Next2Met Online Stakeholder Meeting
1st April 2020

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

Next2Met
Interreg Europe

European Union
European Regional
Development Fund

Contents

Introduction

Next2Met is an innovative interregional exchange project which aims to increase the attractiveness of the Midlands as a region to live, work and visit focusing on soft digitalisation measures. These are solutions with a digital component, but where digitalisation is not front and centre. The project focuses on attracting and keeping qualified people and Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) in regions surrounding metropolitan areas by means of soft digitalisation measures.

Building on the first stakeholder meeting held on 02 December 2019, the purpose of this meeting was to bring together further expert stakeholders, representing a wide range of organisations including central government departments, local government, community groups and industry as well as Next2Met project partners to build a portfolio of Good Practices (GPs) and discuss the potential of implementing these GPs that focus on digitalisation measures in the Midlands region (Longford, Westmeath, Offaly and Laois). Initially, this meeting was due to take place in Westmeath County Council and 22 stakeholders had confirmed their attendance, however due to COVID-19 stakeholders were emailed on the 19th March 2020 to confirm their attendance at a shorter virtual meeting, rather than the planned face-to-face meeting. Twenty- five stakeholders confirmed their attendance. The meeting was restructured to suit an online platform and Mentimeter (a GP digital solution identified by Longford County Council) was employed to engage with stakeholders.

Twenty-eight stakeholders representing the public, private and non-profit sector attended the 2-
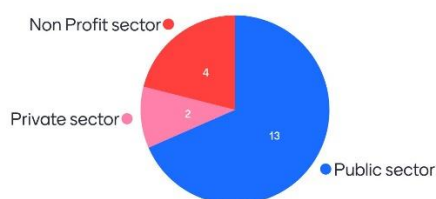
hour online meeting on the 1st of April 2020. The meeting was hosted using Microsoft Teams video platform[1] (using the account of the Lead Partner of Next2Met project the Regional Council of Paijat-hame, based in Finland). Stakeholders were asked to engage and participate in the online meeting through Mentimeter [2] which is survey software that allows meeting attendees to answer questions, share feedback through this tool, using their smartphones. Once stakeholders engaged with this digital tool their responses were visualised in real-time. Although there were 28 stakeholders logged in, not all stakeholders responded to every question. The following report provides an account of the meeting, presentations, survey reponses and potential next steps to explore in the project.

An overview of the work of the Assemby was provided by Jim Conway, CEO of the [Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly](#) followed by an overview of the [Next2 Met project](#) by EU Officer, Bríd Greenan.

Profile of Stakeholders

The majority of Midland stakeholders were from the public sector (13/19) two organisations represented the private sector (2/19) and four stakeholders were from the non-profit sector (4/19). Stakeholders represented small (7/20), large (6/20) micro (5/20) and medium organisations (2/20) [3]. The majority had previously attended a meeting online (17/19) with just two (2/19) stakeholders stating it was their first time attending a virtual event.

Digitalisation/ICT was a direct focus of approximately half of organisations present (8/17) and an indirect focus for (8/17) . 1 organisation stated it was both a direct and indirect focus (1/17).

What type of organisation do you represent?

---

[1] https://products.office.com/en-ie/microsoft-teams/group-chat-software
[2] https://www.mentimeter.com/
[3] 1-9 (Mirco) 10-49 (Small) 50-249 (Medium)250+ (Large)

Twenty-five stakeholders responded to this question with a wide range of positive attributes mentioned. In the Word Cloud above the size of a word shows the frequency to which it was mentioned, and the importance to Midland stakeholders. The top three Midland attributes mentioned were **1. Fresh Air 2. Cost of Living 3. People**. These 'soft' attributes are similar to those that were mentioned by Finnish panellists at the Finnish Policy Learning event in Lahti, Finland who highlighted that quality of life and quality of time were some of the main assets of their respective Region.

