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Community and Voluntary Sector warns of salaries and staffing crisis



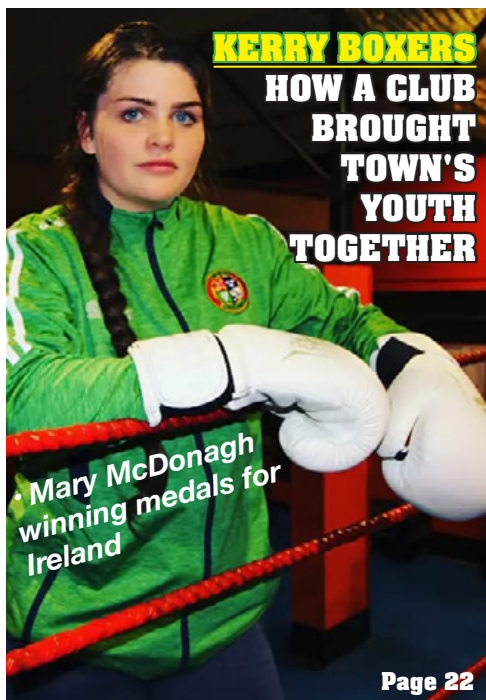
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WINNERS CHANGEMAKERS NATIONAL PITCH-FEST



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KERRY BOXERS HOW A CLUB BROUGHT TOWN'S YOUTH TOGETHER



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DUBLIN'S OUTHOUSE OUR COMMUNITY CAFE IS THE ONLY ONE OF ITS KIND IN DUBLIN - OISIN O'REILLY



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ISSN 1649-5985

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Published by Changing Ireland Community Media CLG, an independent, community-based, not-for-profit NGO. Funded through the Department of Rural and Community Development.

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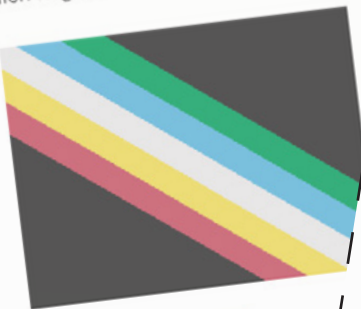


Take the Changing Ireland Quiz!

5. Can you identify this person?



☐ Santa Claus
☐ Paulo Freire
☐ St. Vincent De Paul

8. Which flag is the Disability pride flag?

☐ 
☐ 
☐ 

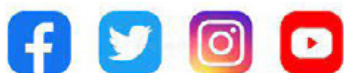
10. What is the aim of the annual shoe box appeal?

☐ Give gifts to children affected by poverty at Christmas.
☐ Gives shoes to people that can't afford them.
☒ Give kids affected by poverty storage for their shoes.

Take the full quiz online - visit www.changingireland.ie



MEET US ONLINE



INDEPENDENT

'Changing Ireland' is an independent, community-based, not-for-profit publication.

ABOUT US

'Changing Ireland' engages in original journalism to highlight the impact of local and community development and social inclusion work in Ireland. We report on action on the ground and provide a space for reflection on what serves people and communities best.

The magazine was established in 2001 and is based in Moyross, Limerick. We value social justice, equality and fair play and to aim to give people who are rarely heard a voice.

We produce journalism to highlight valuable work funded or supported by Government departments and agencies. We provide a platform for those on the ground in communities.

Our readers include workers, activists and volunteers nationwide, civil and public servants and many more involved in social inclusion and community development.

'Changing Ireland' is core-funded by the Department of Rural and Community Development.

See page 4 for information about the team behind 'Changing Ireland'.

SUPPORT

'Changing Ireland' generates a small amount of social enterprise revenue. It is core-funded by Government since 2001, receiving support from the:



**An Roinn Forbartha
Tuaithe agus Pobail**
Department of Rural and
Community Development

Communities losing staff: There is a solution



Money talks and some people are walking away from jobs and potentially from a career in community development. It presents a new challenge for community groups.

One community work co-ordinator told me he scrambled to find another couple of thousand euro to offer a valued staff member looking to depart.

"There's no point," his colleague said. The difference in salary was €15k.

