

# TAOBH TÍRE – A BETTER LIBRARY SERVICE FOR RURAL AREAS

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

October 2003

### **1. Introduction & Background to the Study**

- 1.1 This report has been prepared by the Research and Policy Centre, Donegal County Council, for the project management team of Taobh Tíre – A Better Library Service For Rural Areas. Taobh Tíre is an action-research based project, supported by An Chomhairle Leabharlanna.
- 1.2 In its Strategic Plan for Cultural Services 2001-2004, Donegal County Council committed itself [Action 16] to develop library provision strategies specially tailored to rural, coastal, and island communities, which will integrate library services as part of a package to sustain and enhance rural life, promote participation by communities in the wider society, and contribute to genuine self-sustaining development. In order to achieve this, Donegal County Council submitted an application for funding to An Chomhairle Leabharlanna/ The Library Council, to carry out essential research which could contribute in a very practical and meaningful way to realising this objective. This report presents the findings of that research.
- 1.3 The objectives of the research project were as follows:
  - to investigate existing provision for rural communities including mobile library services;
  - to investigate innovative service delivery methods for the isolated communities of County Donegal: islands, peninsulas, and villages/small towns;
  - to contribute to sustaining rural communities by entering into partnerships with local community development groups and other stakeholders; and
  - to integrate libraries and cultural services with social and economic initiatives.
- 1.4 A number of areas were targeted for inclusion in the research project. These were selected on the basis that there were no / limited library and information services provided in these rural areas at present. The target areas are shown in Map A.

- 1.5 In order to effectively achieve the objectives of the research project, two distinct phases of work were carried out as follows:

#### PHASE A – Desk Research

- to carry out desk research on existing provision for rural communities in Ireland and internationally; (An Chomhairle Leabharlanna were responsible for carrying out research outside of County Donegal)

#### PHASE B – Consultation

- to undertake extensive consultation with key stakeholders in the pilot areas to assess needs, and identify opportunities to develop the library service further.

- 1.6 On completion of both phases, issues and requirements which are specific to rural and isolated communities would be identified and also the extent to which local bodies can seek to co-ordinate programmes / activities / services at local level explored.

- 1.7 The author has attempted as far as possible to draw together the views of all those consulted within the study and present these in an objective and fair manner. We would like to acknowledge with thanks all those who contributed in any way to the publication of this report, and in particular members of the project management team.

## **2** **Current Context of Service Provision in County Donegal**

- 2.1 The Library Service comprises the Central Library, a mobile library service for part of the County, and 16 branch libraries.
- 2.2 Staffing levels have increased from 23 to 33 since 1995, while key staff at Assistant Librarian, Senior Library Assistant, and Branch Librarian grade have increased threefold.
- 2.3 The library has given special attention to two sectors in its expenditure on books – children’s stock and Donegal Studies. The Central Library as well as the smaller branch libraries, hold storytelling sessions and exhibitions aimed at children and encourage schools to partake in these events in their areas.
- 2.4 In 2001, Donegal County Council launched a strategic plan for Cultural Services *Saol agus Saoithiúlacht* that details proposals for further development of the library services.

2.5 Given the rural nature of Donegal and the sparsely populated community catchments, planning for service delivery must take into account a number of contextual aspects, which define social, cultural and economic aspects. These include:

- County Donegal is home to a significant Gaeltacht Population and has a number of inhabited islands off the west coast.
- Population settlements are relatively small, with only the largest centre of Letterkenny having a total recorded population in excess of 3,000 persons. Population density is much lower than national averages.
- Given the vastness of the county, accessibility and infrastructure are key issues. Many individuals own a car, which is a necessity in order to actively access services.
- County Donegal is also bordered by Northern Ireland, and in recent years there has been increased mobility across the border for commercial and educational services.
- The Haase Index of deprivation identifies Donegal as having pockets of extreme social deprivation. There are many socially excluded and marginalised groups living in Donegal, many of which are experiencing rural poverty and isolation.
- There has been a significant increase in recent years of adult returners to education, with many new programmes developed in the county to promote second chance educational and learning opportunities. A culture of learning is to be found in many rural areas across the county.
- There is a strong history of community development activity in County Donegal, with several well established community and voluntary groups and a strong infrastructure in many areas throughout the county.

