

Introduction.

Elphin Development Group was established following a public consultation process initiated by Roscommon County Council and facilitated by Venture International (Venture) through their representative, John O Neill, on behalf of the Council.

The brief of the group is to identify and progress potential projects which could be of benefit to Elphin and its surrounds and, where possible, to assist and help co-ordinate the work of existing groups and organisations in achieving similar goals.

To this end, a survey was undertaken in 2022 to gather local opinions and ideas on actions that could be taken to enhance the town in general and the site of the former Bishop Hodson School in particular. Venture would then examine the initial feasibility and financial viability of the more popular options tested against the experiences of similar rural communities around the country. This process took longer than envisaged due to the challenges of Covid 19 and the unavoidable unavailability of the Venture facilitator for personal reasons. A summary of the findings of the survey is outlined below.

Survey Findings

1) Respondents (Questions 1 and 2)

The survey could be completed online or in hard copy available in local shops. In total 107 surveys were completed and returned. 69 respondents identified as female, 37 as male, while one did not select a gender option. Responses were received for all age group categories from under 18 to over 75 with most of the responses coming from those in the 25- 50 age group (58%).

2) Desired activities and services currently unavailable in Elphin. (Question 3)

A very large and very diverse list of suggestions were returned as answers to this question, some very practical (e.g – improved Wi-Fi, car charging facilities) and some aspirational (e.g –hotel, swimming –pool). However, most of the suggestions could be categorised under one of the following headings.

- 1) Café, restaurant, meeting place ‘not involving alcohol’.
- 2) Sporting or recreational facilities –Astroturf, outdoor gym, walkways, seating, basketball/tennis etc.
- 3) Purpose-built dedicated preschool, play school, crèche, after-school type facilities.
- 4) Somewhere for music, the arts, museum and heritage, workshops, courses and meetings etc to be carried out.
- 5) Something with tourist potential in addition to the Windmill to attract visitors to the area.
- 6) Community services e.g. library, bank, bus services, dentist, launderette, public toilets, etc.

- 7) Facilities to meet the needs of different groups – men’s shed, women’s group, teenagers, active age group, relocation of playground.
- 8) Enhanced shopping and retail opportunities ie supermarket, drapery, bookshop, farmers market etc.
- 9) A safe and accessible ‘green space’ to meet the needs of the entire community.
- 10) Enterprise hubs suitable for start-ups.

3) Suggestions for use of Grammar School site. (Question 4)

There was a huge similarity between the answers to the previous question and this one with most of the same suggestions being offered as uses for the Grammar School site. However, a difference in emphasis in some cases was noticeable due to the nature of the site. The following would summarise the trends of the contributions.

- 1) Use for sport and recreation with many pointing out the absence of an Astro-turf multi sports facility in the town.
- 2) Mindful of the history of the town and the site, a cultural/ heritage facility (such as a museum), was suggested by a number of respondents as a desirable goal.
- 3) A number of respondents, citing the central location of the site, were of the opinion that a unique tourist attraction was needed to entice visitors to the town and provide an economic boost which could have a ‘knock on’ effect on the provision of other services.
- 4) The needs of families with young children and the desirability of a facility designed specifically for services like preschool, after-school, etc also featured a number of times in replies.
- 5) Another common theme was the perceived need for meeting places for groups, where not only meetings but workshops, rehearsals, small performances, lectures, provision of mental health services, men’s shed, youth activities and a host of other activities could be promoted.

4) Why are these difficult to access in Elphin? (Question 5)

Once again, the responses were very varied and there was also a lot repetition of previous answers. The following list gives a flavour of the answers.

- 1) They currently don’t exist in Elphin This was the most common answer.
- 2) Difficult for non-drivers to travel for them and poor bus services.
- 3) No place to meet in an alcohol-free environment.
- 4) Absence of leadership and volunteerism.
- 5) No suitable facilities.
- 6) Funding and running costs are difficult to access.
- 6) Low population makes provision of facilities non-economic.