The lost worker was brilliant with marginalised communities and wanted to stay, but in a time of inflation, rising energy costs and looming recession, money talks and now she works in the education sector. She was the organisation's third core staff member to leave in 12 months.

Experienced staff are being hired by the better-paying HSE, local authorities and government agencies.

As the CEO of a local development

company in Dublin tells journalist Kathy Masterson, not a week goes by without them needing to advertise posts or conduct interviews (see pages 5-7).

In Kildare, a community Garda told me of repeated attempts to recruit community-based addiction support workers. Despite repeat advertisements, not one suitable worker applied. In fact, nobody at all applied when the posts were first advertised. The project is in limbo.

The only silver lining to all this is that it must be a good time for graduates.

Nevertheless, there is a solution. The Government says it is serious about its five-year policy strategy for the community and voluntary sector. It recently launched a follow-up document on shared values and principles for when community organisations and the State wish to work together to empower communities (see pages 8-10).

The salaries and retention issue is undermining communities. It is therefore incumbent on the State to listen and to act and ultimately to raise salaries.

Media commentators may liken what is happening with pay in other sectors. We know the gardaí are struggling to recruit, the navy cannot staff all its ships, teachers are impossible to hire and midwives are scarce.

The housing crisis is a contributory factor especially in Dublin where young teachers and gardaí cannot afford the rent. You may well think – the country has more pressing need for gardaí and teachers and midwives than for community development workers.

However, the situation facing us is different. Community workers – often indirectly funded by the State – are perversely being offered better pay in other areas funded by government. However, when they move, it takes them out of the community (usually to desk jobs) and there are around 1,000 unfilled community sector vacancies at present. The situation is urgent. It is the most talked about issue of the day and that's saying something.

Allen Meagher

FILE A REPORT FOR US!

If you believe in Community Development and enjoy writing, why not file a report for us about your community project and what makes it unique. 300-400 words is plenty (and a photo if possible). Certain criteria apply. Your first point of contact should be the editor.



Published By:

Established in 2001, 'Changing Ireland' is a national magazine focused on community development and social inclusion. It is managed and published by Changing Ireland Community Media CLG., through funding from the Department of Rural & Community Development.

Tel Editor: 061-326057. **E:** editor@changingireland.ie

Office: 'Changing Ireland', Moyross Community Hub, Moyross, Limerick, V94 V0NP.

W: www.changingireland.ie

T: @changingireland

F: www.facebook.com/changingirelandmedia/

Y: youtube.com/changingireland

L: linkedin.com/company/changing-ireland

I: changingireland

Also: lssuu.com

Production:

Editor: Allen Meagher.

Journalist: Kathy Masterson.

Students on placement: Caoimhe Lalor.

Editorial Team: Joe Saunders, Robert Carey, Viv Sadd, Paul Geraghty/Padraic Sweeney/Jane O'Connor/Edel Healy and Allen Meagher.

Packing and Distribution: Speedpak, Dublin, an award-winning social enterprise.

Printed by: Davis Printers, Limerick.

Voluntary Board of Directors: Shane O'Sullivan (chair), George Clancy (vice), Andrew O'Byrne, Cathy Jones and Seamus McGiff (sec).

Thanks To . . . 'Changing Ireland' thanks everyone involved in the production of Issue 79.

Front Cover: Main photo by Brian Lawless.



DISCLAIMER

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OVER 300 REMOTE WORKING HUBS NOW CONNECTED



The number of remote working facilities registered with connectedhubs.ie has passed the 300 mark and it was predicted that more than 10,000 remote workers would be registered with the platform by the end of 2022.

The progress was announced in Athlone, on November 24th, at the first **National Hub Summit** which brought together over 200 business people, hub managers, community leaders, policy makers and remote workers.

"It is hard to believe that less than three years ago, remote working was just a concept in Ireland. It's now an everyday reality for thousands of workers and businesses," said **Minister Heather Humphreys**, opening the hub summit. She announced:

- Funding of up to €50,000 for each local authority outside the capital to promote their county to attract remote workers and mobile talent.
- A pilot scheme to start in 2023 that will match employers and employees to specific hubs;
- The Connected Hubs Voucher Scheme (providing free vouchers for people to try out hubs) was extended until December 31st.

