For the grá: what regions that came back taught me about regeneration under constraint

Grá (Gaeilge): love.

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2026 Churchill Fellowship (year of travel: 2026)

Date submitted: November 2026

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Acknowledgements

The views in this report are my own. They are not those of the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust, SWIFT or any other organisation.

My Churchill Fellowship is awarded by the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust, and I'm very grateful for this opportunity. My thanks to the Trust's trustees and staff, and to the Department of Internal Affairs, which administers the Fellowship.

To make this Fellowship possible, I asked my board at the South Waikato Investment Fund Trust (SWIFT) to endorse it.

James, our board chair, and my team, Shannon and Kiani, brought forward three months of work so that I could travel.

In the Basque Country, Urko Aiartza Azurtza built my itinerary. In Ireland, Robert Nicholson unlocked many doors and gave much of his own time; Lorraine Hogan and her team at Cork County Council hosted me for a full day evidencing community impact. In Germany, Sebastian Schlecht gave me more than I could have hoped for. I am in their debt.

John Elkington gave me invaluable advice, and Professor Brad Jackson offered his mentoring for the Fellowship.

Everyone who gave me their time, their projects and their honesty is listed in Appendix B, with my utter thanks.

Friends and family held on to me through this life-changing experience.

For Florence and Margot: I hope this somehow expands your horizons.

To Laura: thank you, for everything.

Executive summary

Late on a September evening, Sebastian Schlecht and I stood outside the KoFabrik in Bochum. It was shut. We had been going since lunchtime: around Zollverein, through the villages the old colliery turned its back on, up a spoil heap at dusk and across three cities. He told me the Montag Stiftung's model, used at the KoFabrik, might be the most important one he could show me: a foundation takes an old building, partnering with the owner (here the city of Bochum), pays for its conversion and carries the running costs until the rents cover them. Then we tried to work out where might still be open for dinner before I caught the last train back to my hotel.

I went on my Fellowship looking for places that had lost the thing they were built around and were on the comeback. Over five weeks in 2026 I visited the Basque Country, rural Ireland and Germany's Ruhr, and met more than 40 people doing that work. I come from South Waikato, a district of about 25,000 people that lost hundreds of jobs in 2025, and I went with a simple hunch: surely someone has done this before.

No place I saw replaced what it lost like for like. The places that were regenerating had got ready, sometimes for ten or twenty years, and then backed the winner when one showed up. The Ruhr started building universities in the 1960s, decades before its last mine closed in 2018. In Sligo I was sent home to look up clustering, and the story was the same: farming, then toolmaking, then precision manufacturing, then a medtech cluster the college grew alongside.

Almost everywhere, it came down to the same few things. There were five or six people who kept showing up for the love of it: for the grá. There was serious money, with a standard behind it. The best plans settled who would run a thing, and who would pay to keep it going, before the ribbon was cut. And it took time, longer than any 3, 5 or 7 year funding cycle.

Most of it worked with what was already there: the skills people had from the jobs they lost, the buildings nobody wanted, and the landscape itself.

Almost none of it could be proven to work, and I say so in the report. None of it is a model I can copy. What travels are the habits underneath.

So this report asks more questions than it answers. Each chapter opens with the question I have brought home for South Waikato, and this report concludes with three more questions to ask before starting something:

1. Who are the five or six people on board who will make this work, and who isn't represented?
2. Who owns it, who maintains it, and who pays for it beyond year seven?
3. How will this persist regardless of the money?

The greatest opportunity I see at home is getting the right people, from funders, community organisations, councils, central government, employers and educators, on the same page, with the same vision, behind a plan built to last at least twenty years.

Introduction

Why this matters

New Zealand has towns that have lost the thing they were built around. In 2014 the economist Shamubeel Eaqub gave them a blunt name, "zombie towns", and warned that many would find themselves "on a knife edge" (RNZ, 2014). This report is being submitted at a time when Eaqub is fronting an RNZ podcast and video series, *Zombie Towns: Everything I Missed*, in which he goes back to Balclutha and Tokoroa a decade on (RNZ, 2026). The district I work in is one of these places.

I work in a community-owned trust in South Waikato, a district of about 25,000 people (Stats NZ, n.d.-a). Its main town, Tokoroa, was built around a pulp and paper mill. For a time it was the fastest-growing town in the country, peaking at more than 19,000 people, with over 5,000 working at the mill (Hurd & Dyer, 2025). Today Tokoroa has about 14,000 people (Stats NZ, n.d.-b). In 2025 the district lost around 230 jobs when a paper machine at the mill shut for good (Oji Fibre Solutions, 2025), and up to 119 more when the plywood plant in Tokoroa closed (RNZ, 2025). That is the kind of decline Eaqub was putting a name to, and it is what I was responding to when I applied for my Churchill Fellowship.

My hunch was that we aren't the first to experience this sort of decline. New Zealand is a young country. Surely this has been done, somewhere, before.

What I set out to learn

When my Fellowship was announced I said publicly that I believed local communities know what to do. They hold the knowledge and the connections, they care, and they are determined. My application asked how post-industrial regions had regenerated under constraint, and promised to look at three themes:

1. infrastructure investment;
2. workforce reinvention; and
3. the circular economy.

Before I left I shaped that into these questions. How has regeneration been achieved? What combinations of leadership, investment, governance and community action? What sequence, with what trade-offs, and what has and has not lasted?

The question I was sent to answer

My Fellowship is supported by my board at the South Waikato Investment Fund Trust (SWIFT). So this report answers to the Fellowship reporting guidelines, which shape it, and to my SWIFT trustees, whose central question was: does regeneration come from picking winners, or from creating the conditions and letting places come forward? This report also addresses a question that a small town may ask when its big employer goes: what will replace it?

How I went about it

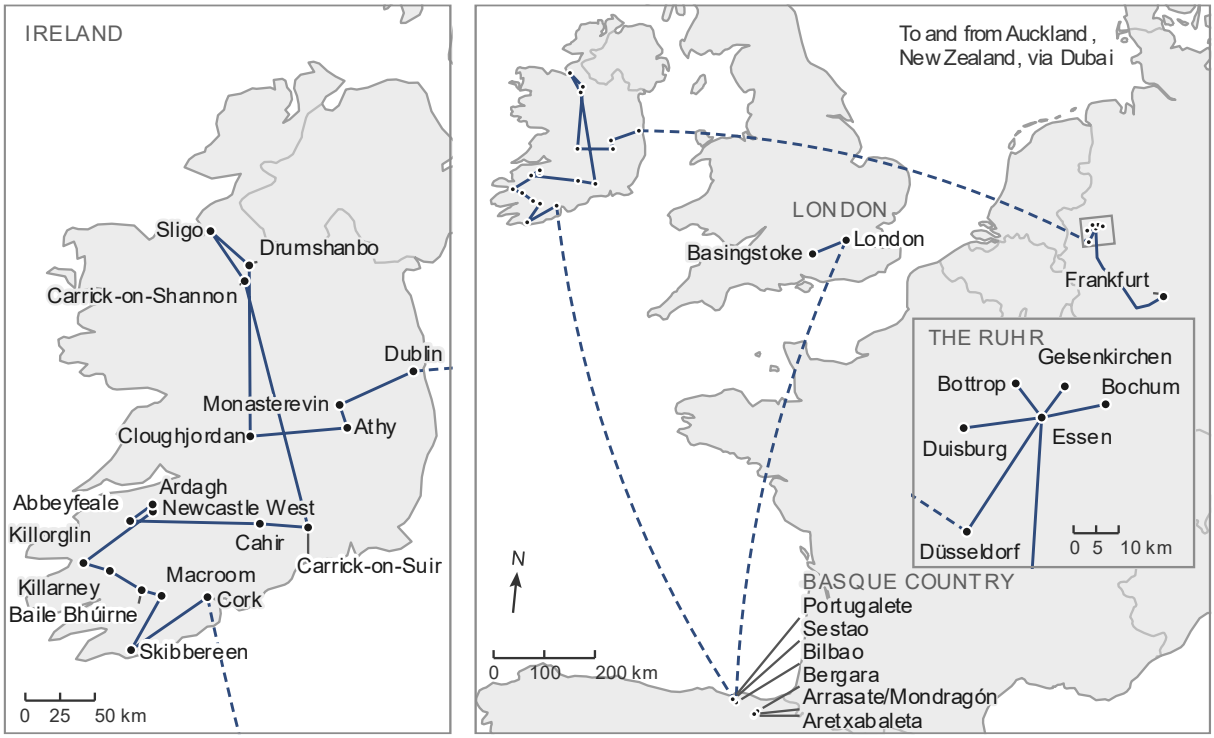
I travelled for five weeks, from 28 August to 2 October 2026. I started in London, where I had sought out John Elkington, a 1981 UK Churchill Fellow and now an ambassador for the UK Churchill Fellowship. John coined the phrase "triple bottom line" in 1994. In 2018 he did something rare and announced a "recall" of it (Elkington, 2018). He met me at the Royal Society of Arts and sent me off with confidence, suggestions, a hug and an instruction: "Go where the fellowship takes you". I took him at his word.

From there I spent a week in the Basque Country, nearly two weeks in rural Ireland and a week in Germany's Ruhr. I emailed people in the places I was going and asked to meet them at the projects I wanted to see. I walked and rode the places themselves to experience them as

much as possible. I said yes to the leads that turned up on the day, prepared briefing notes for meetings, scribbled on my iPad furiously during meetings, kept a daily journal and transcribed video calls. Photographs from the trip are in Appendix F. When I got home I checked the figures I had recalled against published sources. Where they differed, this report uses the published figure and says whose account the other one was – the discrepancies are mine.

Figure 1

Route of the Fellowship, 28 August – 2 October 2026



Note. Route compiled from the author's itinerary and travel bookings. Flights are shown as dashed lines and ground travel as solid lines. Ground legs are drawn as straight lines between places, except the Rhine rail journey, which is shown schematically. Base map: Natural Earth 1:50m Cultural Vectors (public domain), via the world-atlas TopoJSON package.

