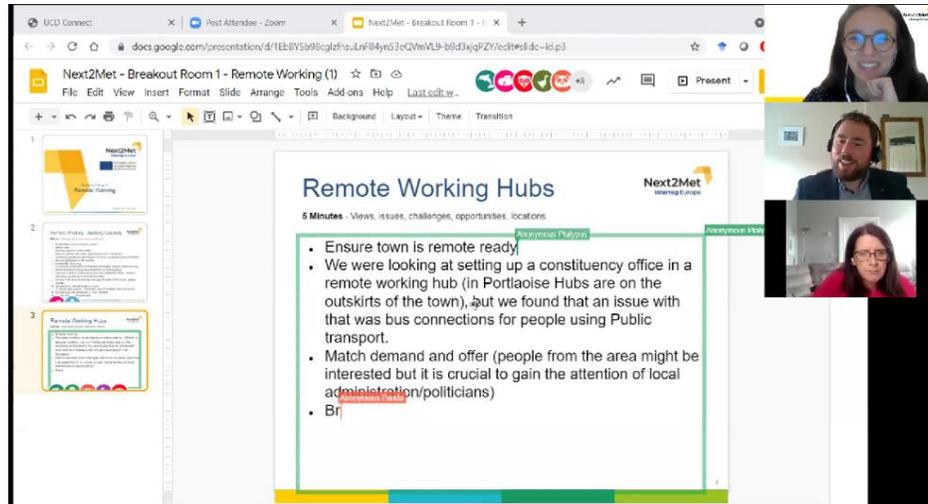
A series of speakers then used the context provided by John Daly to demonstrate real-world examples of **economic opportunities** that come from digital technologies. **Lorraine O’Connor**, Regeneration Officer in Longford County Council gave a presentation on strategy and guidance for developing rural working hubs that support rural regeneration in a sustainable and community-centred manner. Two private sector speakers, **Greg Tuohy** from Cantec Group and **Paul Towler** from SmartOffice, presented jointly on how their company strategies are embracing digital technologies and on the digitalisation services they have developed for SMEs. They provided

excellent examples of how their companies have pivoted their activities to offer automation and digital solutions that have allowed their business and other SMEs to grow. Before the pause for a coffee break there was a moment for questions from the audience to the speakers.

**All these good practice examples demonstrated the great potential of technology and innovative services to improve people’s lives, support businesses and enhance opportunities in the region, ultimately increasing the attractiveness of the territory.**

## 4.1 Breakout rooms

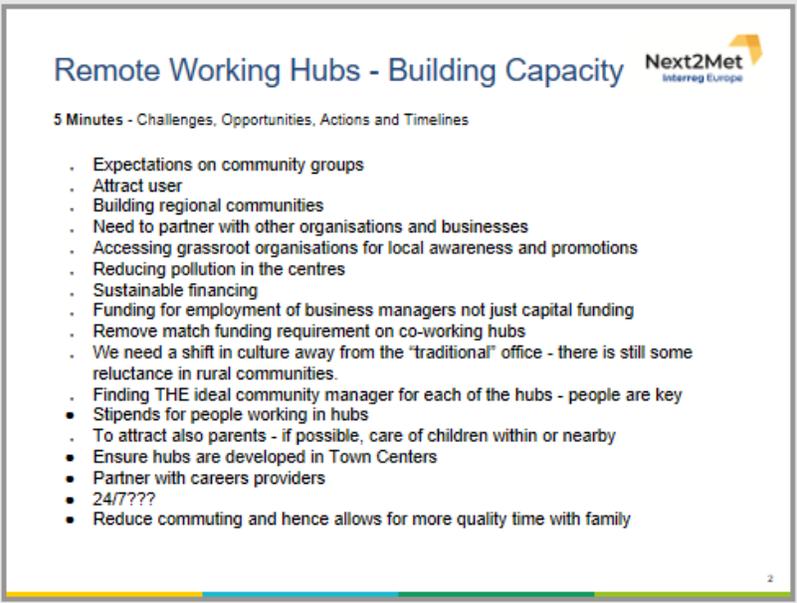
Returning from the coffee break, participants broke into two virtual breakout rooms designed to actively engage with participants to gather their input on relevant topics. One breakout room discussed **remote working** and how we can build capacity or detect where the need is for remote working hubs. The other breakout room focused on **clusters** and how we identify or define clusters. The group looking at ‘clusters’ was also treated to a presentation by **Simone Hagenauer** from [ecoplus](#), the Next2Met partner in Lower Austria, on her region’s experience in mapping cluster potential. These topics of remote working hubs and clusters are particularly relevant in the context of COVID-19 and in line with current European policies.



