



Ferbane Food Campus and Innovation Centre

 Ferbane, County Offaly

In 2003 Ferbane Business & Technology Park was established to create a critical mass of industry which could boost employment. In the first phase, an office block and industrial unit were constructed.

After ESB vacated the top floor of the office building, feasibility studies recommended exploration of opportunities within the food sector. For Phase 2, the original industrial unit was sold and new industrial units were bought and divided into 3 Food Incubation Units.

All offices are now at full capacity. 40 people have established their own businesses, and 30 start-up food businesses have developed their food products. Over 300 local people have attended training courses prior to COVID-19, and 70 people are currently employed at the park.



For Phase 3, the Ferbane Business and Technology Park Ltd received €1,000,000 grant as part of the Just Transition Fund (Phase 2) to modify and extend existing buildings to support start-ups, existing business expansion and provide remote working facilities to people in West Offaly. The funding has the potential to increase employment at the park from 70 to 300.



Interview Questions and Responses

How did you decide upon a single project idea?

The Ferbane Business and Technology Park, as a limited company since 2008, has an objective to develop employment opportunities and drive local enterprise.

The board of the Ferbane Business and Technology Park agreed the objectives of Phase 3 and reflects the strategic priorities of local businesses at the park and community.

How did your group agree the key objectives that you wanted your project to deliver?

A feasibility study undertaken by a private consultant was funded by Offaly LEO, leading to the identification of Phase 2 and Phase 3 of the project. The board then realised the organisation needed to target a different sector in response to the decreasing activity of ESB and the feasibility supported this assumption. The feasibility study supported the idea of creating infrastructure to support the local food and drink sector.

Describe the process by which you achieved consensus around objectives and projects?

The organisation undertakes monthly board meetings to achieve consensus and has an annual AGM, providing a key opportunity for the community and local businesses to share their views and opinions on the future direction of the Ferbane Food Campus.

How did you approach planning and project management around your selected idea?

The organisation worked closely with different agencies, such as Enterprise Ireland, Offaly County Council, Offaly LEO and other groups for planning and managing the project.

The organisation obtained a grant to employ a manager for developing the Phases 1 and 2, funded by Enterprise Ireland for two years of a total of 4 years. Another manager was selected to support Phase 3 who acted as a mentor for people in the time-shared kitchens. This was critical for managing the project.



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How has that stood the test of time through the project? Have you had to revise your plans? How have you managed that process?

The organisation and community are always adapting, with strategic plans and proposals always shaped by the board. The board has been a strong way for managing change consisting of an accountant, administrator and technical experts, alongside an interim manager 3 days per week.

How did you identify a funding need?

The Ferbane Food Campus had to grow and meet new market needs of the food and drink sector. The board identified more space and pursued an extension for Phase 3, and the funding opportunity from the Just Transition Fund was perfect timing.

In parallel, existing tenants required larger space and another tenant exited an adjacent building which went up for sale and bought by Ferbane Business & Technology Park Ltd. This enabled the conversion of space into two further kitchens and incubation units. Subsequently, those tenants have left the space and one business has taken all units.

Therefore, funding was required for expansion.

Prior to developing Phase 1

The project also benefited from a grant via ESB who were ceasing operating and launched the West Offaly Fund in the 1990s, providing €700,000 to initially launch the project. This was a critical injection of funding and the project would not have initially launched without this support.

How have you managed the process of bidding for funding?

The Just Transition Funding requires experience and a large amount of documentation to be submitted, resulting in a challenging process. Kevin Gavin undertook this work on a voluntary basis, utilising his industrial experience from working at Bord na Mona.

Kevin drew upon his experience and expertise of the board members. For example, one board member is a civil engineer and could provide cost estimations for the project.

Did you have a need for specialist expertise for your project? If so how did you handle that and approach experts?

An architect for the project was openly procured through e-tenders and knew the building very well from Phases 1 and 2. Each of the board members has their own areas of expertise, in particular around civil engineering.

Directly approached ESB to support the installation of solar PV on the building. Kevin and the board are currently working with ESB to install the solar PV and overcome initial difficulties around meter installation and upgrades.

What have been the hardest difficulties to overcome and how did you overcome them?

Communication with tenants and contractors for the project was key and ensuring they were on board with the project. For developing sector specific projects, communities need to deeply understand what is involved within a proposed project and clearly understand objectives.

Pre-COVID-19, a meeting room was utilised by other community groups and which was key in keeping the wider community in Ferbane up to date. However, COVID-19 had a big impact upon community groups and we had to communicate messages virtually via online platforms such as Microsoft Teams.

Has the project team managed to stay true to the original project vision? If not, why not? If it has, how has this been achieved?

Although the community specifically wanted to target the food and drink sector, there are now rising costs and it is becoming a riskier sector of focus. However, the community has remained true to its original project vision of establishing additional space and facilities for food and drink businesses.

What have been the biggest learnings from the delivery of your project?

It is important for communities to have a very unified board which is very diverse. Having an engineer, an accountant and an expert in a sector is critical in a community group.

Carefully managing finances is key and ensuring transparency with the local community as the project develops is also an important lesson for communities.

What decisions, or elements of organisation have been the most important in the delivery of your project?

The key decision was launching the project with the local community as a focus and attracting business to generate employment over time through the phases of the Ferbane Food Campus.

Deciding to collaborate with Offaly County Council and bringing in wider partners was key too. This was underpinned by the formation of a Town Development Group in the 1990s and building relationships over time.

It is key to organise an appropriate structure and set up a limited or appropriate company, local government agencies can support this process such as the County Council or local LEO (Local Enterprise Office).

What were the most important sources of advice and guidance for your group as you moved through the different phases of the project?

Offaly County Council and Offaly LEO group were very helpful in supporting the project in identifying the opportunity from the Just Transition Fund.

Shannon Development as a former regional development body, now part of Enterprise Ireland, were very supportive before the launch of Phase 1 of the project in identifying ways to regenerate the greenfield site where the Ferbane Food Campus is currently located.

Key contact

Kevin Gavin, Ferbane Business and Technology Park
kevinpgavin@gmail.com

Links

Website: <https://www.ferbanefoodcampus.ie/food-producer/custom-content-item/>

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/foodcampus>