Good Practices Exchange

Next2Met requires the identification of 6 GPs over the course of the project, at the moment all EU partners are mapping potential GPs within their Regions. Harri Kussela representing the [Regional Council of Paijat-hame](#) and lead partner in the Next2Met project presented on the work the Regional Council is doing in terms increasing the attractiveness of their Region, focusing on their Smart specialisation Spearheads:

- Design (education): industrial and digital design
- Circular Economy: several spearheads
- Sports and Experiences: tourism, well-being, culture. Also drink and food businesses, metal industry, digitalization

Harri also presented on three potential GPs that are being investigated in the Region of Paijat-hame- a region that is similar to the Midlands Region, in terms of assets and challenges.

i. Citi-Cap Personal Carbon Trading Scheme for Mobility

Citi-Cap is a mobile application that enables people to trade their personal carbon exhaust/trading – influencing the way they move around. i.e. using a bike rather than a car. The idea of the GP is that it raises environmental awareness and creates a positive environmental image within the Region therefore increasing its attractiveness. Lahti is the first city to pilot personal carbon trading on mobility emissions and will be the European Green Capital in 2021- this application is part of the green agenda in Finland.

In parallel, one of the key projects outlined in the Regional Enterprise Plan to 2020 is for Portlaoise to be piloted as a 'low carbon town' managed by Laois County Council and which will serve as a road map for the development and rollout of similar low-carbon initiatives in county towns of Longford, Offaly and Westmeath.

ii. NayaDaya – Science-based Emotion Technology

The Finnish Region is investigating this GP which connects science, technology and emotions. This technology measures, maps and predicts emotions, seeking to increase the image or perception of people about the Region. It's not all about hardware, but also applying this to our emotions.

iii. Regional Remote Care Technology Unit

This service is providing customers with tablets and care through the use of video phone technology. Nurses can provide care/guidance i.e medication or instruction re insulin etc. to people living at home. Relations can also connect to the patient through 'coffee mornings. There has been a huge increase in demand for this technology due to Covid-19.

Transferring GPs

After the presentation stakeholders were asked how transferrable[4] these practices are to the Midlands Region. The majority (13/20) felt that the GPs maybe transferable to the Region with 7/20 stating they were transferrable to the Midlands Region. Stakeholders were asked if these GPs, or elements of the GPs could be used within their organisation. The majority 15/19 stated that they may be transferrable in collaboration with others, 3/19 stated they could be used and 1 stakeholder stated they could not be used in their organisation.

---

[4] Transferability : potential for transfer, both from a region to another one and from one sector to another.

How transferable are the GP's presented by our EU partner to an Irish Midlands context?

Not at all transferable: 0
Maybe transferable: 13
Transferable: 7
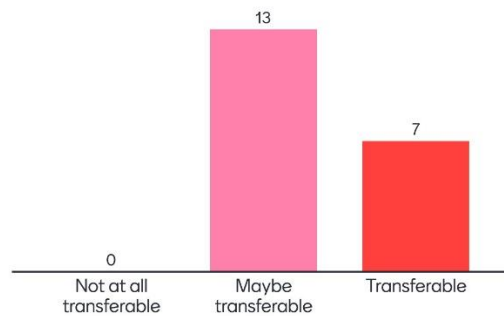
20

Hosting the meeting online facilitated the involvement of our Finnish Partner which broadened the network potential for stakeholders. Not only did stakeholders get the opportunity to hear from the Regional Council of Päijät-Häme, Finland this resulted in 2 sets of exploratory talks with a view to future cooperation being initiated, that would not have occurred offline.

Action 1: Follow up with relevant stakeholders in relation to these sets of exploratory talks.

iv.   Free Public Wi-Fi points to enhance Tourism

Catriona Hilliard, Broadband Officer with Offaly County Council presented information about how their local authority has used technology to support tourism by implementing Free Public Wi-Fi points along tourist routes (including at the Big Six Attractions, mostly based in the West of the County and economically disadvantaged areas) to monitor data analytics and enhance tourism over the last 18 months. As a result of placing the Broadband Access Points in these areas the following peripheral benefits include:

- In Tullamore, the Historical Society and Tullamore and District Rotary Club collaborated to develop a Historical Walking App including a 45-minute walking trail around several sites.
- In Lough Boora, in partnership with Bord Na Móna, a Bicycle Hire Company was established which can take online payments, bookings, queries etc. There is also an indoor access point in a Café at this location improving tourists experience at the site.
- Mid Ireland Adventure Centre (Banagher on the Shannon & Kinnitty) and Premier Cruise along with their customers have benefited from direct access to high speed broadband to download maps and charts.