Table 1

Where I Went: Size, and What Each Place Lost

Place	People (year)	What it lost, and when
Region: Basque Autonomous Community	2.22 million (2025)	Heavy industry: industrial restructuring cost 157,000 jobs between 1977 and 1996, and unemployment reached 24% by late 1985
Bilbao	347,000 (2025)	Euskalduna shipyard (1988); the Altos Hornos de Vizcaya steelworks next door (last furnace out 1995, company closed 1996)
Bergara	14,700 (2025)	Its railways (1967–71) and its cotton mill (2010). Its steelworks still run
Arrasate/Mondragón	22,300 (2025)	Fagor Electrodomésticos, bankrupt in 2013
Region: Rural Ireland	Ireland total 5.53 million (2026 estimate), with 1.8 million people living in rural Ireland (2022 census)	The Celtic Tiger boom (unemployment rose from about 5% in 2007 to 15.9% in 2012) and its peat industry (peat-fired power stations closing from 2020; harvesting formally ended in 2021)
Skibbereen	2,903 (2022)	Regenerating its town centre (RRDF €1.86 million, 2024)
Cahir	3,679 (2022)	Regenerating its town centre: RRDF €0.63 million to plan (2020), then €11.9 million to build (2022)
Abbeyfeale	2,206 (2022)	RRDF money to plan a Limerick Greenway hub, shared with Ardagh (€0.6 million, 2022)
Carrick-on-Shannon	4,743 (2022)	MBNA call centre (closure announced 2014)
Sligo	20,608 (2022)	A pharmaceutical plant (closure announced 2018)
Drumshanbo	1,240 (2022)	Arigna mines (1990), Arigna power station (1993), its jam factory (1990s)
Cloughjordan	701 (2022)	Before the ecovillage, a village of about 500 people in decline
Athy	11,035 (2022)	Coca-Cola concentrate plant (closure announced 2018, phased out 2019)
Region: The Ruhr (RVR area)	5.13 million (2024)	Hard coal (last mine closed 2018)
Essen	575,000 (2024)	Zollverein colliery (1986) and coking plant (1993)
Gelsenkirchen	268,000 (2024)	Its last coal mine (2008)
Bochum	359,000 (2024)	Nokia (2008); Opel (2014)
Duisburg	502,000 (2024)	Meiderich ironworks (1985). Steel is still made in the city
For comparison: South Waikato District	25,044 (2023)	A paper machine and a plywood plant (2025)

Note. The table covers the places that appear in the chapters. A full travel log is in Appendix A, and the sources for this table are in Appendix D.

The three regions faced different constraints, and that framed some of what follows. The Basque Country has real fiscal power but is not a state. Ireland has money and a strong centre, but too few people to do the work. The Ruhr has state money and a long memory, and a landscape that will need looking after forever.

Table 2

The Constraint Each Region Faced, and What It Was Not Short of

	Basque Country	**Ireland**	**Ruhr**
Main constraint I saw	Power without a state: wide fiscal powers, but Spain still decides a great deal	People: too few engineers in an economy close to full employment, and about 90% of local capital spending comes from central government (OECD, 2026)	Scale and legacy: a region split across many councils, carrying the long costs of coal
What it was not short of	A government that does things	Cash, and community engagement	State money

I went trying to find examples of things that had worked, replicable success, things I could bring home. What I often found were people very willing to share the shortcomings or failings they experienced. In response to this I started asking: "What's one thing I should take home?" These are captured as the ideas I was given, in Chapters 2, 4, 5 and 7, and in Appendix C.

The report is built around what I found rather than where I went. Chapters 1 to 7 each make one claim and use the three regions as evidence for it.

Limits

I chose where to go. I travelled to see what worked, and to try to draw out common themes across dozens of contexts – which is useful for learning what is possible and not for proving what causes what. These are illustrative cases.

The Churchill Fellowship has a non-academic focus. It seeks community and industry benefit: the primary goal is to let recipients explore global best practices, gain practical expertise and bring back actionable knowledge or networks to benefit New Zealand (Community Matters, n.d.). This report is not a supervised academic paper. I also bring my own context and biases. I am very curious, and I am optimistic. I work in a community-owned trust, and these influences colour what I saw.

Most of the projects I visited have not been independently evaluated, and some are still being built. Any one of them could warrant further study, and that may well be a future avenue for me. My application said these regions had "successfully regenerated". Having been, I would say parts of them are regenerating, at different speeds, and none of them would call it finished.

Much of the Basque leg happened in Basque and Spanish, translated for me on the spot. In Germany I am grateful for my time with people for whom English is a second, third or fourth language. In both places, some nuance will have been lost. And I did not find the circular economy I promised to look for, at least not where I expected it. The nearest thing was reuse: old buildings and materials given a second life, in Chapters 2 and 3.

For both the Fellowship travel and this report, I have tried my absolute best to honour the investment in me by everyone who made it possible for me to undertake this trip. I present here what I saw.

Key learnings

1. I didn't find a replacement. I found places that got ready.

How might we prove that we are preparing for a winner we haven't met yet?

Fergal McPartland met me on site at the Food Hub in Drumshanbo. In the 1990s the town lost its jam factory, a coal mine and a coal-fired power station, with 450 jobs lost over 15 years (The Food Hub, n.d.).

No new employer arrived to replace them. Fergal told me they had tried that before. In the 1980s the government brought in multinationals on grants, each with around 100 jobs. When the grants were weaned off, they wound up. The Drumshanbo jam factory of that era lasted about ten years. The community remembers this, and they want family-owned businesses now.

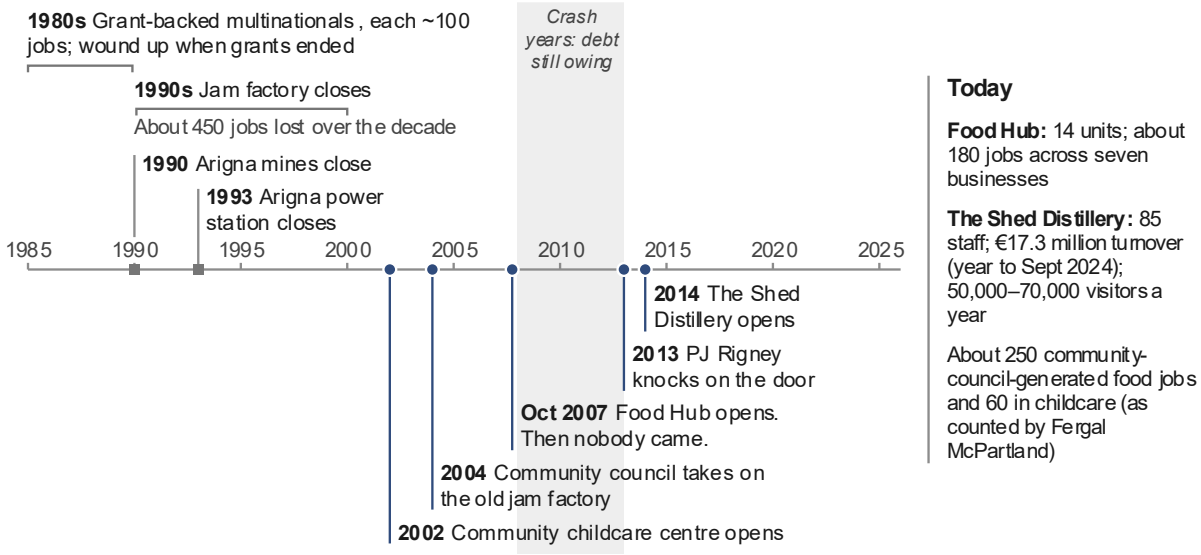
What has happened instead has been slower. Six to eight people who cared put themselves together in a community council, an unelected, volunteer group, and started years of tireless, exhausting work to create the conditions for success. In 2004 the community council took on the old jam factory, and in October 2007 it opened as the Food Hub: a block of food production units, 14 of them today (Interreg Europe, 2025), a big opening, and then nobody came (Leitrim Guardian, 2018). Not a tenant, not a penny of cash flow. Over the years they had 77 real conversations with possible tenants, and seven of them signed.

Then in 2013 PJ Rigney knocked on the door wanting to open a distillery. He promised 80 to 100 jobs and 25,000 visitors a year. The community council interrogated the idea, it looked real, and the county council fast-tracked the licences. The Shed Distillery opened in 2014. In the year to September 2024 it turned over €17.3 million and employed 85 people (RTÉ, 2025). It receives between 50,000 and 70,000 visitors a year (Shannonside, 2025). Around it, the Food Hub now has about 180 jobs across the seven businesses based there (McDonagh,

2024). They include a ready-meals business, a potato-pancake maker and the rest, none of which anyone could have planned for. Chef in a Box, which outgrew one of the original units, employs 54 people and makes around 40,000 meals a week (Bibby Financial Services Ireland, 2026).

Figure 2

Drumshanbo, From Closures to The Food Hub, 1985–2026



Note. Compiled from The Food Hub (n.d.), Interreg Europe (2025), Leitrim Guardian (2018), RTÉ (2025), Shannonside (2025), McDonagh (2024) and the author's interview with Fergal McPartland, 16 September 2026. Job counts for today are approximate.

I can't say that the groundwork of the community council brought the distillery. I can say that when it arrived, they were ready for it. If it had knocked in 1995, I don't think they would have been. Fergal counts about 250 community-council-generated food jobs in the town today, and 60 more in childcare.

That was a pattern I saw in most places I went. I didn't find a single place that replaced what it lost like for like.

In Carrick-on-Shannon, MBNA opened a call centre in 2001 and at its peak employed almost 1,200 people (McDonagh, 2023). Its closure was announced in 2014. In 2023 Leitrim County Council bought the building for about €7 million, with €7.2 million from Ireland's Rural Regeneration and Development Fund (RRDF) towards a €9 million project, and reopened it as the Carrick Business Campus. I met someone who is both an employee of Leitrim County Council and a director on the board of the designated activity company (DAC) that runs the 10,405 sq m campus (McDonagh, 2023). She showed me what has grown on the campus since. Avant Money, Payac and Image Skillnet are there now (McDonagh, 2023). Payac, a credit-union services organisation, started in The Hive, a technology enterprise centre 500 m further along the road, outgrew it, and has grown from 2 to 53 staff, drawing, as far as I could tell, on skills people had learned from MBNA. She pointed to the risk of any county or region depending on a small number of large employers, rather than a larger number of small and medium-sized ones, where one employer pulling out does less damage.

ATU Sligo is about a two-hour drive from either Dublin or Galway, and offers highly specialised tertiary qualifications in the medical technology and pharmaceutical sectors. There, Ceola McLynn and Finola Howe told me how Sligo became a thriving medical technology hub, employing thousands of people (Atlantic MedTech Cluster, n.d.). It was farming, then toolmaking, then precision manufacturing, then a medtech and pharma cluster that the college grew alongside. It's "a very long journey", they said, built on the value in the people already around. They then encouraged me to contact renowned clustering expert Ifor Fowcs-Williams, who, they said, is based in New Zealand.

