

# 200 Volunteers Attend Offaly PPN Information Evening

**TULLAMORE'S** Bridge House Hotel was buzzing last Tuesday evening when close on 200 committed people representing the various community and voluntary groups in the county met for the first county meeting of Offaly Public Participation Network.

The topics for the evening ranged from energy efficiencies in the community, community finance options, BHP Insurance Scheme for the Community and Voluntary Sector, Rural Development Programme funding for Offaly, updates from Chief Executive of Offaly County Council, Rural transport services in Offaly and updates on the Charities Regulatory Authority. All the speakers on the evening were selected based on feedback to the PPN and Offaly County Council Local Economic and Community Plan from community consultations that took place earlier this year.

The event was chaired by the familiar and impartial voice of Ann Marie Kelly from Midlands 103 who kept the questions and answers session lively and informative for all who engaged in the evening.

Ruth Buggie, the Programme Manager of the Sustainable Energy Communities Programme with SEAI. Ruth explained that A Sustainable Energy Community (SEC) is a community in which everyone works together to develop a sustainable energy system.

The main purpose of Ruth coming to Offaly was to inform community groups about participating in the Sustainable Energy Community Programme. SEAI will sign three year partnership agreements to support communities develop sustainable energy communities. SEAI will also provide technical and financial supports to communities. This call for new communities to work with SEAI will commence soon. Nationally there is ?14 million available for communities for sustainable energy projects

Donal Traynor from Community Finance Ireland gave a lively presentation on what's involved for groups to apply for loans and what are the important things to consider when seeking loans. There was plenty of interest in some of the projects that Donal cited as examples of social enterprise nationally from a Community Hotel and Community Cost Cutter shop in Monaghan to a large scale upgrade of a 150 year old community hall in Carndonagh.

From the reaction in the audience it would suggest that many Offaly attendees went away with new ideas for social enterprises in the future. Loans available from €30,000 to €500,000 on a interest reducing balance, monthly repayments. Micro financing not available, small loans under €30,000 are not generally given.

The third speaker was Alan Mc Greevey

2014 to establish a Register of Charities in Ireland, Increase trust and confidence in the charities sector, Ensure accountability to donors, beneficiaries and the public and Providing guidance and support to charities / Assisting trustees in their obligations and duties with compliance. T

he general reaction from the audience was that this was a positive step in light of the lack of public confidence nationally in the charities sector and an opportunity for your charity to demonstrate that your charity is transparent, accountable and operates to a high standard of administration and governance. It was certainly clear from Alan's presentation that the newly formed Charities Regulatory Authority are working in a supporting role to all groups.

BHP Insurance was available on the night to provide information on the Insurance packages they can offer community groups at reasonable rates to PPN members.

Declan Kirrane Chief Executive from Offaly County Council updated the groups on OCC plans to work with the community sector particularly in the areas of rural tourism promotion and products, development of the Greenways in Offaly, alternative housing options with a voluntary housing association/co-operative and the opportunities for employment in the alternative energy sector. He acknowledged the outstanding work that is done by the community and voluntary people in Offaly from Community alert groups to Tidy Towns groups, groups caring for the elderly, promoting our young people and social services across all age groups. He encouraged groups to continue their efforts as the return on their efforts and investment far outweigh anything the agencies can deliver at a local level and welcomes ideas and opportunities from groups to further develop their areas physically and socially.

Brendan O'Loughlin Offaly Local Development Company gave a very clear explanation of the new Rural Development Programme Funding for Offaly. Offaly has been awarded €8,036,763.90 million in the new Rural Development Programme LEADER elements .

The final speaker on the evening was Frances Byrne from Laois TRIP. Laois TRIP are the rural transport provider for Laois and Offaly who Co-ordinate and promote integrated public transport within Laois and Offaly, provide services that are sub-contracted to private operators and Accessibility and social inclusion are one of the primary focuses . Frances sent out a helpful message for all who attended that if you are part of a group or live in an area where you feel your transport needs are not being met to Contact the Laois TRIP office and they can look at your area, iden-