7

- Chart Special Interest Group/ a volunteer organisation – are using access points to generate data and support tourism by developing underwater maps to assist navigation for boat users. Waterways Ireland and the RNLI are also using these navigation methods.

Transferring GPs

The majority of stakeholders (18/21) felt that that this GP could be rolled out within other area/counties with the remainder (3/21) stakeholders stating that they don't know if this is possible. Furthermore, just over half (10/18) felt that this GP/or parts of this GP could be used within their organisation in collaboration with others.

Could the GP presented by Offaly Coco be rolled out in other areas/counties?
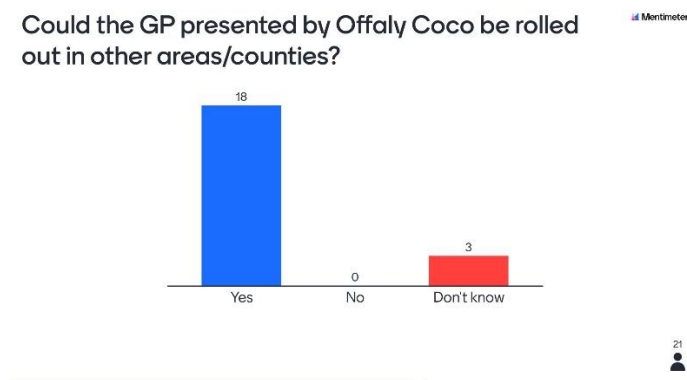
v. Grow Remote

Social enterprise Grow Remote has been operating on a voluntary basis since 2018, recently it received REDF (Regional Enterprise Development Fund) funding through Enterprise Ireland. Grow Remote supports companies, communities and individuals seeking remote work positions. They focus on full-time salaried jobs, that people can do anywhere and that are advertised as location-less or remote across a time-zone. Tracy Keogh, Co-Founder reported that although there are some remote specific job boards, on the job search engines that most people are familiar with such as Jobs.ie or Indeed.ie remote working is not visible (they don't have the functionality to list location-less jobs). Tracy highlighted the importance of understanding the language of remote work and ensuring that communities are remote ready. The challenge is to make remote work visible and accessible as rural communities may not know about the remote working options available. For example, if a person from Tullamore searches for a job by their location e.g. Tullamore/ Offaly it won't identify the remote working roles available as the mainstream job boards don't list location-less roles.

However, Remote Circle offers location-less jobs such as:

- Buffer social media scheduling tool- fully remote/no offices/ pay for co-working spaces/hubs
- Doist- productivity Apps (Glassdoor rate your employer, decipher between real jobs/scams
- Shopify – IDA landed company who employ one person in every county in Ireland
- E-bay- entry level jobs
- Wayfair- IDA landed company
- RemoteHub is a community of people and companies working remotely.

Tracy highlighted that there are remote employment opportunities for jobseekers who have historically worked in hospitality roles to move into some of these companies/ roles above (particularly relevant now with the hospitality sector paused due to Covid-19).Grow Remote try to bypass some of the challenges of remote working and the lack of a model for location-less work. Tracy highlights that in order to make remote working possible there is a need for:

1. Infrastructure -spaces, broadband, online connection platforms
2. The people -community leaders and advocates
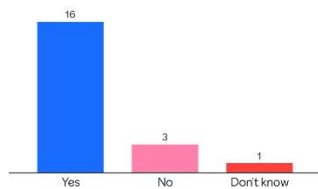3. Resources -education, tools to make this local or funding

One way to promote this work is by establishing Chapter Leads to create awareness within the community. Grow Remote use the Change X platform to connect remote jobs, remote workers and local communities. As a Chapter Lead you are asked to collaborate or partner with communities, groups, digital hubs etc who are doing work locally.

A recent study on remote working carried out by Whitaker Institute & Western Development Commission showed 83% people indicated that they would like to work remotely after the crisis is over. Furthermore, 51% would like to work from home and 36% would like to work a mix of from home/hub or work-sharing space and onsite. The top three advantages of working remotely cited were no traffic/commute, reduced costs of going to work and commuting and greater flexibility as to how to manage the working day (McCarthy et al, 2020)

Stakeholders were asked about the practice of remote working within their organisation. The majority of stakeholder organisations supported remote working (16/20) and stakeholders reported that there will be a shift in the numbers working remotely in the future (12/21).
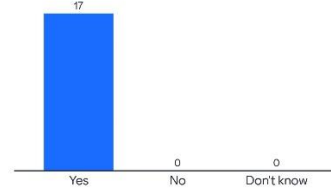
Stakeholders were then asked if there was a need for a 'Midlands Chapter' to support remote working with a unanimous majority (17/17) stating that there was a need for a Midlands Chapter and (15/19) respondents who answered this question felt that their organisation could support this work.