To capture discussion points in the breakout groups, a slide set managed on Google drive was shared with participants, who were asked to discuss the topics and note down their ideas and comments on the slides. The group on remote working hubs discussed ideas around adding value in the working hubs to attract users, such as childcare facilities, engagement with community and business organisations. There were also comments about financial supports from various sources to make use of the spaces affordable and an appealing option. There were also several

statements relating to having a people- and community-centred approach to working hub development. The other group considering clusters discussed the interdependencies between parties and the cooperation needed on several levels to make engagement with clusters beneficial and attractive alternatives. To help form and strengthen clusters, one participant advised that funding opportunities or the prospect for new business could be a driving factor. As such, clusters with international partnerships in Europe could be relevant. The resulting slides from the group discussions can be found in the images below (screen captures 1, 2 and 3).

**Screen capture 1.** Breakout room on Remote Working Hubs resulting slide 1.



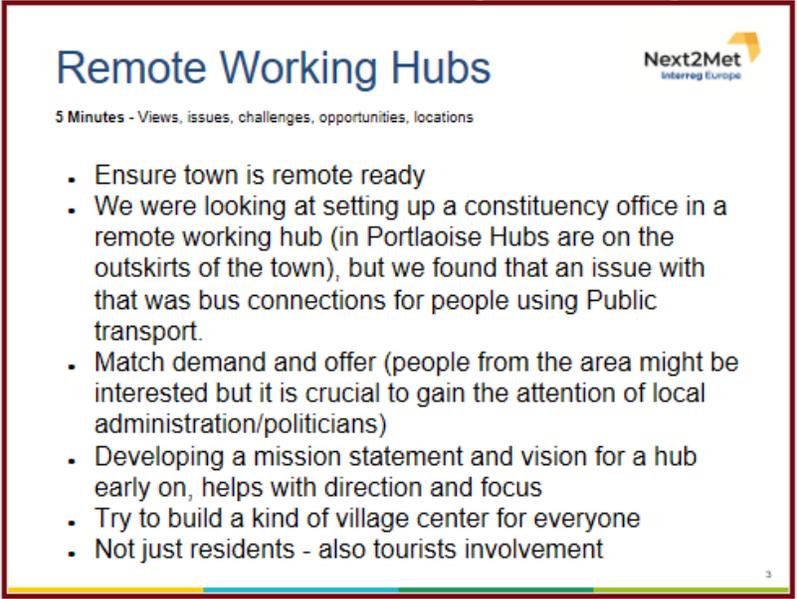
Remote Working Hubs - Building Capacity 

5 Minutes - Challenges, Opportunities, Actions and Timelines

- Expectations on community groups
- Attract user
- Building regional communities
- Need to partner with other organisations and businesses
- Accessing grassroots organisations for local awareness and promotions
- Reducing pollution in the centres
- Sustainable financing
- Funding for employment of business managers not just capital funding
- Remove match funding requirement on co-working hubs
- We need a shift in culture away from the "traditional" office - there is still some reluctance in rural communities.
- Finding THE ideal community manager for each of the hubs - people are key
- Stipends for people working in hubs
- To attract also parents - if possible, care of children within or nearby
- Ensure hubs are developed in Town Centers
- Partner with careers providers
- 24/7???
- Reduce commuting and hence allows for more quality time with family

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**Screen capture 2.** Breakout room on Remote Working Hubs resulting slide 2.



Remote Working Hubs 

5 Minutes - Views, issues, challenges, opportunities, locations

- Ensure town is remote ready
- We were looking at setting up a constituency office in a remote working hub (in Portlaoise Hubs are on the outskirts of the town), but we found that an issue with that was bus connections for people using Public transport.
- Match demand and offer (people from the area might be interested but it is crucial to gain the attention of local administration/politicians)
- Developing a mission statement and vision for a hub early on, helps with direction and focus
- Try to build a kind of village center for everyone
- Not just residents - also tourists involvement

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### Screen capture 3. Breakout room on Clusters resulting slide.

**Identifying and defining clusters** 

Data required, definition by geographic area, type, manufacturing, ICT?