In 2018 Coca-Cola announced it would close its concentrate plant in Athy with the loss of 82 jobs, and it was phased out in 2019 (RTÉ, 2018b; Kildare County Council, 2024). What I found there was a town that had been getting itself ready: a bypass to take the traffic out of the medieval centre, a new town square, and a renovated market house that reopened in 2025

as The Shackleton Experience museum after a €7.5 million redevelopment (Phelan, 2025). On the wet Friday I visited, it was heaving.

Bergara, in the Basque Country, lost its railways around 1970 and its old cotton mill in 2010, but its steelworks still run (Odriozola, 2018; Modaes, 2010; Crónica Vasca, 2024). What amazed me there was what the council does. In one of its initiatives it has given a local consumer-worker-and-producer cooperative a ten-year concession to run a local-food shop in the market, where I was told about 80% of what shoppers pay goes straight to the producers.

The Ruhr didn't replace coal either. It ran it down over sixty years, from the crisis of 1958 to the last mine in 2018 (Kracht, 2020; Euronews, 2018), and as Sebastian Schlecht, the architect and researcher who showed me around the Ruhr, pointed out, some of the steelworks still run. In 1970 services provided fewer than half of the Ruhr's jobs outside farming (Tenfelde, 1988). Since the late 1980s they have employed more people than industry, and by 2020 more than three-quarters of the region's employees worked in services (Regionalverband Ruhr, 2021). MARK 51°7 is a 70-hectare technology, knowledge and innovation campus in Bochum. It is the response to the last Opel coming off the line in Bochum on 5 December 2014, after 52 years, with around 3,000 people still working there (Handelsblatt, 2014). The state of North Rhine-Westphalia put €65.1 million in all, into cleaning up and preparing the 70-hectare site (Land Nordrhein-Westfalen, 2016), and by 2024 more than 3,500 new jobs had been created on it, with more than 10,000 planned (Regionalverband Ruhr, 2024). More jobs than when the plant shut. Different jobs, different people, ten years and a lot of public money. I had emailed the city's economic development agency in July, got a polite holding reply, chased it, and heard nothing more. In the end I saw it from the train.

In Tipperary, at the Cloughjordan Ecovillage, Pa Finucane, owner of Django's Hostel, put it simply: business brings business. He built his six-room ensuite hostel with EU LEADER tourism funding. He believes his hostel was the impetus for the big house in the old village

starting to host weddings, and still provides overflow accommodation for weddings of 200, far more than the house itself can sleep.

For towns that have lost their big employer, I would say do not wait for a replacement. You need to create the conditions for success, so that if a winner shows up, you can support it. Fergal from the Drumshanbo Food Hub had two tests for whoever walks in:

1. Interrogate the winner.
2. And ask what jobs it will create; if it creates them, give it leeway or concessions to get started.

For South Waikato, the observation I've brought home is: how might we prove that we are preparing for a winner we haven't met yet?

2. Past the ribbon: operator, connection and upkeep

Do we know who will run it, who will keep people coming, and who will pay to keep it going?

Athy's new food, drink and skills innovation hub sits in the old Model School, set up by the Duke of Leinster in 1851 and since then a police station, council offices and a fire-damaged shell. Kildare County Council bought it derelict. The published funding includes €5.1 million from the RRDF for the 1,013 sq m site (Kildare County Council, 2024, n.d.). It opened in early 2026. When I walked through it with an official, we were the only people on site, and the high level of fit and finish was easy to see. While I caught the project on a quiet day, I did note that the planned demonstration kitchen with a deli counter had yet to happen, and the room had become a barista training space for the local Education and Training Board (ETB), which was there three days a week. The 16-bench training kitchen was used for an ETB chef's course two days a week. Of the shared test kitchen and the three individual food-unit kitchens, the test kitchen had an occasional user, and two of the units had been used but none was in use when I visited. When I asked why the hub didn't run a café or a social enterprise of its own, the answer was that councils are wary of competing with local business.

In Drumshanbo, Fergal had warned me about shared kitchens: a timeshare kitchen is good in theory, he said, but it gets abused on occasion. A caterer smashes through it for a day and the bills are enormous, someone has to clean between the bread, the sausages and the fish, things go missing, and someone always has to be there. He reckoned it was twenty times more profitable just to run a government training agency out of it. That is more or less where Athy has currently landed.

I had first asked the question that runs through this chapter a week earlier, walking Campás Íosagáin in the Gaeltacht Mhúscraí, a 1,835 sq m, once run-down historic school site that Údarás na Gaeltachta is bringing back to life as an enterprise centre supporting remote

workers, start-ups and indigenous companies, as well as multinationals (Údarás na Gaeltachta, 2020). It is a modern and impressive workspace that opened in April 2026, and like some of the other places I visited, it already looked like it needed a bit of love. I wondered: "Where does the money for the upkeep come from?"

On the Barrow Blueway, I found a new 23 km section of trail that nobody was promoting (Carlow Tourism, n.d.). The bike-hire owner in Monasterevin told me there was a standoff between Kildare County Council and Waterways Ireland over who would maintain it, so there had been no advertising and no fuss. Mini cafés were opening anyway, spun up and serving the walkers, riders, dog walkers, anglers and canal boat captains I found there. By April 2026 the major works were complete, but signage and legal agreements were still outstanding, and the formal opening was being aimed at late 2026 (Kildare Nationalist, 2026). In Abbeyfeale the problem was the connection into town. An official told me that a key objective, a commuter- and bike-safe link from the Limerick Greenway into town, had stalled because residents along the 1.2 km of road would not give up their parking spaces, even for replacement parking nearby. The published figures for the wider Abbeyfeale public realm enhancement tell the rest: a €10 million shortfall on a €25 million scheme in 2024, and about €12 million on €26 million a year later (Jacques, 2024, 2025).

I think I had already discovered why this keeps happening, and it isn't about any one council. Ireland is currently awash with cash: three corporate groups paid almost half of all its corporation tax in 2024 (Irish Fiscal Advisory Council, 2026). From 1973 to 2018, Ireland was "a net recipient of over €40 billion in EU funds", but it is now a net contributor "because its economy is among the strongest in the EU" (European Commission Representation in Ireland, 2026). The Rural Regeneration and Development Fund is a €1 billion capital investment scheme (Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht, n.d.). I was told that no politician wants to be the one turning off wage or salary funding after

three years, so the money goes out the door as buildings. As I understood it, it's less about who pays in seven years and more about spending it while it's there. Most applications come with a big consultancy's business case that says the project will pay for itself, and it's usually for the most expensive option. I saw good capital projects. In some, a role was funded for a fixed period to ensure the project's feasibility, but at times this person was busy instead repaying a part of the project funding under the de minimis rules.

The projects being delivered in Cahir by Tipperary County Council were planned first: the RRDF paid for the plan in 2020 and for the build in 2022 (Department of Rural and Community Development, 2020, 2022c). The council's project manager showed me Cahir's plan, which starts by knocking down a derelict hotel to build a car park. That sounds backwards until you see where it is: 86 car parks, plus coach and EV parking, sited so visitors walk through the town to the main tourist draw, Cahir Castle. Then the old Granary becomes the new library, with a maker space and podcast suite. The old library, in the Market House, is becoming a business centre, which already has a waiting list. Finally the town square, the middle of which I was asked to meet in and which is perilous to cross, loses 44 parking spaces to make it an easier and friendlier place to be, as it was explained to me. When I asked him why the car park came first, his answer was that the sequence set up business and town success.

The council is also running projects in Tipperary Town. The town's strategy names who will run a building before it asks for money to restore it: "Finding a viable and sustainable long-term use for these important buildings will be the key determining factor in securing funding for their restoration" (Tipperary Town Revitalisation Task Force, 2022). Dan Breen House, the old civic offices, is becoming a youth and further-education hub for Youth Work Ireland Tipperary and Tipperary ETB, and MooreHaven, a disability service, has been named custodian of the courthouse and bridewell (Department of Rural and Community

Development, 2024; Tipperary Live, 2023). I was told the council will hand those buildings to the proven organisations on long leases.

Figure 3

Permanent Shared Benches Outside the KoFabrik, Bochum, During a Science Festival



Note. From *CAIS Press Play: Wissenschaftsfestival in der Kofabrik* [Photograph], by T. Mohn, 2022, Center for Advanced Internet Studies (https://www.flickr.com/photos/196877321@N07/52486103254/). CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

Idea I was given: the Montag Stiftung's "initial capital" model

The best answer I saw to the upkeep question came in the Ruhr. Sebastian Schlecht drove me to Bochum to see the KoFabrik, because his strongest recommendation was that I look at the Montag Stiftung. The model is simple: the foundation takes an old building on a long lease and pays for its conversion, with a business model geared towards the public good while paying its own way. The owner waives the ground rent for as long as the project stays non-profit. A non-profit company runs it locally and puts its income back

into the project, and any surplus flows into the neighbourhood to fund local people's own projects in and around the building. The foundation carries it until rents cover the running costs. The KoFabrik, a former ironworks office building, fully opened in 2021, with €3.3 million budgeted for purchase and building works, plus €0.8 million over four to five years for project and neighbourhood work (Montag Stiftung Urbane Räume, n.d.-a, n.d.-b). The running money was in the budget from day one, and it was fully let by the end of 2021, with 15 rental contracts by early 2022 (Scholz, 2022). There are seven of these projects so far, from a former velvet weaving mill in Krefeld to the KoFabrik in Bochum (Montag Stiftung Urbane Räume, n.d.-a). Event rooms are let on a pay-what-you-can basis: companies pay, and community groups use them free. KoFabrik won first place for social neighbourhood development in the polis Award 2022, and the Bochum Architecture Prize in 2023 (Montag Stiftung Urbane Räume, n.d.-b).

Sebastian also took me to walk Bochumer Straße in Gelsenkirchen. The city's own renewal company says the street was often called a "no-go area" by the media until 2016. It felt normal, even hip: an upcycled-skateboard workshop, an old church turned events space, and Stefan Demming, an artist. His GeOrgel installation turns donated "Gelsenkirchen Baroque" wall units into drawers you open to hear local stories, and at the back of the same space he has a reuse studio, where building materials are exchanged: used components are collected from demolitions and passed on (Baukultur Nordrhein-Westfalen, 2025). The city's renewal company has bought around 40 properties there, and it pays for them mainly by developing and selling a 27-hectare former children's clinic site elsewhere in the city (SEG Gelsenkirchen, n.d.).