Regional Spatial & Economic Strategy (RSES)

RPO 6.6: Support local authorities to explore mechanisms for the emergence of a diversified sectoral mix in rural areas. This includes the identification of appropriate locations to drive regeneration of these rural towns and villages for example by the provision of serviced sites for housing and co-working/incubator space near Institutes of Technology to facilitate technological spill overs through greater connections and linkages. Page 134

RPO 6.9: The Regional Assembly supports the Regional Enterprise Plans to focus on - Develop a network of innovative co-working spaces in the region to mitigate long commuting times, promote remote working opportunities and life-style benefits.

RPO 6.31: Support enterprise development agencies and LEOs in their efforts to increase business innovation capacity, to create a distributed network of coworking hubs, to promote Ireland's Edge to strengthen linkages between Irish-owned enterprises and foreign owned enterprises, and to support existing Irish entrepreneurs and to attract overseas entrepreneurs.

Also, in the Midlands Region

-In parallel, Longford County Council are involved in a project as part of the LEADER/European Network for Rural Development to develop and start rural working hubs for telecommuters who are in need of working space. The aim is that working spaces are designed in such a way to endorse creating networks, change of ideas and forming social capital.

-The Midlands has established a Midlands Network of Co-working Facilities comprising of over 20 facilities, which can provide flexible working solutions, and is exploring opportunities to provide additional enterprise space in impacted bog communities as facilities become vacant.

Just Transition Report: increase the number of working hubs and innovation centres in the Midlands Network for Co-working Facilities, under Enterprise Ireland's "Empowering the Regions" plan for remote working hubs and innovation centres. #Worksmartchallenge supporting 10,000 co-working and incubation spaces in regional locations.

This is a potential GP that could be further developed in the Midlands (there are already Chapters in Tullamore and Mullingar). It focuses on a digital solution, mobilising and building the capacity of

people to enable this new type of employment; retaining people and capital in the Region building a community and ecosystem around remote working. Due to Covid-19 this input was extremely relevant and timely as all stakeholders in attendance were working remotely (for approximately three weeks).

Action 2: Create awareness about remote working options and supports within communities

- Establish a Midlands Chapter to 'help people to find employment and 'repopulate their community by targeting remote workers'
- Create awareness of technology, policies and a culture for remote working (24k commuters leaving the Midlands every day and their companies)
- Carry out remote working survey in the Midlands to provide a baseline for research
- Submit Grow Remote as an example of a Good Practice

vi. Augmented Reality & Virtual Reality Training

Athlone based company Mersus builds training on a virtual platform called 'Avatar Academy'. The company focus on the Life Sciences, MedTech and Bio pharmaceutical companies (160 companies in Ireland). Geoffrey Allen, CEO highlighted the massive opportunity for the animation sector for these industries and Mersus are promoting VR/AR among these large clusters of companies.

The entertainment-focused industry is well known, but Mersus is trying to re-focus that talent; (limited employment opportunities for animation graduates in the entertainment field) to move into an industrial focus industry. Many students want to do gaming animation but Mersus are giving students the opportunity to apply these animation skills to the industry sector.

Mersus provide Industrial focused animation which is a new sector and 85% of employees in the company are local people. Mersus also provide transition year and college students with work experience in the company. As the

company grows one of the biggest inhibitors is gaining a talented workforce. The VR/AR sector is the most sophisticated media technology made and Mersus has taken the gaming animation field and given it an industrial application. For large organisations such as Medtronic and Boston Scientific, Mersus are giving these companies the option to unify their training, language options and offer training remotely. There is lots of potential, but with new products, the skillsets are becoming more niche, as a result the company are working with colleges and have established a programme to develop talent for people who have an aptitude for this area. Global managing consulting agencies have linked Mersus with a University in Philadelphia who train for General Electric[5]. Geoffrey reported that Covid-19 will definitely accelerate the adoption of VR/VR technologies and has already seen an increase in requests. The broadband extension will provide further opportunity, as for the workforce Geoffrey notes that the Irish are flexible, innovative, good communicators and fast thinkers – the skills sought by global corporations.