Welcoming the progress, **Sean Brady**, CEO of CloudAssist, called for the Government to support hybrid working "as a right so citizens have choices when deciding where they work".

Independent TD **Denis Naughten** described hubs as "the safe halfway house, and the most flexible halfway house".

Currently, a national hub strategy is in the developmental stages. It will take a whole of government approach overseen by an interdepartmental working group chaired by **Mary Hurley**, Secretary General of the Department of Rural and Community Development.

"The sector has to get real about bringing in a proper payment structure"

- says *Dearbhla Conlon Ahern*, SICAP Coordinator in West Limerick

The pressure on local development companies and other community organisations from staff leaving because of salary disparities is increasing, **REPORTS KATHY MASTERSON**.

In Limerick, Dearbhla Conlon Ahern, SICAP Coordinator at West Limerick Resources, told 'Changing Ireland': "We are losing someone in the next few weeks. They're going to a statutory body and we just can't compete. I'm delighted for the person, but it's heartbreaking for us. All the relationship building that you do, then you have to set the dial back to zero. I'm afraid I'm going to see more of this."

She continued: "Our sector is built heavily on building relationships. We are there to deliver the national programme to the people who are facing the most barriers. It's a journey with people. The problem is, there isn't a value set on community development, because it's not tangible."

"The gap between the salaries in the sectors is between about 12 and 14 per cent. The sector has to get real about bringing in a proper payment structure. We shouldn't be a stomping ground for others (to recruit staff). Sláintecare are hoovering up quite a few, as are local authorities."



• *Dearbhla Conlon Ahern*, SICAP Coordinator at West Limerick Resources.

Ms Conlon Ahern revealed that these concerns were raised with Minister Joe O'Brien when he visited West Limerick Resources in October. "Hopefully he will take heed of what we are asking. This is the bridging year between this iteration of SICAP

and the next - now is the time that this needs to be done," she remarked.

Read what others across the country have to say on pages 6-7.

Department aware of difficulties recruiting and retaining staff

The Department says it is "aware of the challenges facing organisations in the Local Development and Community Development Sectors."

The Department of Rural and Community Development issued a brief statement in response to a query from this publication on the issue of recruitment and retention in the community sector.

We sought comment after speaking to people working in the sector who reported difficulties around the recruitment and retention of employees in the sector, which is having an impact on their services and relationships. The main issue they are reporting is the loss of staff to State organisations such as the HSE, as they cannot compete with the salaries on offer.

We also asked if the Department had any information on any future plans to increase funding to Section 10, 56, and 39 organisations to help raise salaries in the sector.

In response, the Department issued the following statement:

"DRCD are aware of the challenges facing organisations in the Local Development and Community Development Sectors around the recruitment and retention of staff. However, DRCD has no funding role in respect of Section 10, 56 and 39 organisations."

STAFF RECRUITMENT & RETENTION

1,000 jobs unfilled amid concerns that groups and communities will be left without resources

BY KATHY MASTERSON



Managers in the community and voluntary sector are warning of a crisis in the recruitment and retention of staff, as salaries in the sector have stagnated due to lack of funding.

In its pre-budget submission in September, The Wheel called for an increase to funding for HSE-funded (Section 39), Tusla-Funded (Section 56), Housing Act (Section 10) homeless services and other statutory-funded services.

The organisation warned that the community and voluntary sector is experiencing “an escalating crisis in staffing” that is jeopardising service delivery and continuance.

However, Budget 2023 did not include any proposals to address pay issues for those in Section

39 and similar organisations.

Anne Fitzgerald, CEO of Ballyfermot Chapelizod Partnership told Changing Ireland how the issue has affected their work: “We are always recruiting; it’s now a constant part of every working week.

“It’s about pay, recruitment and retention. Sláintecare has expanded, and County Councils are moving into the area of community development, and it’s our staff they’re taking. We can’t compete with the public sector salaries, particularly now since the public sector pay deal. Fairness would dictate that where people are doing similar jobs, they would get similar salaries. We did have a lot of equity before, but with one stroke of a pen, that’s gone, destroyed.”