### **3** **Description of the Target Areas**

3.1 Eight Target Areas were selected at random to participate in the research. The areas are as follows:

- Area 1                      South Donegal;
- Area 2                      South West Donegal;
- Area 3                      The Rosses;
- Area 4                      Aranmore Island;
- Area 5                      Tory Island;
- Area 6                      An Ghaeltacht Laír (Fintown, Cloghan, Glenfin);
- Area 7                      Rosguill;
- Area 8                      Fanad;
- Area 9                      East Donegal.

3.2 All areas are in rural and sparsely populated parts of County Donegal, where service provision is limited, and where there are no definite plans at this stage to further develop the Library services, to meet the needs of outlying community catchment areas.

3.3 Each target area was reviewed in relation to a broad socio economic profile and also discussion on the level of community development activity and supporting infrastructure. Key quotes from the various target areas are shown below.

### **3.3.1 Area 1 South Donegal**

- This area stretches southward from Donegal Town to smaller settlements including Laghey, Pettigo, and Ballyshannon. The area is bordered by the National Primary Route, N15, and is the gateway for access from South Donegal to others parts of the County.
- There has historically been a strong community spirit in these areas, with some key community development projects gaining greater strength in recent years, and also a strong self-help ethos is prevalent in the area.
- The area generally has good infrastructure, both roads and ICT access are good. There has also been a good experience of inter-agency work in this target area, and much cross-border activity to date.
- Community Infrastructure in this area is reasonably well established. There exists a lot of enthusiasm among the sector, and several community development projects are currently in existence in the local area.

### **3.3.2 Area 2 South West Donegal**

- This target area contains a number of smaller settlements stretching along the south west coast of Donegal, including Kilcar, Glencolmcille, Killybegs and Carrick, and northwards stretching towards Ardara and Glenties.
- A culture of learning also exists, with good community uptake of local education and training opportunities and also usage of libraries in the catchment area.
- Glencolmcille has a dispersed and elderly population, with many smallholders in the area. There exists a good community spirit. Tourism is a key sector in the Glencolmcille area. There are also several summer schools with many students returning in the summer months.
- Generally in the region, there are limited employment opportunities.

- There are several community development activities ongoing in this target area. There are also several parish councils active in many areas across the region (e.g. Ardara, Kilcar). There are many examples of village renewal also underway across the region (e.g. Ardara), which are assisting greatly in the physical renewal of the area.
- Overall, there is much activity in this area, with an established community infrastructure and IT resource.

### **3.3.3 Area 3 The Rosses**

- With the exception of Dungloe, the Rosses is located in the Clár Programme area, which reflects the declining population profile of this rural part of County Donegal.
- One of the main centres of population within the Rosses is Dungloe. With a population of 2,000, Dungloe has in recent years witnessed a steady influx of returning emigrants and much development in the town. The town services a very broad area, and more recently has been the focal point, with the opening of the new Public Services Centre.
- Gweedore in recent years has experienced a slight decline in housing needs, with the nature of housing requirements changing. There is a younger population in the area, and many prefer to live in the Dungloe area, where services exist. Gweedore is very sparsely populated, and accessibility is limited. Transport is a key deterrent in this area.

### **3.3.4 Area 4 and Area 5 Arranmore and Tory Islands**

- Arranmore Island is one of the inhabited islands, located off west Donegal. The island has a second level school, two national schools and a Naoinra. There are also two Co-operatives located on the Island, with a remit for promoting all aspects of development.
- The main economic industry is fishing, particularly shell-fishing.
- There exists a Rural Transport Initiative on the island, supported by MFG, and road infrastructure is improving all the time.
- In the mid – 1970s, Tory experienced a huge decline in population, 10 families left the island and the population fell to 100 persons. Subsequent to this, some artists raised the profile of the island, and brought it into the public domain. The population has now increased to 133 persons. With the

improvements in the Ferry service, there is an increasing population, with many returning emigrants. Tory is located 14 miles off the mainland. There are also proposals at present to develop the airstrip further in Tory island. The island needs to find a vehicle to further strengthen linkages with the mainland and other islands. There exists untapped tourism potential on the island.