Transferring GPs
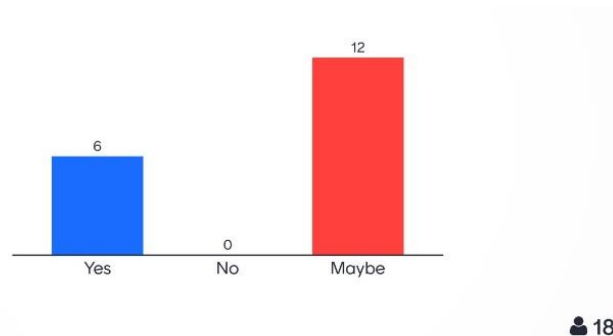
The majority of stakeholders (12/18) stated that this AR/VR technology could be used within their organisation and the remainder (6/18) stated that it could not be used within their organisation.

Exchanging Good Practice in the Future

INTERREG Europe projects are about exchanging knowledge, experiences and GPs so that local and regional governments can develop and deliver better policy. As part of this project a **'Teams Extranet for Stakeholders'** has been established by the Lead Partner for information sharing and communication i.e. online broadcasts and to facilitate horizontal discussions between regional and EU stakeholders. The majority (19/21) of stakeholders stated that they were interested in hearing more about GPs at EU level.

---

[5] General Electric Co. is a technology and financial services company. It operates through the following segments: Power, Renewable Energy, Aviation, Healthcare, and Capital.

Action 3 : Stakeholders will be added to this 'Teams Extranet for Stakeholders' so that they can hear more about GPs and engage with other Next2Met stakeholders/EU stakeholders.

Digitalisation in the Midlands

There is no clear definition of Digitalisation or soft digitalisation but one definition describes it as

"the application of digital technologies and infrastructures in business, economy, and society'.

(Tilson, Lyytinen, & Sorensen, 2010)

Digital Solutions or Tools

Stakeholders were asked about digital solutions or tools being used in their organisation. The majority of stakeholders reported using communications software (17/23) such as Microsoft Teams, Zoom, Skype etc. The Covid-19 lockdown of people globally has driven huge growth in the use of communication platforms like Zoom. Zoom reported a 2,000% surge in the user numbers in March 2020 compared to its best days in 2019[6]. This may be the reason a large number of stakeholders mentioned Communication/Collaboration tools.

Digital Solutions or Tools
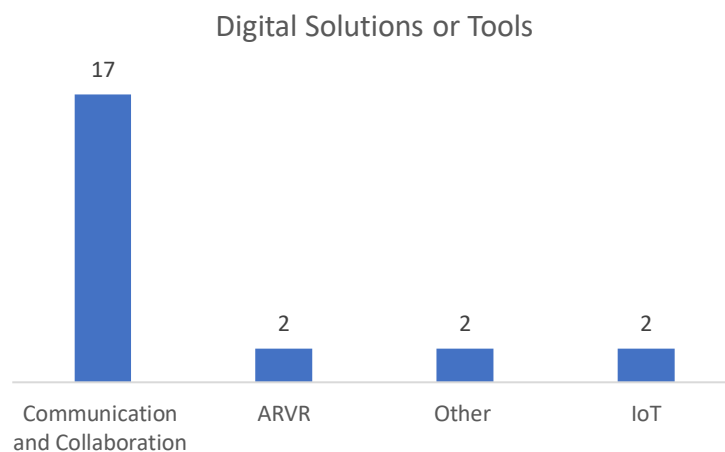
Other tools mentioned were Augmented Reality/Virtual Reality (AR/VR, 2/23) and the Internet of Things[7] (IoTs, 2/23). Verizon estimates that by 2025, organisations that have fully embraced IoT will be 10% more profitable than competitors that have not embraced this technology.[8]

---

[6] https://www.rte.ie/news/business/2020/0423/1134305-zoom-users-top-300-million/
[7] The Internet of Things (IoT) is a network of interconnected devices/ systems that can be remotely controlled over the Internet. e.g Smart Mobiles
[8]European Parliamentary Research Service) European Commission https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/news/internet-things-brochure September 2019

Figure 1 Stakeholder Responses from Mentimeter

Digitalisation Needs

The main needs reported by stakeholders were Digital Culture[9] & Awareness (6/21), Funding (6/21), Policy, Process and Strategy (6/21) and to a lesser extent digital infrastructure (3/21).