5) Further comments and suggestions (Questions 6)

Many of the responses in this section have already been highlighted in answers to previous questions. A cross section of samples of responses is included here.

- 1) Try a small market as a trial run.
- 2) Lack of signage on approach roads.
- 3) Elphin needs a lift in terms of atmosphere and life.
- 4) History of area / family history could have potential.
- 5) Take a look at Drumshanbo.
- 6) Important that newcomers to the town are welcomed.
- 7) The appearance of the town is dilapidated. Painting and improvements to the presentation of buildings is badly needed.
- 8) Well done on the footpaths and lights around the block.
- 9) Windmill wheelers looking for more cycling enthusiasts . Get on your bike!
- 10) Replace the horrible windows in the Grammar school with something like the original. Bring it back to life.

[Report by Venture based on analysis of similar projects elsewhere.](#)

Following the results of the Survey, Venture Ireland undertook an analysis of its findings, measured against the experience of similar type projects in comparable rural communities throughout Ireland. The rationale for engaging with such precedent projects is that many communities have experience of developing capital projects to provide spaces (indoor and outdoor) to meet the needs of their own communities or visitors to that community, and their experience presents an opportunity to capture that learning to support evidence-based decision making in Elphin. The projects examined were: -

- A. Located in small rural settlements.
- B. Community led.
- C. Had some of the elements aligned with the needs expressed in the Elphin survey.
- D. Were based in general in the Republic of Ireland with access to the same type of revenue streams.

The following is a summary of the reports conducted:

Direction provided by precedent (similar) projects:

- 1) It is difficult for projects with a significant capital cost to sustain themselves purely from earned income.
- 2) The reason that project sustainability is challenging is that the market (local population mainly) is small and unlikely to grow significantly.
- 3) Where the providers of facilities do employ staff, the majority of these positions are funded through accessing revenue funding on a casual basis, requiring access to volunteers skilled at developing competitive revenue funding applications on a daily basis.

- 4) The majority of projects do require substantial community volunteers to manage and operate the facilities. The continuing input of operating such facilities is challenging.
- 5) The majority of projects confirmed that while they manage with difficulty to sustain the facilities through volunteer fundraising etc, they are not in a position to generate reserves to reinvest in maintaining the facility to a high standard.
- 6) Some of the groups indicated that it is only recently that they have been aware of the level of responsibility required as volunteers in the management of facilities. The impact of COVID-19 on the demand for community facilities (particularly indoor) has led to significant challenges in terms of financial sustainability of facilities. Some have not opened since COVID. Where income generated from their supported employees is no longer the case, the burden has fallen back on volunteers and become unsustainable in the longer term.
- 7) The impact of global increases in energy costs has had a major impact on community led facilities, with energy costs increasing by anything up to 500%.
- 8) The potential to develop a significant attraction which has the potential to attract visitors to Elphin, thus contributing to the sustainability of the project, combined with providing additional community facilities, is something worth considering. A re-imagining of elements of a model village project, the subject of a detailed feasibility study at the start of the millennium, as suggested by some members of the group, would require a detailed and professional feasibility assessment before agreeing a final vision and options for the site.
- 9) Can some or all of the local needs identified be met through existing community led facilities such as the Community Centre, GAA grounds, Biodiversity sites, Windmill, Schools, Playground...?
- 10) Is there a risk of displacement where new facilities could compete with or displace existing facilities, and by extension challenge the financial sustainability of, for example, the Community Centre? These represent the major considerations, based on the experience of others, to be taken into account in deciding the options and future direction of the project.

Response of Elphin Development Group (EDG) to the Survey and Venture observations:

EDG considered the findings of the survey in the light of observations of Venture, and these are summarised below. In particular, the options for the Grammar School were given careful consideration.