- The second level schools in both Arranmore and Tory are established in local community facilities. Both have good suites of IT infrastructure, and they are becoming satellites for educational usage, supported by Donegal VEC.
- Both islands have a remoteness factor, given their location on the periphery of the north west coast of Donegal. Accessibility remains an issue, but there have been some improvements in recent years to infrastructure.

### **3.3.5 Area 6 An Ghaeltacht Láir**

- An Ghaeltacht Láir is a sparsely populated area, with a number of centres including Glenfin, Cloghan and Fintown. It is centrally located in County Donegal, and many areas are easily accessible to the nearest centres of Ballybofey and Letterkenny. The area has c. 300 families who are very dispersed across the region, most settling in the west.
- Fintown is a strong Gaeltacht area, yet there are few cultural projects established in the area, however music is very strong.
- Glenties provides the main focal point for services in the locality.
- The Glenfin area is traditionally a farming area, with some smaller businesses operating locally (e.g. sawmills, engineering).
- Physically, the River Finn divides the area. Cloghan and Brockagh are nucleus points in this rural area. Community spirit is also very strong in these areas.
- There are several community based facilities in this area. Coiste Éigse Sheáin Bháin is located in Fintown and is a group with a collection of First Edition limited books (€30,000). This group hope to secure a building locally.

### **3.3.6 Area 7 Rosguill**

- This target area stretches upwards in the north of the County, and contains the key centres of Dunfanaghy, Creeslough, Port na Blagh and Falcarragh. These areas all have their own unique socio-economic and demographic

profiles. The areas are all primarily serviced by Milford for educational and commercial services.

- Tourism is a key economic contributor in the Dunfanaghy area. The area has a strong tourism infrastructure, however the area has experienced a changing profile in recent years, with a greater emphasis now being placed on supporting community development.
- Falcarragh is perceived as a much more vibrant area for development.
- Creeslough has a strong agricultural profile, and is predominantly a small village community.
- Infrastructure is not well developed in this area. There are some well established groups. Meitheal Mhíobhaigh (CDP project) is a good example of a community resource in the local area.

### **3.3.7 Area 8 Fanad Pensinsula**

- The Fanad Peninsula is a very dispersed area, which is predominantly farming based, and which has a relatively older population. The biggest employer in the area is Fanad Fisheries, and most of the economic spend is concentrated in Milford, which also provides the two main local second level schools (Mulroy College, Loreto).
- Fanad is also included in the Clár programme area, which highlights the levels of depopulation which is continuing locally.
- The area has no definite nucleus / focal point and accessibility is limited, particularly in relation to roads infrastructure. The area has traditionally had a strong sense of identity within the local population.
- IRD Milford is a key development organisation in this area, but currently has no office space. The new Public Service Centre is a key asset in the area, housing the Milford Library and also providing independent information through the CIC (Citizens Information Centre).

### **3.3.8 Area 9 East Donegal**

- Key centres within this target area include Manorcunningham, Newtowncunningham, Raphoe, and St. Johnston/Carrigart. Located along the border with Northern Ireland, services in smaller catchments are limited, and one of the biggest problems at present is unemployment. Mobility typically within the area has been very strong. There are many areas which

are cross-community in nature, with several funded projects promoting reconciliation and cross-border development strategies. There exists a large farming community also within this target area.

- Community Infrastructure in this area has developed to a good standard, with an excellent Resource Centre located in St. Johnston.
- Manorcunningham has also established a Resource Centre, with an IT suite (supported by the Cáit initiative).
- Raphoe also has a community centre and a very active local committee.