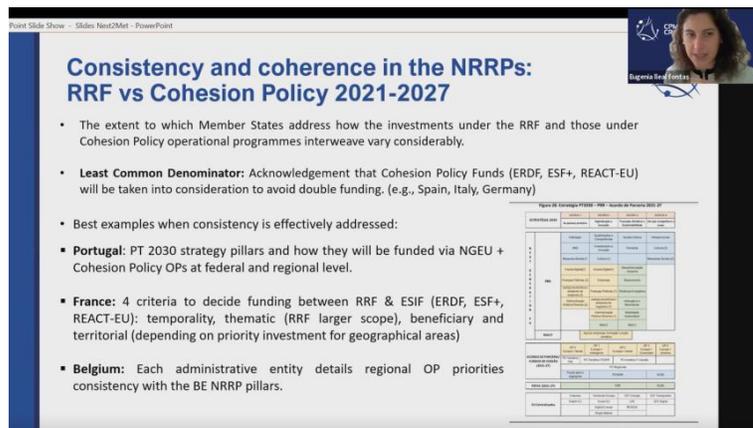
Value chains and interdependencies  
Clusters becoming more international- global actors  
focused on technology/ sector  
Challenge- trying to get coalitions together...COVID made people work together.  
Cluster Opportunity needs to be great or development is lacklustre  
Funding opportunities are important- international clusters are needed  
Often addressing global challenges eg. sustainable production, environmental protection etc.  
Supporting SME especially in R&D&I and internationalization

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## 5. Session 2 – Regional perspective on the EU Recovery Plan

The final session provided a European and regional perspective with a view on the EU Recovery Plan. **Eugènia Lleal Fontàs**, Policy Analyst at [Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions](#) (CPMR) gave attendees an overview of the [EU Recovery Plan](#) – including the Recovery and Resilience Facility and the National Recovery and Resilience Plans (NRRPs) – and the presented [key messages](#) from a regional

perspective. She explained that the green transition to a low-carbon economy and digital transformations are present as thematic concentrations in the EU Recovery and Resilience Facility, and are noticeable pillars within the various national Recovery and Resilience



**Consistency and coherence in the NRRPs: RRF vs Cohesion Policy 2021-2027**

- The extent to which Member States address how the investments under the RRF and those under Cohesion Policy operational programmes interweave vary considerably.
- Least Common Denominator:** Acknowledgement that Cohesion Policy Funds (ERDF, ESF+, REACT-EU) will be taken into consideration to avoid double funding. (e.g., Spain, Italy, Germany)
- Best examples when consistency is effectively addressed:
  - Portugal:** PT 2030 strategy pillars and how they will be funded via NGEU + Cohesion Policy OPs at federal and regional level.
  - France:** 4 criteria to decide funding between RRF & ESIF (ERDF, ESF+, REACT-EU): temporality, thematic (RRF larger scope), beneficiary and territorial (depending on priority investment for geographical areas)
  - Belgium:** Each administrative entity details regional OP priorities consistency with the BE NRRP pillars.

Plans submitted to date. The role of regions and local authorities was stressed in the presentation as important elements in the EU Recovery Plan for proper governance, complementarity and consistency between EU programmes. Following the presentation, questions from participants sparked a discussion around how the EU Just Transition Fund relates to the EU Recovery Plan.

The meeting closed with thanks to all participants and speakers.

## 6. Conclusions

This fourth Policy Learning Event was very successful in showcasing examples of Irish good practices in using digitalisation to make regions more attractive to investment and better places to live. With participants and speakers joining from across Europe, the event fostered interregional exchanges and learnings. The good practices presented during the event demonstrated the great potential of technology and innovative services to improve quality of life, support businesses and enhance opportunities in the region, ultimately increasing the attractiveness of the territory.

The virtual mode of delivery proved to be a key success factor of the event. While reflecting Next2Met's soft digitalisation subject matter, the event's online format allowed for a fast-paced and high energy event where participants got to engage directly with one another to discuss questions around rural working hubs and clusters. Without the need to travel to attend the meeting, the event was able to have a broader reach both in terms of the number and geographic location of participants, and the variety of stakeholders who were able to partake. There was strong contribution from the local commercial sector, whose time is often a precious resource and engagement in similar projects and events is consequently rare.

The pre-event communication activities also benefitted from the virtual nature of the event. Promotion on social media, in local news outlets and on the radio helped target stakeholders in the Midland region and opened up participation to a broader audience. If the event had been delivered 'in-person', these communication pieces would not have happened as last-minute additions to attendance would likely have been impossible. Furthermore, as no travel was required, the meeting lowered its carbon footprint.

A **fifth Policy Learning Event** is expected to be organised by Next2Met partners from **Podlaskie Voivodship (Poland)** in autumn 2021. This next event will focus on Regional Action Plans and how the Next2Met interregional and regional learning events have led to the proposals for improvements to selected Policy Instruments.