In Bergara I had asked about Olaso Dorrea, a tower a family had given to a movement. Who owns it, who maintains it, and who pays for that in year seven? The answer was a mix of income from events, public and private money. It seemed to me that the ideology was important enough to the community to ensure the preservation of memory and upkeep of the building. An official working on Ireland's rural development policy told me that one theme of

the next national policy is resilience: how to sustain projects once they are up, when so much rests on volunteers who burn out.

My conclusion for South Waikato: before anyone cuts a ribbon, do we know who will run it, who will keep people coming, and who will pay to keep it going?

3. The life was in the villages

Who is looking after the life of our towns, alongside the places where people work?

Sebastian Schlecht met me at Zollverein, a 100-hectare UNESCO World Heritage Site. Zollverein was a colliery and coking plant, designed in the Bauhaus style – today it is one of the Ruhr region's great drawcards: about 1.5 million visitors a year, and the second-most-visited cultural attraction in North Rhine-Westphalia after Cologne Cathedral (Stiftung Zollverein, 2018; UNESCO-Welterbestätten Deutschland, 2018).

We toured Zollverein, and walked in and out of the fences into Katernberg and Stoppenberg, the villages that sit right against the site, and which the site ignores by its boundaries and development decisions. I photographed a new cage fence on the boundary at Stoppenberg. The RAG foundation, which carries the coal industry's long-term obligations, has set up extensive new offices inside Zollverein looking inward to the park, and, as Sebastian told it, its staff often drive in from more affluent places.

In October 2024 the City of Essen commissioned RWTH Aachen to research how the World Heritage Site and the district around it can grow together economically, socially and in their infrastructure (Stadt Essen, 2024). That is the problem Sebastian now works on. He is an architect and a researcher, based on the site, and a lifelong Ruhr local. He explains that when Zollverein was a working plant, you showed up, the gates shut, you did your shift, the gates opened and you went home, and the life was in the villages. Visiting the Ruhr Museum on the Zollverein site, I saw an exhibit by Brigitte Kraemer, *How We Live – Where We Live: Documentary Photographs* (Ruhr Museum, 2025). It showed me 40 years of everyday life and leisure – scenes of camping and in allotments, on the canal, barbecuing, shopping, in ice cream parlours, in chip shops, on coffee trips, at funfairs, drinking halls and kiosks – that were a feature of villages around Zollverein. Now Zollverein is a World Heritage Site with all

those visitors. In Sebastian's view, it does offer many social and cultural activities for local residents, but it also means those activities are shifting out of the neighbourhoods and into the grounds of the old colliery.

Essen publishes a profile of every district, and the numbers bear out what I saw. At the end of 2024, 44.8% of under-18s in Katernberg, the neighbour to Zollverein, were living on subsistence benefits. In the more affluent Bredeney, 13 km south in the same city, it was 2.6%. Unemployment was 13.1% against 2.8% (Stadt Essen, 2025a, 2025b). Essen has not ignored this. Katernberg has been in a renewal programme since 1993 and won a national prize for integrated urban development in 2009 (Stadt Essen, n.d.).

I came away thinking that restoring a site and supporting the place around it are two different jobs, and that the second is slower and harder to fund. In Katernberg it has been going for more than thirty years.

In the Ruhr the culture lives in the land as well. Standing in the forest around Zollverein, I couldn't imagine what it had looked like before they planted the trees. I was wrong. They didn't plant them. The trees grew out of the slag on their own, and the International Building Exhibition (IBA) Emscher Park's move, with a concept and design by the office Planergruppe, was to keep and curate what had happened (S. Schlecht, personal communication, October 13, 2026). Sebastian told me to look up Karl Ganser, the IBA's first director, who described landscape as the region's most important infrastructure (lala.ruhr, 2024).

Two days later I went to the 180-hectare Landschaftspark Duisburg-Nord, an old steelworks about half an hour's drive away and, like Zollverein, a product of IBA years (Landschaftspark Duisburg-Nord, n.d.-b). It is sort of the opposite to Zollverein. Landschaftspark is a free-range experience. They have cut sections of the brick boundary wall to improve access and connection to the places around it. Unfettered by UNESCO restrictions, the park has climbing

walls on the old silos and what is probably one of the lowest-lying huts of the German Alpine Association (Deutscher Alpenverein, 2015). There is also a specialist diving site in the gasometer. Climbing 54 m up a decommissioned blast furnace, I balked at the different approach to welcoming people, and loose health and safety settings. Its public areas are open around the clock and entry is free (Landschaftspark Duisburg-Nord, n.d.-a).

Figure 4

Two Boundaries: A New Fence at Zollverein and a Cut Wall at Landschaftspark Duisburg-Nord



(a) (b)

Note. (a) The new cage fence on the Zollverein boundary at Stoppenberg, Essen, 23 September 2026. (b) A section cut through the boundary wall at Landschaftspark Duisburg-Nord, 25 September 2026. Photographs by the author.

In the Basque Country, the life of the village that people were keeping was a language. Manex Mantxola Urrate, who coordinates Euskalgintzaren Kontseilua, the council of Basque-language organisations, told me that if you speak Basque, you are Basque. Kontseilua works with businesses too. The unions have pushed for plans to make Basque normal in the workplace (Puertas Ramirez, 2022), and companies are challenged to use Basque at work,

with a certificate in three levels, from "on the way" through to serving customers and working in Basque (Bai Euskarari Elkartea, n.d.; Gutiérrez, 2002). And everywhere I went in the Basque Country, language was simply there: on signs, on websites, in the names of things. Amaia Antero Intxausti, Director of Pedagogical Innovation at the Arizmendi Ikastola in Arrasate, told me the *ikastolas*, a type of school in the Basque Country where pupils are taught entirely or predominantly in the Basque language, began hidden and family-run, and are now a cooperative owned by the families. Her advice was blunt: "Minority communities only exist if you do the work".

And in the last weekend of my trip I found life in buildings nobody wanted. Manifesta 16, the roving European biennial, came to the Ruhr on the theme of its disused churches. More than a thousand churches were built in the Ruhr in the 25 years after the Second World War, many of them in response to the concept of *Pantoffelkirche*, the "slipper church" of Bishop Franz Hengsbach (Bohigas, n.d.), and Manifesta's director put today's disused churches at around 3,000 (c plus c, 2026; Ayers, 2026). Among the installations I saw were Nasan Tur's *Elevation* – pews upended and carved by the artist with visitors' sentiments – and Mirosław Bałka's *Madonna*, a monumental sculpture in coal. Henk Van Vliet, a man I met on an English-language walk of Manifesta, had driven over from Amsterdam and invited me to drive around a city of venues with him. Café owners lit up when I asked about it: Manifesta had kept them busy and given them a purpose.

When I was musing on the benefit of creative spaces to regeneration, Ali Grehan, Dublin's former City Architect, told me what made the arts programme in Ballymun, in Dublin, work: "the skill of the curator", someone who knows what excellence looks like and is prepared to say no.

So, for South Waikato: who is looking after the life of our towns, alongside the places where people work?

4. The right conditions, with money behind them

What money, and what standard, sits behind the conditions we are creating?

I put my board's question to an Irish civil servant. The answer was that picking winners is, a lot of the time, where the politics comes in, and that the department has tried to put criteria in place so that projects are well thought through. Then came the clearest answer I got on the whole trip: make the conditions for success, and then let winners show up.

Others said the same. In Drumshanbo, Fergal's advice was to do the planning and the infrastructure first, so that the space is there and ready to go. Sebastian Schlecht's answer came from the other end of the scale, from a ten-year programme in the Ruhr that I come to below. A volunteer in a town of about 1,200 people, a German researcher and an Irish civil servant gave me the same answer. On the Limerick Greenway I had inferred much the same about politics and winners.

What I took from all of them was that the right conditions also had money behind them.

In Drumshanbo the money came along with the community council. As Fergal tells it, the group knew someone who owned a supermarket chain, and the owner gifted them land, which meant they could borrow against it. They opened a community childcare centre in 2002. To open the Food Hub they put about €3 million of grants together, but grants needed their own money alongside, so they ended up with about €0.5 million of debt. With few tenants, the first ten years were mostly about how to repay it. One unit became a training room when there was government money for retraining people who had lost their jobs after the crash.

I had gone to Germany believing the IBA Emscher Park had no money and no power. Sebastian put me right. The IBA brought state money with it for projects. It ran from 1989 to 1999 and had almost no budget of its own. Instead, its projects were financed from 36 existing state funding programmes plus federal and European money, and projects that carried the

IBA's approval went to the front of the queue for that money. A state-owned company ran it, and its job was quality control, not delivery. Over ten years about 120 projects drew around DM 5 billion of investment, a third of it private (Shaw, 2002).

There are only four tax authorities sitting under the European Union's 27 members that are not states, and they are all in territories of the Basque Country. This means that the money sits close to home. Asier Areitio, the Basque Government's Director of External Action and Multilateral Organisations, walked me through how the three provinces of the Basque Autonomous Community raise and collect their own taxes, as Navarre does, and how Spain and the EU still control a great deal. His point was that this complexity forces people to work together, and that working together is the point.

Ireland's lesson was about sequence. In Skibbereen the council team said the funding to plan is essential, and that a town funded to plan something has a real chance of ultimately being funded to build it. It isn't guaranteed. The development funding is there to help communities work their ideas up properly, to strengthen the solid proposals and weed out the weaker ones, and an official pointed out to me that the expectation that every plan will be built is itself a challenge. The official on the greenway added a benefit I hadn't thought of: even if a project falls over, the site has planning attached, and that usually holds its value if it's sold. What interests me is the contrast with a feasibility study, which asks: is this feasible? A funded plan says: we know this fits the bigger plan for the town, and here is a proper plan for this project, paid for well. It is a genuine step towards delivery, and a test.

So my belief is this: create the conditions, put real money and a real standard behind them, and back the winners that show up.

For South Waikato: what money, and what standard, sits behind the conditions we are creating?

Idea I was given: a diaspora strategy

Asier Areitio looks after the Basque Government's relationships with Basque communities abroad. There have been waves of Basque migration and exile, and after the Civil War many of those who could leave set up Basque houses around the world. The Basque Government has a law for these relationships, Law 8/1994, and a new one is being prepared (Basque Government, 2026). Asier's view, as I understood it, is that what the government puts into its diaspora comes back, in political influence and in investment brought home. In Carrick-on-Shannon, I was shown Leitrim's own diaspora strategy, launched in August 2026, and told about an upcoming summit where 50 people, many with Leitrim connections, are being invited to the county for two days to see what it offers for living, working and investing. At ATU Sligo, the team got me thinking about a diaspora strategy for South Waikato. Who is from here, has done well somewhere else, and has a piece of their work or sustainable funding that could come home?