#### **4 Existing Models of Service Delivery**

4.1 A number of good models of service delivery, which have primarily focused on developing inter-agency responses to needs, were identified within the consultation exercise. These include:

- Earagail Arts Festival
- Oideas Gael – Cultural Centre
- Malinbeg – Integrated response to rural needs
- Tír Hugh Resource Centre – Ballyshannon
- Ionad Lae, Day Care Centre
- Forbairt na Rosann, Dungloe
- REACH Project, Donegal County Council
- Citizens Information Centres, Public Services Centres, Donegal County Council (providing independent advice and information on public services)
- Arranmore Co-op (supported by Udaras na Gaeltachta)
- Tory Island – developments
- Mevagh Resource Centre
- Fanad Day Care Centre
- Dunfanaghy Family Resource Group
- Wainfest Festival

4.2 Ingredients which led to the success of many of these initiatives included:

- Strong management committee and local leaders
- Inter-agency / partnership involvement
- Good community infrastructure
- Resourcing / staffing
- Nucleus / focal point for development
- External funding supplementing activities
- Good community links

- Partnerships established with other groups (e.g. historical society, women's groups)
- Independence of initiative
- Broad multi-focus
- Community support and participation
- Taking services out to areas and providing a local point of contact
- Access to information on other services - signposting

4.3 Consultees were invited to suggest potential models of service delivery which could be developed to delivery library and information services in an effective manner in rural areas. Many of the proposed models represent inter-agency responses to needs, emphasising the need for involvement of all sectors – Local Authority, Local Development Companies, Statutory bodies, Community & Voluntary sector, cross-border bodies, and the general community.

#### **4.3.1 Extension and Retention of Mobile Library Service**

- This would involve further development of the Mobile Library Service into rural areas. Particular areas needing attention include staffing, stock, linkages to central databases, and visiting times.

#### **4.3.2 Provision of Information points in outlying schools**

- It was generally felt that linkages between schools and the library service should be further promoted and developed.

#### **4.3.3 Development of inter-agency responses to tackling target group needs through Partnership**

- Based on the vast array of target groups identified in the needs section above, it was felt that there are numerous partnership opportunities which should be explored to reach them:
  - Linkages with Day care centres, hospitals, Irish Wheelchair Association, Health centres
  - Rural Transport Initiatives
  - Linkages with Youth Centres
  - Entering into a partnership with the new CICs (Citizens Information Centres) based in the Public Services Centres of Donegal County Council.
  - Linkages with Naoinraí and summer schemes
  - Linkages with the DSFA, whose primary target group includes lone parents and the unemployed.
  - Partnerships with schools

#### **4.3.4 Community based responses to needs**

- Community Infrastructure has developed considerably in recent years in many rural areas of County Donegal, resulting in an increase in the proliferation of PCs and a substantial number of Community Development Projects (CDPs) and Family Resource Centres (FRCs) in the county. Many have an established base which could provide opportunities for a community run facility in outlying areas.
- There also exist many new Cultural and Arts initiatives which are developing in many areas of the county, and which have substantial potential to work more closely with the Library Services

#### **4.3.5 Use of ICT (Information and Communications Technologies)**

- While the role of ICT is recognised, there are many factors which limit the potential capabilities of IT in a rural setting including: existing telecommunications infrastructure is weak; many age-cohorts have limited knowledge and know-how of ICT applications; on-site facilitation and support would also be required; it is unclear how widespread the proliferation of PCs has been in County Donegal as a whole. Given this, there were some potential models highlighted which would take advantage of ICT responses:
  - Links with Public Service Centres, Donegal County Council through the FAS Information Kiosks.
  - Linkages with rural post offices
  - Partnerships with educational bodies

#### **4.3.6 Cross-Border projects**

- Given the proximity of many of the target areas selected to Northern Ireland, the advantages of promoting more cross-border projects was highlighted. One possible model is to establish a cross border mobile library service.

### **5 Needs of Isolated communities for Library / Information Services**

- 5.1 One of the core objectives of the research project was to explore the needs of isolated communities for library and information services and to investigate the potential to pilot new models of service delivery to meet these needs.

5.2 In all of the target areas, a genuine level of interest in the role played by the Library service in a rural area was evident. All target areas expressed a desire to have increased services made available in their local area.