---
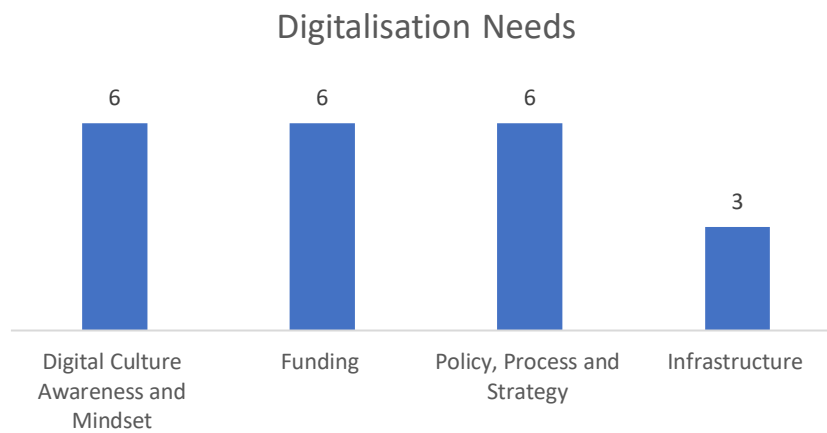
[9]Digital Culture is used here to reflect some of the needs that stakeholders described such as culture, attitudes and mindset.

Barriers to achieving digitalisation

The barriers reported by stakeholders include Digital competency/developed culture (17/21) Funding, Policy and Strategy (7/21) other (5/21) and (3/21) Digital infrastructure.

Barriers to achieving digitalisation
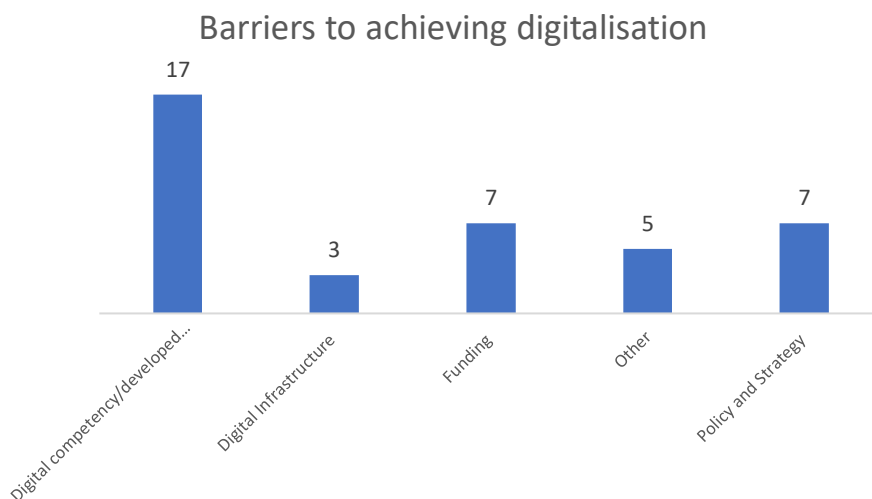
Overcoming Barriers towards Digitalisation

Stakeholder stated that these barriers could be overcome by collaboration, communication and information sharing (6/13), exchange of GPs (2/13) other methods (3/13) and policies to promote remote working.

