

## **SARURE - Save Rural Retail**

### **Introduction:**

SARURE is an Interreg Europe project to which Sligo County Council is partnered. It is an inter-regional cooperation project which is tasked with improving policies aimed at SME competitiveness. The project is led by the Chamber of Commerce, Industry and Services of Teruel (Spain) and we are joined by partners from Burgenlandkreis (Germany), Western Macedonia (Greece), Aragon (Spain), South Karelia (Finland), South Warmia (Poland) and Soderhamn (Sweden). The project is funded by the European Development Fund has a total of value of €1.38M and will run from June of this year until November of 2022.

Sligo County Council has been approved for funding of €169,112 under the programme. The 'SARURE – Saving Rural Retail' project is based around producing policy interventions aimed at supporting rural retailers, thereby reducing the level of commercial vacancy in our rural towns. The project is focused on Tubbercurry and South Sligo, and programme includes a schedule of meetings with key stakeholders, including Tubbercurry Chamber of Commerce, South & West Sligo Tourism, Aclare Development Council and Tubbercurry Old Fair Day Committee.



### **SARURE Project - Background**

Local Shops supply the population with staple goods and act as a social hub, they contribute to the quality of local life, encourage the population to remain in rural areas and are a prerequisite for the development of other diversified activities and services. Also, SMEs and micro SMEs' weight in terms of employment is very significant in demographically fragile rural areas. However, given that retail shops are a basic service that is required in sparsely populated areas, their existence is not inevitable. Small villages and towns need shops to survive but small rural shops need also a minimum number of customers to survive.

When depopulation started to affect some European regions severely, different schemes to support rural retail appeared around the year 2000. It was the case of Rural Multiservice Shops in Aragon (Spain) but also for different attempts and formulas in many other European countries. Even if these initiatives have undoubtedly contributed to cope with the situation in the past decade, the decline of retail in rural regions of Europe continues today. Rural businesses face significant challenges in the marketplace leading to their unfeasibility and to dramatic consequences in terms of social and territorial cohesion.

### **Reducing commercial vacancy**

One of the main objectives of the County Sligo Local Economic and Community Plan (LECP) 2016-2021 is to develop Sligo as the economic driver of the Northwest and to promote it as an attractive location for investment, tourism, entrepreneurship and employment. An action identified in the Plan is to develop Rural Economic Development Zones (REDZ) in key rural towns, starting with Tubbercurry as a pilot. Tubbercurry has a population of around 2,000 people and is identified as a 'key support town' in the Sligo County Development Plan. The commercial vacancy rate in the Tubbercurry area exceeds that in the county as a whole, having doubled since 2013, indicative of the pressures on the retail and services sector in South County Sligo. Within this context Tubbercurry and its hinterland was deemed to be an appropriate case study in relation to the exploration of the problems facing the retail sector in rural County Sligo.

### **Project Aims**

The SARURE partnership intends to exchange information on innovative trading and service models developed during the past decade in different countries and will seek to explore possibilities around innovative marketing, mix of services, financing options and technology. 99% of the SMEs in the retail sector in partner rural areas are micro SMEs which are especially vulnerable to crisis and with many barriers to innovation. In this context, the ultimate aim of the project is to improve the partner regions policies to support retail SMEs towards survival, innovation and overall competitiveness. Given the fact that a vast array of European regions face the same issue around the retention of vital rural services, Interreg Europe is deemed an excellent arena to exchange on successful experiences and policies.

### **Next Steps**

- 1. Stakeholders Meeting**– The Stakeholders meeting will seek to involve the local community in defining the scope of the project in County Sligo.
- 2. Situational Analysis** - This piece of work, which will be contracted out, will enable Sligo County Council to map and quantify the problems affecting the retailers and communities of South County Sligo.
- 3. SARURE Partner Meeting** – The next event takes place in Western Macedonia (Greece) in April 2019 and some of the stakeholders will be invited to attend.