5.3 It was felt that library and information services had tremendous potential for further development of services for all users, and that rural communities are not well catered for at present. This would mean moving away from the traditional ideology that libraries are only about books and providing other services, for example, Storytelling, poetry reading, audio-visuals, multi-media, modern authors, special needs (e.g. literacy books), music, recordings, games / puzzles, Irish Plays. It was also suggested that particular interest areas should be more widely available to rural areas:

- Archives (including local photographs of historical interest)
- Local History
- School curriculum resources (including audio-visual)

5.4 It was also felt that some investment in targeted programmes to support the needs of different age-cohorts and non-users should be made.

- Children
- 12-17 age – cohort
- Early School Leavers
- local parents
- involvement from schools
- Community groups
- Adult literacy programmes
- Older people
- Asylum seekers and refugees
- Third level students
- House – bound
- Remedial teachers

The functions of the branch library service are not well known among rural communities. There is a lack of publicity in local libraries of services offered.

5.5 It was also felt, that there was an absence of new publications in the branch libraries at local level, and many schools expressed dissatisfaction with the variety of children's stock available.

- 5.6 Many also felt that the Library and Information Service has a key role to play in the preservation of the Irish language.
- 5.7 The retention of the mobile library service is considered critical in ensuring that those living in isolated areas can continue to access services.

## **6 Overall Conclusions**

6.1 The purpose of this report has been to synthesise the key needs of isolated communities for library and information services, and also to suggest models of service delivery which could potentially be utilised to deliver services in a more effective and targeted manner. It is clear that there is a significant level of interest among all constituent groups in seeing the library service develop into a service which is more accessible in outlying areas, and which also seeks to address the needs of particular target groups (including older people, young people, community groups, businesses etc.). The effective implementation of a number of pilot models in rural areas should move forward to a great extent in helping to meet these needs.

6.2 Based on the findings of the research the following recommendations are made:

- Effective consultation mechanisms must be developed to further gauge the level of interest from the community and voluntary sector in participating in an inter-agency pilot community run library facility. Key issues include firstly capacity to manage and sustain the operation of the project, and secondly, community infrastructure.
- More indepth research is needed to assess how non-users could be encouraged to make better use of all the facilities available currently through the Library service.
- Further investment is needed in order to ensure that existing libraries are continuing to respond to user needs, in terms of stock of books and suitability of premises (e.g. disability access).
- Linkages between social inclusion and tackling the rural isolation from services experienced by many target groups should be explored in greater depth. The library service can provide an important focal point for community networking and social contact in rural areas.
- Many associations have been made throughout the consultation process concerning the linkages between the library service and education / lifelong learning. Again, there are numerous potential models of inter-agency responses proposed for consideration in the report (e.g. VEC, Schools, summer schemes etc.)
- A policy for the provision of services in rural areas is needed, outlining how future development planning will take account of rural needs.

- The financial implications of further investing in the delivery of rural services need to be explored. It has not been within the scope of this study to carry out a cost-benefit analysis.
- The Mobile Library Service is seen as having an important role to play in serving isolated communities. An evaluation of the effectiveness of the service to date should be undertaken to ensure that the service is continuing to address needs.
- Marketing of Library services has been criticised by many consultees. The Library service should invest in further promoting the work which is being undertaken and the range of services provided.
- Investment in ongoing research and community profiling of target areas served is critical to ensuring that strategies remain relevant and targeted in response to needs.
- Consideration should be given to providing specialised services in some branch libraries based on the age cohorts and attitudes of local users. Particular interest areas should be more widely available to branch libraries (e.g. archives, local history, local authors etc.)
- While there is a network of branch libraries in the County, linkages to the central library are weak. Mechanisms should be put in place to allow these to be strengthened and more formalised.
- The range of services which a Library and Information service provides should be examined further and should in some way reflect the demographic profile of a local area (e.g. high concentrations of elderly, strong cultural identity, youth). Some recommendations are made in the report as to additional services which could be introduced (e.g. storytelling, poetry reading, audio - visuals etc.).
- Anecdotal evidence would suggest that the ICT services of the Libraries at present (e.g. Public Internet Access) are not fully utilised. Further research is needed to examine how ICT could be better utilised and promoted in a library setting.