5. Who will keep showing up?

Who are the five or six people on board, and who will keep showing up for the love of it?

Fergal's dad was one of the original members of Drumshanbo's community council. Fergal says his dad did it for the grá: for love. Fergal is the second generation of his family to give his time to it, as a volunteer community councillor. The years from 2008 to 2013, with the debt still owing and the country in a crash, were in Fergal's word "horrendous". They kept going anyway through ten to twenty years of impossibly hard work.

Over my trip a question formed that is a key finding of my Fellowship. Any consultant-led plan will wash its face: it will say, on paper, that it pays for itself. But the question I care about comes before the plan: who are the five or six people on board who will make this work? For the love of it? Who will keep showing up?

I'd already met some of the answers. In Skibbereen, when I asked the Chamber of Commerce representatives – themselves business people, and highly engaged – and the town team what mattered most to the successful delivery of major projects, they said proper consultation, and they highlighted Eimear O'Neill, the council's municipal district officer, and John Duggan. John, an executive engineer with Cork County Council, had earlier shown me a series of completed, in-progress and proposed works. I can't overstate what I thought of John: an engineer known everywhere we went, who obviously listens and cares deeply. The Chamber was impressive too: it has 100 members, they told me, in and around a town of about 2,900 people (Central Statistics Office, 2023). Urko Aiartza Azurtza arranged my Basque week, and when I was there I saw that the people he connected me with, Malen Dominguez at the Telesforo Monzon eLab, Mayor Gorka Artola Alberdi of Bergara, Amaia Antero Intxausti, Lierni Ezenarro and Manex Mantxola Urrate, were all interconnected, and incredibly engaged in their own and each other's projects. Further bolstering the case for who is on board: in

Bergara, Manex told me to look up the Overton window. His view was that you only need about a quarter of people to be really well engaged.

Idea I was given: Tidy Towns

An official told me he thought Tidy Towns was exceedingly good value: thousands of volunteers, all for the chance to win a town award. It was his go-to example, and he came back to it more than once. This is someone whose department spends hundreds of millions of euro a year (Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht, 2025a). I asked for the numbers afterwards. About 30,000 volunteers in almost 1,000 groups take part, and the Department estimates they give over one million hours a year. The State put €1.5 million in grants into Tidy Towns groups in 2025: 987 entered the competition, and about 100 more do the work without entering (SuperValu TidyTowns, 2026; Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht, 2025b; TidyTowns, n.d.). In Carrick-on-Shannon, Ireland's tidiest town for 2025 (Leitrim County Council, 2025), a café owner told me the Tidy Towns committee rings him when his ashtray needs fixing. It has lovingly strong-armed him into keeping the street out front tidy.

I have considered naming this theme place-based leadership, even ideologically. The people carrying things believed in something bigger than the project in front of them. But I'm careful with this. A place's leadership "directs, but does not determine, outcomes" (Beer et al., 2019). Commitment on its own isn't enough either. The Cloughjordan Ecovillage in Tipperary was initially designed to be a 27-hectare site and provided for up to 114 low-energy homes, plus 16 live-work units (Papadimitropoulos, 2018). There I saw a community with plenty of belief but limited systems of delivery. I chose it as a counterpoint, and to look for the circular economy: it was founded on an ideological vision, not in response to a crisis. Twenty years on it is, literally, half-finished, and it showed.

I also went looking for a governance answer, and I saw plenty of governance: national, regional, local and inside organisations. What I didn't see was a governance model that made

the difference on its own. The correct governance models are important, but I have seen projects survive and fail in the same governance environments. The difference was rarely the rules. It was whether someone stayed past the proposal, past the plan, past the project and persisted on, at times only for the sake of it.

For South Waikato: who are the five or six people on board, and who will keep showing up for the love of it?

6. Longer than 3, 5 and 7 year cycles

What will still need funding in twenty years, and who have we told?

I described Drumshanbo to Ali Grehan on a video call. She made clear something I had been muddling: anything worth doing in development takes thirty years. "You might be able to build a building in five years," she said, "but if there's some, if there is poverty, trauma, that's going to take three generations to work through. So where is the sustained effort?" People move on, she said, "but there has to be a culture of commitment".

Ireland's Department of Rural and Community Development contracted the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) to review its rural policy: a two-year exercise with several visits to Ireland, published in February 2026 (Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht, 2026). I learned that communities contributing to the review had told the OECD team they most needed money. The OECD team asked different questions, which were put to me as one of the most valuable things I could take home: "What's the real vision for 3-5-7-10 years…? … What happens when the money turns off?" By the time I got to Dublin I had realised that regeneration relies on real, invested people who persist and funding models that survive more than 3, 5 and 7 year cycles.

The Ruhr's timeline is much longer again. Deep mining there began in 1830, when miners first broke through the water-bearing marl (Czierpka, 2019). Sebastian told me the region's foresight went back further than the IBA. In the 1960s, as he tells it, the Ruhr saw it was facing international pressure to keep its coal profitable, and built a hugely efficient cokery that outlived the mine (it ran until 1993). It also built universities, because it needed skilled people; Sebastian's own father, a physicist, moved from Munich for the first of them. The first, in Bochum, was decided in 1961 and opened in 1965. The historians give the same

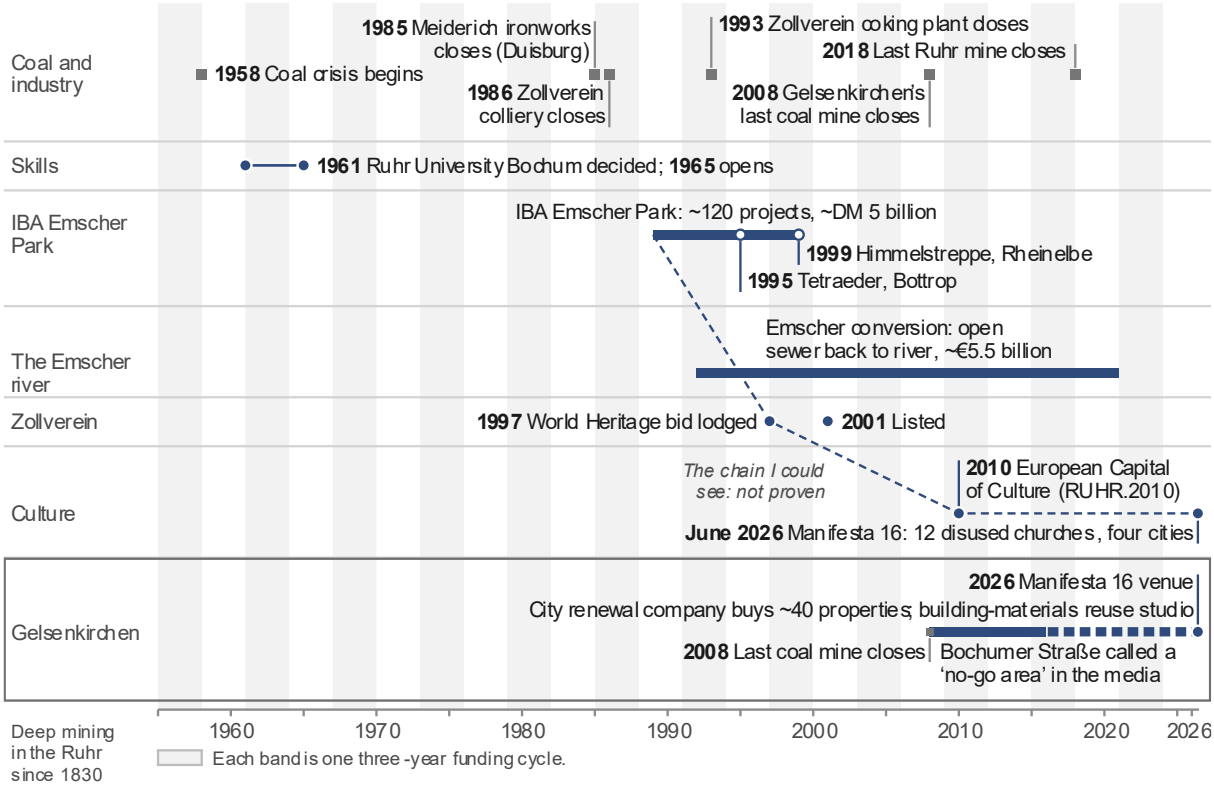
reason, a shortage of skilled people, and add that the universities were only later seen as a tool against the mining crisis (Weisser, 2006).

Sebastian and I talked about the IBA as scaffolding: the first infrastructure for flourishing. It started with the landscape and turned a degraded wasteland into parks people travel to see. And then, through our discourse, I could see a chain. The IBA's director, Karl Ganser, was one of those who lodged Zollverein's World Heritage bid in 1997, and it was listed in 2001 (Stiftung Zollverein, n.d.-b). The evaluators of the Ruhr's year as European Capital of Culture in 2010 saw that bid as "part of a longer process of development in the Ruhr", beginning perhaps with the IBA (Ecorys, 2011). And from June 2026 Manifesta 16 filled 12 disused churches across four Ruhr cities (Manifesta 16, 2026). I can't prove that each one led to the next. But I don't think the last one happens without the first.

The water is the longest commitment of all. The work to turn the Emscher River from an open sewer back into a river ran from 1992 to 2021 and cost about €5.5 billion (Emschergenossenschaft und Lippeverband, 2023). Underneath the region, it is *Ewigkeitsaufgaben* – literally, "eternity tasks". The old mines have to be pumped forever so that polluted water never reaches the drinking water. The foundation that carries those costs spent €288 million on them in 2024 (Regionalverband Ruhr, 2025a).

Figure 5

The Ruhr's Long Thread: Coal, the IBA, the Emscher and What Followed, 1958–2026



Note. Compiled from Czierpka (2019), Kracht (2020), Euronews (2018), Weisser (2006), Shaw (2002), Stiftung Zollverein (n.d.-a, n.d.-b), Ecorys (2011), Emschergenossenschaft und Lippeverband (2023), Route Industriekultur (n.d.-a), SEG Gelsenkirchen (n.d.), Baukultur Nordrhein-Westfalen (2025), Manifesta 16 (2026) and the sources for Table 1. The dashed line shows a connection I observed, not a proven cause. Background bands mark three-year periods.