- 1) The provision of an AstroTurf Sporting facility, as suggested in the Survey, was considered. While there is a need for such a facility in the community, it is debatable if it is financially sustainable as an independent entity, with such facilities already available in at least three other locations within an eight-mile radius of Elphin. It was felt that such a project would be more viable if provided in conjunction with one of the local Schools or GAA Clubs, where management structures are already in place, and where access to additional funding streams and fundraising activities might be available. In this regard, it

is understood the Elphin GAA Club intend to apply for planning permission for the provision of such a facility at Orchard Park, Elphin.

- 2) The group also considered the expressed desire for the provision of facilities for an Early Years Preschool Service and a School Aged Childcare facility. At present these facilities are utilised in Elphin Community Centre, and there is also a private provider of a Crèche within the community. The group is mindful of the 'risk of displacement' referred to in the Venture Report, in other words, that the relocating of these facilities could jeopardize the sustainability of the Community Centre and end up "robbing Peter to pay Paul". The group is of the opinion that at this point in time, the expansion and upgrading of the available facilities of the Community Centre to better meet the needs of these age groups, is a more desirable objective. In this regard, the recent significant funding allocated for the upgrade of the Community Centre should be of benefit in furthering this objective.
- 3) Another item from the survey was the need for a multi-functional facility, capable of meeting new and emerging needs for meetings, workshops, performances, demonstrations etc., which would encourage activities not currently catered for in the community, such as, promoting artistic and cultural pursuits. It was felt by the group that any development at the site could incorporate such an adaptable and multi-functional area, and meet a large variety of desirable community initiatives, without having a negative impact on existing facilities or organisations.
- 4) It was felt that such a facility could also go some way towards meeting the expressed desire for an emphasis on history and heritage in any re-imagining of the site and that this would be a desirable objective to incorporate into this historic location.
- 5) The group are strongly of the view that with the necessity to bring increased footfall to Elphin and help give an economic boost to the local economy, a significant tourist attraction was the best option for the site, given its strategic location right in the middle of the town. It was further felt that such a direction would not necessarily exclude the options of the site also accommodating some of the other options mentioned above, particularly a multi-functional meeting space and an historical and heritage dimension.
- 6) Regarding the wider question of re-invigorating Elphin town, a number of recent positive developments since the Survey were conducted, were noted and welcomed.
 - A. The state of dereliction of many buildings in the town is noticeably being addressed with the purchase and development of many of them into private homes, apartments, businesses etc. It is felt that this will encourage others to explore such options and encourage new life in the main town area.
 - B. A place to meet "without the presence of alcohol" was an aspiration from the survey. It is great to see a coffee shop/restaurant being developed now. It is likely that a development, such as that envisaged at No. 5 above, may involve a coffee shop also, if successful.
 - C. The expressed need for a safe and accessible green space is being addressed by the Bio-diversity Park, which is a most welcome development, and goes some way to addressing those needs.
 - D. Unfortunately, the gaps left by the closure of the Bank and Library still remain, and the occasional visit of the mobile library does little to fill that particular need. While

the Bank is a private institution, which makes its decisions on economic grounds, it is felt that Roscommon County Council should constantly be agitated with about the restoration of our Library. It is great that the perceived threat to our Post Office has been overcome by its relocation to its present premises.

- E. Many other desired suggestions, i.e. improved Wi-Fi, electric charging points etc., are objectives which need to be pursued. This would also apply to the provision of improved public transport options for services not available in small rural settlements like Elphin.

What Next: Vision and immediate goal

Based on the results of the consultative review of the community survey conducted by Venture on behalf of Elphin Development Group (EDG) and funded by Roscommon County Council, the vision of EDG is to develop “The Hodson Centre” site as a tourist attraction that incorporates:

- A Heritage / Historical / Literary interpretative space with links to Elphin’s hinterland.
- A miniaturisation concept tourist attraction.
- A multi-functional space serving the tourist attraction that could be used by the community also.

Our immediate goal is to secure funding for a feasibility study to develop the site accordingly and we are currently working on this.

We will update the community with relevant information as this process progresses.

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