Overcoming Barriers
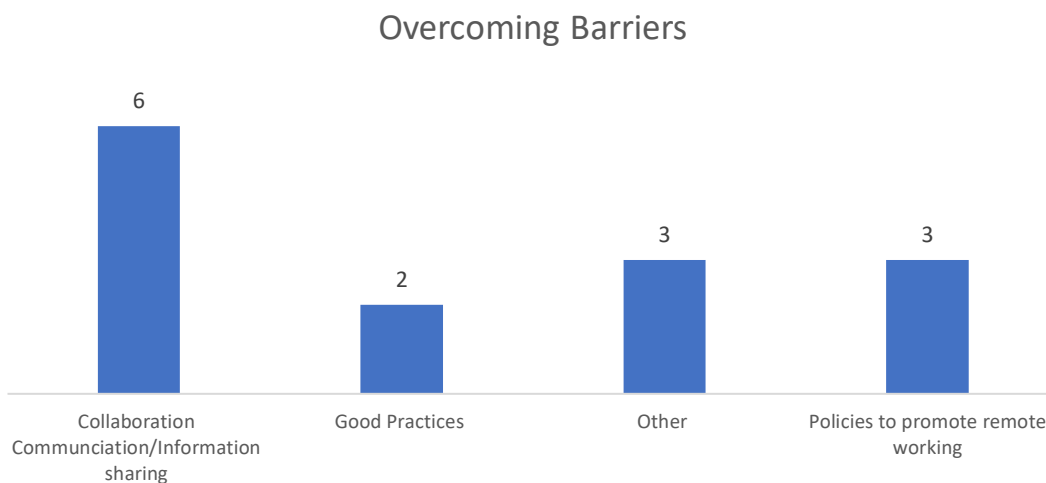
Conclusion

Building on the first stakeholder meeting, this online stakeholder event, tested the very essence of this project; using digitalisation measures to bring people together and facilitate cooperation. Hosting this meeting online was a new and innovative way for EMRA to engage with stakeholders. There was an amazing level of engagement despite remote working and the lack of rural broadband, meeting participants were able to successfully participate and interact during the meeting. The process and outcomes of this meeting highlight that the main barriers to digitalisation in the Midlands may not be infrastructure/broadband but more the challenges of gaining/retaining a talented workforce, creating awareness of remote working possibilities, as well as supporting and developing a culture of embracing digitalisation among SMEs and organisations. There is lots of potential for future work in this project, however stakeholders highlighted a need for more information sharing and improvements in linkages between stakeholders, including those with the private sector.

It is also clear that Covid-19 has fast forwarded the process of digitalisation leading individuals and organisations to find new solutions to current challenges and this has already been demonstrated by a significant capability for remote working and new opportunities for remote VR/AR training. This could provide economic opportunities for the Midlands with the potential to increase the number of people working, living and visiting the Midlands.

Initial actions

There was lots of engagement throughout the meeting and some stakeholders submitted requests for information, reports, and networked with each other through the Chat feature. After the meeting the following information was shared with stakeholders.

- Share the outputs of the Territorial Analysis and GPs with the people on the call.
- Share presentations with participants
- Share GP platform with participants
- Put Harri and Ken Whitelaw, IDA in direct contact
- Share Menti results with the group
- Share Tracy Keogh, Grow Remote details

Sharing experience of using online tools

As a result of hosting this stakeholder meeting online the EU Officer was invited by the Joint Secretariat of Interreg Europe to act as a panellist for a webinar on the 'Use of online tools in stakeholder meetings' (May 12, 2020). The webinar was attended by 440 people across Europe. This was a great opportunity to share the experience of EMRA and showcase the project.

Next Steps

Action 1. Follow up with relevant stakeholders in relation to these sets of exploratory talks.

Actions 2. Create awareness about remote working options and supports within communities:

- Establish a Midlands Chapter to 'help people to find employment and 'repopulate their community by targeting remote workers'
- Create awareness of the technology, policies and culture for remote working (24k commuters leaving the Midlands every day and their companies) via workshops/ Laois and Offaly ETB course
- Carry out remote working survey to provide a baseline of numbers remote working (Engage with Longford County Councils LEADER Rural Working Hubs Project)
- Submit Grow Remote as an example of a Good Practice.

Action 3. Stakeholders will be added to this 'Teams Extranet for Stakeholders' so that they can hear more about GPs and engage with other Next2Met stakeholders/EU stakeholders.

Action 4. Engage with the private sector in terms of digitalisation in the Midlands.

Action 5. Identification of further GPs in relation to Smart Specialisation.

References

McCarthy, A., Ahearne, A., Bohle Carbonell, K., Ó Síocháin, T. and Frost, D. (2020). Remote Working During COVID-19: Ireland's National Survey Initial Report. Galway, Ireland: NUI Galway Whitaker Institute & Western Development Commission

Tilson, D., Lyytinen, K. and Sorensen, C. (2010)—Digital Infrastructures: The Missing Is Research Agenda. Information Systems Research, 21, 748-759. https://doi.org/10.1287/isre.1100.0318