At Mondragon, my host told me that what I was looking at was an 80-year journey, and he didn't think you could copy and paste it, but that some places have tried: Co-op Cincy has been developing for 15 years (ICIC, 2015). In Bergara, after meeting the mayor, I found myself hoping that their initiatives can outlast politics. The mayor and the town were inspirational: they have a view. Bergara is trying to build that view into how the town works.

The mayor's presentation to me traced a habit of citizen action back to a cultural association founded in 1967, and showed how it is now set up to outlast any one project: Ehundu, a space since 2021 to listen, connect and enable action; Berener, a community energy cooperative; and Elikaenea, a local food hub built around the Oxirondo market. Its message was that Bergara's community ecosystem is not built around one flagship project, and that the priority is not the building. The idea that stayed with me most was to institutionalise what needs to be institutionalised, and keep in community hands what can remain community-led (Bergarako Udala, 2026).

For South Waikato: what will still need funding in twenty years, and who have we told?

7. I say seem, because I can't prove it

Can we see impact in our communities, and can we see who isn't represented?

In Dublin I tried to sum up what Ireland had taught me. Business gets business. Good governance and engagement are key. And projects with economic outcomes first seem to work. I say seem, because I can't prove it, and nor, mostly, could the people I met.

Ireland is honest about this. The OECD's key recommendation to Ireland was to get the right data at the right spatial level (OECD, 2026). The Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) identified 45 indicators to monitor the effect of the national rural policy's schemes and funds, and found only nine were available at the level it needed (Kelly et al., 2024). The Rural Regeneration and Development Fund's own assessment in 2022 found that nine of its largest projects had been completed and none had yet been evaluated after the event (Department of Rural and Community Development, 2022a).

The big events have a similar opportunity. Manifesta 15 in Barcelona reported €1.81 of visitor spending for every public euro, mostly from local visitors, which is spending, and maybe proof of lasting change (Manifesta Foundation, 2025). For the Guggenheim: one study estimated that the public money spent on it would come back to the Basque treasuries through tax within about nine years (Plaza, 2006).

What the payback forecast didn't count is the anti-tourism graffiti and housing crisis I saw walking Bilbao. With housing costs above 30% of household income, the city has since been declared a stressed housing market so that it can cap rents (Infobae, 2025; Ministerio de Vivienda y Agenda Urbana, 2025). And the people who know Bilbao best didn't give the museum all the credit. One told me it only works because of all the measures that run together. Ali Grehan, who lived and worked in Bilbao before the Guggenheim was built, had a view that it "has worked because of the energy that was already in the place". Asier

described the Guggenheim as only one response to an industrial crisis, from a people used to working together: in the 1990s, he told me, a group of chefs cooperated to build the new Basque cuisine, sharing recipes and ingredients and travelling to learn.

Some things are counted. Drumshanbo can tell you its jobs, and the Emscher works can tell you what they cost and how long they took. And the City of Essen publishes a statistical profile of every district, which is why I could give the contrasting Katernberg figures in Chapter 3.

The other half of measurement is who you are counting. In Bilbao, the team at the Agirre Lehendakaria Center showed me how the centre maps a place: collect the data, show it back to people, and keep asking "who isn't represented?". They see the listening and mapping as ongoing: the picture is never finished. Later in the trip I started asking whether systems had an accidental bias towards places that were good at making applications. Where I landed was that you can't tell who isn't represented if those places have never applied.

I came home with the question for South Waikato: can we see impact in our communities, and can we see who isn't represented?

Idea I was given: listen until you know who is missing

The Agirre Lehendakaria Center, a Basque and Columbia University collaboration, works on complex challenges with many players. It maps a place's system across three kinds of institution (public, business and social); captures what people think as narratives and presents them back as personas; and brings every voice into the room in sessions that repeat at whatever rhythm suits the place, each time asking: who is missing, and what have we not captured? As I understood it, the centre wants as many communities as possible to be able to run this for themselves. To me it is the natural counterpoint to the consultant's business case that says the project will pay for itself.

Conclusions and recommendations

What I concluded

I didn't find a place that replaced what it lost like for like. I found places that got ready, sometimes for ten or twenty years, and backed the winner when one showed up (Chapter 1). The best plans I saw settled who would run a thing, how people would reach it and who would pay to keep it, before the ribbon was cut (Chapter 2). They remembered that the life of a place was never only where people worked (Chapter 3). Their conditions had money and a standard behind them (Chapter 4). They started with five or six people who kept showing up for the love of it (Chapter 5). The people and institutions that carried them stayed longer than any 3, 5 or 7 year cycle (Chapter 6). And almost none of them could prove it worked, which is the honest limit on everything above (Chapter 7).

While none of this was a model I could directly copy, what travels are the habits underneath. The places I saw are evidence that the idea that you can do something, that you can effect change, is good. They are not proof that it always works.

Table 3

The Seven Chapters, and Where in Each Region the Evidence Came From

Chapter	Basque Country	Ireland	Ruhr
1. I didn't find a replacement. I found places that got ready	Bergara	Carrick-on-Shannon; Sligo; Drumshanbo; Cloughjordan; Athy	Bochum (MARK 51°7)
2. Past the ribbon: operator, connection and upkeep	Bergara (Olaso Dorrea)	Athy; Campás Íosagáin; Abbeyfeale and the Limerick Greenway; Cahir; Tipperary Town; Drumshanbo	Bochum (the KoFabrik); Bochumer Straße, Gelsenkirchen
3. The life was in the villages	Arrasate (Arizmendi Ikastola); Euskalgintzaren Kontseilua	Ballymun, Dublin (by video call)	Zollverein, Katernberg and Stoppenberg, Essen; Landschaftspark Duisburg-Nord; Manifesta 16

Chapter	Basque Country	Ireland	Ruhr
4. The right conditions, with money behind them	The Basque Government's tax powers	Drumshanbo; Skibbereen; the Limerick Greenway	IBA Emscher Park
5. Who will keep showing up?	Bergara (the Telesforo Monzon eLab)	Drumshanbo; Skibbereen; Carrick-on-Shannon; Cloughjordan	—
6. Longer than 3, 5 and 7 year cycles	Bergara; Mondragon	Drumshanbo	Ruhr University Bochum; IBA Emscher Park; Zollverein; the Emscher; Manifesta 16
7. I say seem, because I can't prove it	Bilbao (the Guggenheim; the Agirre Lehendakaria Center)	Drumshanbo	The Emscher; Katernberg, Essen

Note. Places as they appear in each chapter. A dash means the region does not feature in that chapter.

What this asks of us: a shared, place-based practice

In each of the places I visited that was regenerating, funders, community organisations, councils, central government, employers and educators had to keep working together for long enough to matter. I came home thinking of this as a shared practice that I am one small part of, not a plan for any one organisation.

If that practice had a habit, it would be asking the same three questions together, before anyone says yes:

1. **Who are the five or six people on board who will make this work, and who isn't represented?**
2. **Who owns it, who maintains it, and who pays for it beyond year seven?**
3. **How will this persist regardless of the money?**

I started this trip with John Elkington, who coined the triple bottom line and later recalled it. What I found was something like his three lines, held together. People matter: the five or six on board. Profit matters: it has to be business, and it has to work. Place matters: the landscape

as infrastructure, and the persistence of place-based leadership. But none of them was enough on its own, and again and again people talked to me about ecosystems. Since the recall, John has pushed for resilience (Elkington, 2020), and says that "the only way I know to ensure longer term resilience is to regenerate (not just repair) our critical systems, and soon" (Sarkar, n.d.).

Application and dissemination

Each of the first seven chapters opens with a question I have brought home for South Waikato. In my application I committed to sharing what I learned across the public, private and community sectors. Once this report is accepted, I will begin that work: publishing it, sharing the findings with local and central government, supporting workshops with regional economic development agencies, and contributing to conferences and media. I hope this is useful to these groups. I also hope it may be of use to future Churchill Fellows planning a trip like mine, and I offer the entire Churchill Fellowship network whatever support I can give.

How my thinking changed

I went with three themes – infrastructure investment, workforce reinvention and the circular economy – and held on to them tightly. Professor Brad Jackson, a former academic supervisor who has offered mentoring for the Fellowship, had pushed me to have strong beliefs, loosely held. I think the trip did both: it strengthened what I believe, and it let me hold it much more loosely.

It wasn't all good days. Meetings fell through. The constant rhyming refrain from people in Ireland, "Why [did you go to] Athy?", actually got to me. Cloughjordan was one of the saddest places I've ever visited, for all the good people in it. On my first evening in Essen I felt flat. The centre looked like a tired shopping mall, and straight after a buzzing Dublin, I

thought about paying to go home early. The next day Sebastian met me at Zollverein and gave me one of the most fulfilling days of the trip.

Some things I simply got wrong. I had it in my head that the IBA Emscher Park had no money and no power. I was too hard on Essen and the Ruhr. By my last weekend I thought Essen was lovely, and I was embarrassed at how I had misunderstood Manifesta.

Starting to head home, I sat on a train running along the Rhine, past a castle on every hill and vineyards climbing wherever they could. After five weeks of hard places I felt something let go. Sebastian had said, more than once, that there is trauma in the Ruhr, in the people and the places. I think he's right, and I think it's true beyond the Ruhr. I'm from some of these places, Tūrangi and Huntly, and I work in these places, where the hardness of the industry, and the loss of it, its incomes and its social fabric, have left something in the place.

However, I came home immensely grateful for where I'm from, and hugely optimistic about how we might have national and civic pride and civil discourse, and keep the things that are great about us, like our informality. The trip pushed me to think bigger and wider, and to see my job as convening and understanding systems. I am changed: softer, more open to ideas, and thinking much longer term.

The Churchill Fellowship exists so that ordinary New Zealanders can travel, learn and bring something home. On my first days away I noticed how much the culture gap had narrowed, and how close the shared human experience felt, even on the other side of the world. That stayed true for five weeks. The Fellowship has advanced my own practice in regional and community economic development, and I hope this report helps others in that work across New Zealand.

While there is much to learn from visiting the antipodes of New Zealand (the Mondragon office I visited in Aretxabaleta is only 600 km from the exact antipode of my home), there is

much in considering, too, that, as the wonderful satirist John Clarke's character Fred Dagg sang in 1975, we don't know how lucky we are.

Figure 6

With Sebastian Schlecht at the Himmelstreppe, Gelsenkirchen



Note. Sebastian Schlecht and me at Herman Prigann's Himmelstreppe on the Rheinelbe spoil heap, Gelsenkirchen, 23 September 2026. Photograph from the author's collection.

A last word

Lots of people asked me "Why Athy?", which I think is exactly why. I grew up in a small town (pop. 7,500), blithely unaware that it wasn't the centre of the universe, and surrounded by the smartest and most prescient people I've ever met.

Let us never underestimate, underinvest in or underrepresent the towns, the districts or the regions.

Appendices

Appendix A. Travel itinerary

Table A

Travel Itinerary

Dates (2026)	Region	Places	Main activity
28 Aug – 3 Sep	United Kingdom	Travel; Basingstoke; London	Meeting with John Elkington, RSA, London (2 Sep)
3–6 Sep	Basque Country	Transit; Bilbao; Sestao; Portugalete	Guggenheim; Ría 2000 area; industrial heritage
7 Sep	Basque Country	Bergara	Olaso Dorrea Fundazioa; Telesforo Monzon eLab; Bergara council; Euskalgintzaren Kontseilua
8 Sep	Basque Country	Bilbao; Aretxabaleta; Arrasate	Basque Government; Mondragon (Otalora); Arizmendi Ikastola
9 Sep	Basque Country → Ireland	Transit; Bilbao; Cork	Agirre Lehendakaria Center; TM eLab (video call); flight to Cork
10 Sep	Ireland	Skibbereen; Macroom	Cork County Council itinerary
11 Sep	Ireland	Baile Bhúirne	Campás Íosagáin
12 Sep	Ireland	Killarney; Killorglin	Towns and observation
13 Sep	Ireland	Limerick Greenway; Newcastle West; Ardagh; Abbeyfeale	Greenway ride with a Department official: the Fuller's Folly project at Newcastle West; Maiden Street, where three vacant and derelict buildings have been bought for renovation as a community centre; the old station house at Ardagh
14 Sep	Ireland	Cahir; Carrick-on-Suir	Tipperary County Council projects; the Blueway and town centre at Carrick-on-Suir
15 Sep	Ireland	Carrick-on-Shannon; Sligo	Business Campus; The Hive; ATU Sligo Innovation Centre
16 Sep	Ireland	Drumshanbo	The Food Hub
17 Sep	Ireland	Cloughjordan	Ecovillage
18 Sep	Ireland	Athy	Food hub; Shackleton museum
19 Sep	Ireland	Barrow Blueway	Monasterevin – Athy – Monasterevin by bike
20–21 Sep	Ireland	Dublin	Consolidation, documentation
22 Sep	Ruhr	Transit; Essen	Planning

Dates (2026)	Region	Places	Main activity
23 Sep	Ruhr	Zollverein; Katernberg; Gelsenkirchen; Bochum	Day with Sebastian Schlecht: Zollverein; Bochumer Straße; Wissenschaftspark Gelsenkirchen, the first IBA project; the Rheinelbe spoil heap and Himmelstreppe; the KoFabrik
24 Sep	Ruhr	Emscher; Bottrop	Ride to observe Emscher River project, ending at the Tetraeder on the Beckstraße spoil heap; video call with Kelley Keogh (Midlands STEM)
25 Sep	Ruhr	Duisburg	Landschaftspark Duisburg-Nord; video call with an Irish government official
26–28 Sep	Ruhr	Essen; Bochum; Gelsenkirchen	Manifesta 16; video call with Ali Grehan (28 Sep)
29–30 Sep	Germany	Rhine; Frankfurt	Departure
2 Oct	New Zealand	Travel	Home

Appendix B. People and organisations

With thanks to everyone below.

Table B

People and Organisations

Person	Organisation or role
John Elkington	Founder, Volans; Churchill Fellow (1981); Churchill Fellowship Ambassador (UK)
Javi Elkano	Olaso Dorrea Fundazioa
Juan Luis Agirre	Olaso Dorrea Fundazioa (host and translator)
Malen Dominguez	Telesforo Monzon eLab
Gorka Artola Alberdi; Maite Usabiaga Uranga	Bergara council (Mayor; Deputy Mayor)
Manex Mantxola Urrate	Euskalgintzaren Kontseilua
Asier Areitio Ibarlucea	Director of External Action and Multilateral Organisations, Basque Government
Germán Lorenzo	Cooperative Dissemination, MONDRAGON Corporation
Amaia Antero Intxausti	Director of Pedagogical Innovation, Arizmendi Ikastola
Lierni Ezenarro	Agirre Lehendakaria Center
Julia Martínez Barbero	Agirre Lehendakaria Center
Mikel Álvarez	Agirre Lehendakaria Center
Beñat Oiartzabal Goia	Agirre Lehendakaria Center
Lorraine Hogan	Administrative Officer, Capital Delivery, Cork County Council (organised my West Cork day)
Fergus Gleeson	Director of Services, Capital Delivery, Cork County Council
John Duggan	Executive Engineer, Cork County Council
Eimear O'Neill	Municipal District Officer, Cork County Council
Marie O'Leary	Municipal District Officer, Macroom, Cork County Council
Audrey Coleman	Executive Architect, Cork County Council
Denise Desmond	Executive Engineer, Cork County Council
Cllr Kate Lynch	Elected member for Macroom, Cork County Council
Skibbereen & District Chamber of Commerce	Skibbereen
Cathal Ó Conaill	Campás Íosagáin, Údarás na Gaeltachta
Robert Nicholson	Department of Rural and Community Development
Frank Cussen	Project Manager, Tipperary County Council
Colm Keane	The Hive, Leitrim County Enterprise Fund

Person	Organisation or role
Ceola McLynn; Finola Howe	ATU Sligo (Innovation Centre Manager; Head of Enterprise and External Engagement)
Fergal McPartland	Drumshanbo community council; The Food Hub
Pa Finucane	Django's Hostel, Cloughjordan
Davie Philip	Cultivate: The Sustainable Ireland Co-op, Cloughjordan Ecovillage
Iva Pocock	Sustainable Projects Ireland, Cloughjordan Ecovillage (visit coordinator)
Peadar Kirby	Former professor; Cloughjordan Ecovillage
Derek McCormack	Project Manager, Local Enterprise Office, Kildare County Council
Michelle McKiernan	Principal Officer, Our Rural Future policy
Ali Grehan	Former Dublin City Architect
Kelley Keogh	STEM Engagement Officer, Westmeath County Council (Midlands STEM programme)
Sebastian Schlecht	RWTH Aachen, based at Zollverein
Stefan Demming	Artist; GeOrgel installation and reuse studio, Bochumer Straße, Gelsenkirchen
Henk Van Vliet	Fellow visitor, Manifesta 16
The three mediators who led my Manifesta 16 Open Walks	Gelsenkirchen (St. Bonifatius to Thomaskirche); Bochum (Christ-König); Essen (St. Gertrud)

Appendix C. Ideas I was given, and who they might be for

Table C1

Suggestions to Bring Home, by Audience

For	Idea	Where I saw it	Chapter
Philanthropic and community funders	Commit beyond three-year cycles; fund people and upkeep, not only buildings; budget the running money from day one; consider revolving loan funds	Montag Stiftung; Leitrim County Enterprise Fund; Drumshanbo	2, 4, 6; Table C2
Community and social organisations	Volunteer town competitions with small prizes and big pride; ask who isn't in the room	Tidy Towns; Agirre Lehendakaria Center	5, 7
Local government	Fund plans that can become builds; name the operator before the capital; design the connection to town in from day one; settle who maintains a thing before building it; use one good site to fund the repair of a street	Skibbereen; Tipperary Town; Cahir; Barrow Blueway; Gelsenkirchen	2, 4
Councils and economic development agencies	A diaspora strategy: ask people from the district who have done well elsewhere what could come home	Basque Government; Leitrim County Council	4
Central government	Separate money to plan from money to build; set a standard and give priority to projects that meet it; measure at the level of each town; give youth and STEM programmes an owner beyond the pilot	RRDF; IBA Emscher Park; ESRI; Midlands STEM	4, 6, 7; Appendix D
Employers and education providers	Build on the skills already in the district; small teams so small schools can take part; clusters as a decades-long project	Carrick-on-Shannon; ATU Sligo; Midlands STEM	1; Appendix D
Arts bodies and owners of empty buildings	Time-limited creative programmes in unwanted buildings, with a curator who can say no; pooled public-art funding	Manifesta 16; Ballymun	3

These are the answers I got when I asked people what one thing I should take home. Each is set down as I was given it, with what I found when I checked. Where an idea is told in full in a chapter, the chapter is named. These are offered for consideration. They are not commitments by me, by SWIFT or by any other organisation.

Table C2

The Full Register of Ideas I Was Given

Idea	Given by	What it is	Chapter
Keep asking "who isn't represented?"	Agirre Lehendakaria Center	Community listening and systems mapping	7
Montag Stiftung	Sebastian Schlecht	Reused buildings with day-one operating money	2
Recycling the uplift	Seen in Bilbao and Gelsenkirchen	Using the gain from one good site to fund the next	2
Revolving loan fund	The Hive	The Leitrim County Enterprise Fund, set up in 1988 with International Fund for Ireland support, when banks were wary of lending in border counties. It lends small amounts quickly and simply, and was one of the partners that developed The Hive (Leitrim County Enterprise Fund, n.d.)	—
Funded to plan, then funded to do	Skibbereen council team	Two funded phases for a town plan	4
Tidy Towns	An official	National volunteer town competition	5
Landscape as infrastructure	Sebastian Schlecht (via Karl Ganser)	Treating landscape as the region's main infrastructure	3
Innovation vouchers	Údarás na Gaeltachta	Through Enterprise Ireland, a voucher worth up to €10,000 for a small firm to pay a registered research provider, such as Nimbus at Munster Technological University, to work on a business problem	—
LKS	Mondragon	LKS Next, a cooperative consultancy in the Mondragon group, independent for more than 30 years. That it teaches the Mondragon way is as told	—
"Just one more night"	Skibbereen Chamber	Getting visitors to stay one more night and spend in town	—
Town gift vouchers	Skibbereen Chamber	Employer gift vouchers spent locally. Ireland's Small Benefit Exemption allows up to five non-cash benefits worth €1,500 in total a year, tax-free, from 2025 (Revenue, 2025)	—
PEACEPLUS projects	The Hive	STRIDE (design thinking with rural communities, run partly from The Hive); DS³ (digital services and two mobile digital hubs); Connexus (22 community-led ICT hubs)	—
Coal as a proxy	John Elkington	Track how many people worked in an industry over decades	—

Idea	Given by	What it is	Chapter
Places to look at	John Elkington	Pittsburgh, and Val-des-Sources (formerly Asbestos), Quebec: places that lost the industry they were built on. Offered as cases; I didn't visit them	—
Garabide	Amaia Antero Intxausti	Founded in 2005 in Eskoriatza, it shares the Basque experience of reviving a minority language with other language communities, including Aymara, Mapuche, Kichwa and Nahuatl speakers, through exchanging experience rather than money	—
Basque diaspora law	Asier Areitio	Law 8/1994 on relations with Basque communities abroad; a new law is being prepared	4
Diaspora strategy	Leitrim County Council	Leitrim Diaspora Strategy 2026–2030 (launched 5 August 2026)	4
Pooled Per Cent for Art	Ali Grehan	Ballymun pooled many small Per Cent for Art allocations into one curated programme; Ireland's 2004 guidelines allow it	—

Appendix D. Notes on sources, and material not carried in the body

Sources for Table 1. Central Statistics Office (2023, 2026a, 2026b, n.d.); Eustat (2025a, 2025b); IT.NRW (2026); Regionalverband Ruhr (2025b); Stats NZ (n.d.-a); for losses, Arigna Mining Experience (n.d.); Auñamendi Eusko Entziklopedia (n.d.); Böhmer (2025); Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment (2019); Euronews (2018); Legasa (2026); Odriozola (2018); RTÉ (2014, 2018a, 2018b, 2021); Route Industriekultur (n.d.-b); Sanzo González (n.d.); Stadt Gelsenkirchen (n.d.); Stiftung Zollverein (n.d.-a); The Local (2013); and, for regeneration funding and Cloughjordan, Department of Rural and Community Development (2020, 2022b, 2022c, 2024) and Kirby (2017).

What the leadership research adds. Writers on place leadership warn against what Sotarauta, Beer and Gibney (2017) call "the popular obsession" with heroic leaders. Research on place-based initiatives in Auckland, Australia and Canada found people worried when the same few had led for a long time (Boorman & Jackson, 2025). A crisis on its own won't produce new leadership (Jackson, 2019). I've used these as guardrails in Chapter 5 rather than as findings.

Cases kept short or left out of the body.

- *Listowel:* the operator of a local food hub arrived, but repeated planning applications cut its planned jobs from 25–30 to about eight (Joy, 2026)
- *Fagor:* Mondragon's ownership model did not save Fagor Electrodomésticos, which closed in 2013. Most of its worker-members were found other work through the group (Arenaza Bengoa & Arando, 2018).
- *Athy's launch promise:* the hub's 2019 funding announcement promised an incubator kitchen and other facilities; what I saw in 2026 was quieter (Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation, 2019).

- *Bilbao Ría 2000:* uplift from urban development along the river was recycled into the next development. It worked while the land sold, and when the property market fell it needed bank debt and its public shareholders (Bilbao Ría 2000, 2020; GARA, 2013).
- *Campás Íosagáin:* the site opened in 1940 as Coláiste Íosagáin, an Irish-language preparatory college for future primary teachers, and closed in 1989. It reopened in April 2026 as an enterprise campus, with nearly €10 million from the RRDF, Enterprise Ireland and Údarás (Údarás na Gaeltachta, 2026).
- *Midlands STEM:* on a video call from Essen, Kelley Keogh, who worked on a STEM programme across four of Ireland's Midlands counties in response to the loss of primary industry there, told me her robotics competitions work for tiny rural schools because "you only need three people on a team". The programme, funded by the EU Just Transition Fund, ended in mid-2026 (Midlands 103, 2026).
- *IBA art:* Herman Prigann's Himmelstreppe on the Rheinelbe spoil heap opened in 1999 and is built from old concrete blocks; the Tetraeder in Bottrop was made for the IBA in 1995 (Route Industriekultur, n.d.-a).

Appendix E. Glossary

Table E

Glossary

Term	Meaning
ATU	Atlantic Technological University (Ireland)
DAC	Designated activity company: an Irish company type, used by Leitrim County Council for the company that runs the Carrick Business Campus
De minimis	EU rules that let governments give a business small amounts of state aid without prior approval, up to €300,000 over any three years
DRCD	Department of Rural and Community Development (Ireland)
Emscher	River through the northern Ruhr, used as an open sewer for most of the 20th century and restored between 1992 and 2021
ESRI	Economic and Social Research Institute (Ireland)
ETB	Education and Training Board (Ireland)
Euskara / Euskaldun	The Basque language / a Basque speaker
Gaeltacht	Irish-speaking regions of Ireland
Grá	Irish (Gaeilge) for love
IBA Emscher Park	International Building Exhibition Emscher Park, 1989–1999
Ikastola	A Basque-medium school, traditionally cooperatively owned
LEADER	EU rural development programme run through local action groups
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
RAG-Stiftung	The foundation that carries the Ruhr coal industry's long-term obligations, including pumping mine water
RRDF	Rural Regeneration and Development Fund (Ireland)
RVR	Regionalverband Ruhr, the regional association of the Ruhr's cities and districts
SWIFT	South Waikato Investment Fund Trust
Údarás na Gaeltachta	The regional development agency for the Gaeltacht
Wash its face	Pay for itself
WCMT	Winston Churchill Memorial Trust (New Zealand)

Appendix F. Photographs

These are photographs from my trip, grouped by region. All of them are mine. Where someone can be recognised, they gave me permission.

Figure F1

The Basque Country: Bilbao, Bergara and Aretxabaleta


(a)


(b)



(c)


(d)



(e)


(f)

Note. (a) Gritty Bilbao: apartment blocks, Bilbao, 6 September 2026. (b) Where the new works on Zorrotzaurre island meet the old biscuit factory, Bilbao, 4 September 2026. (c) The cooperative shop in the market, Bergara, 7 September 2026. Photographed with permission. (d) The archivist at Olaso Dorrea getting out an old contract, Bergara, 7 September 2026. Photographed with permission. (e) An information panel on the old Vasco-Navarro railway, Basque first and a bit beaten up, Aretxabaleta, 8 September 2026. (f) Mondragon's palace at Otalora, Aretxabaleta, 8 September 2026. Photographs by the author.

Figure F2

Ireland: What Came Back



(a)



(b)



(c)



(d)

Note. (a) The Food Hub, Drumshanbo, 16 September 2026. (b) Carrick on Shannon Business Campus, the former MBNA call centre, 15 September 2026. (c) ATU Sligo, 15 September 2026. (d) Campás Íosagáin, Baile Bhúirne: the very posh rear entrance, 11 September 2026. Photographs by the author.

Figure F3

Ireland: Past the Ribbon



(a)



(b)



(c)



(d)



(e)



(f)

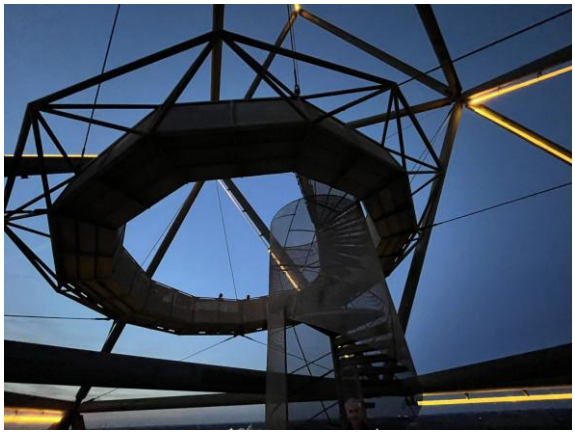
Note. (a) The Granary, Cahir, nearly finished, 14 September 2026. (b) The old station house at Ardagh, becoming a Limerick Greenway hub, 13 September 2026. (c) A container café on the Barrow Blueway, 19 September 2026. (d) Skibbereen's main street, newly paved, 10 September 2026. (e) Concrete blocks stopping unauthorised traffic, painted by the Tidy Towns committee, Carrick-on-Shannon, 14 September 2026. (f) The old church in Macroom, handed to the council, 10 September 2026. Photographs by the author.

Figure F4

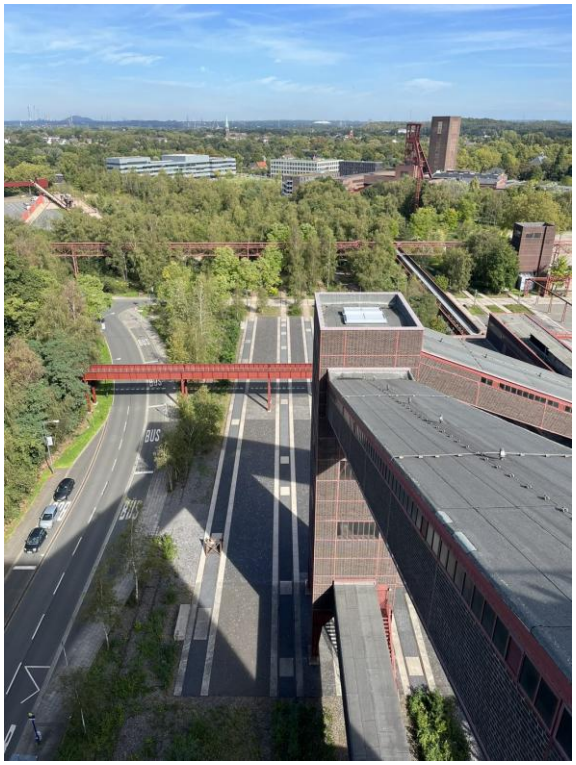
The Ruhr: Landscape as Infrastructure



(a)



(b)



(c)



(d)

Note. (a) Landschaftspark Duisburg-Nord from the blast furnace, 25 September 2026. (b) The Tetraeder on the Beckstraße spoil heap, Bottrop, at dusk, 24 September 2026. (c) Zollverein from above: the trees grew out of the slag on their own, Essen, 23 September 2026. (d) The Emscher, Gelsenkirchen, 26 September 2026. Photographs by the author.

Figure F5

The Ruhr: Life Around the Sites



(a)



(b)



(c)



(d)

Note. (a) A market under the blast furnaces, Landschaftspark Duisburg-Nord, 25 September 2026. (b) The road edge at Stoppenberg, beside Zollverein, Essen, 23 September 2026. (c) Bochumer Straße under a complete streetscape renovation, Gelsenkirchen, 23 September 2026. (d) The KoFabrik at night: shut to the public, with one room holding a meeting, Bochum, 23 September 2026. Photographs by the author.

Figure F6

Heading Home Along the Rhine



Note. The Rhine, with a castle on the hill, 30 September 2026. Photograph by the author.

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