While the issue is a nationwide one, Ms Fitzgerald believes it is exacerbated in Dublin, due to the higher cost of accommodation.

“Dublin is the perfect storm. It’s getting difficult to get around, there’s the issue of housing. In Dublin a salary of €45,000 is just about what you’d need to live. In somewhere like Cahirciveen it’s worth way more, the cost of living is cheaper,” she explained.

When asked if the issue of recruitment and retention would affect her organisation’s services, Ms Fitzgerald replied: “It probably will, in terms of stability, continuity of care. The relationship side can be impacted.”

She continued: “People don’t stay in the job as long. We’ve had people stay less than a year, then they go to the HSE or the Council. We’ve had people who are upset handing in their notice, but they’re saying ‘this means the difference in the mortgage I can get’. It’s a candidate’s field, and that’s good for them. I don’t begrudge people doing better for themselves.

“Sometimes it’s good to get a variety of experience in this sector, and a lot of particularly younger people would change jobs to get experience in different areas. But in a lot of these jobs you’re relying on people building relationships. When people are staying in the job for a year or less, it’s not good for the relationships.”

The recruitment and becoming the main topic of conversation among CEOs in the sector.

According to Ms Fitzgerald: “It comes up every time a group of CEOs in the sector gather together,

retention crisis is

whereas it wouldn’t have two or three years ago.

“CEOs should be spending time on development and doing policy work, but a lot of the time we’re treading water. We’re treading it well; I think we do a good job of keeping it going, but we need something to give somewhere. We need more money. An employee of a community project should be paid the same as a HSE worker in a similar role by the worth of their qualification and the job they are doing.”

As to what can be done to help solve the problem, Ms Fitzgerald said: “As a sector we could have a look at our strategy around hiring older people as a matter of policy. Often you default to the stereotype of hiring young graduates, but maybe part of our survival could be to look at people who have taken early retirement from state jobs.”

In Kerry, Rob Carey at North East and West Kerry Development revealed that the organisation has lost two staff members in the last three months to the HSE.

“We have had very few pay increases. I think we had one increase in the last ten years... A lot of people working in the sector would be below the average industrial wage.”

- Rob Carey, SICAP manager, North East and West Kerry Development.

“We are always recruiting. I don’t think there’s been a week this year where we don’t have some part of the recruitment process on,”
- Anne Fitzgerald CEO Ballyfermot Chapelizod Partnership.

Home > Vacancies > Community

Dublin 12 Local Drugs and Alcohol Task Force: Engagement With Minority Communities

| | |
|---|--------------|
| https://www.activelink.ie/vacancies? | |
| Dublin Simon Community: Flexi Support Worker - Bray / Wicklow (Days & Nights) | Co Wicklow |
| Positive Futures: Support Worker - Sona Service | Dublin |
| Society of Saint Vincent de Paul: Senior Childcare Worker | Co Waterford |

“An employee of a community project should be paid the same as a HSE worker in a similar role”

- Anne Fitzgerald



“It’s the single biggest issue that we are hearing from our members - the inability to recruit staff,”
- Ivan Cooper, Director of Public Policy, The Wheel.

“Before that we had very little turnover. In one way, people moving on is natural, but we wouldn’t be able to compete with the salaries they are being offered. SICAP is losing employees to the HSE; it has come up at a SICAP managers’ meeting. Partnerships nationwide have experienced people leaving,” he said.

Mr Carey continued: “We have had very few pay increases. I think we had one increase in the last ten years, the reason being that our budget hasn’t increased. Ten years ago we weren’t doing too bad, but salaries in the sector have stagnated and now we’re falling behind. A lot of people working in the sector would be below the average industrial wage.”

Ivan Cooper, Director of Policy at The Wheel, revealed: “It’s the single biggest issue that we are hearing from our members - the inability to recruit staff. Grants allocated to our members haven’t been significantly increased for a number

of years. Some of our members have told us that their salaries are 12 to 15 per cent lower than their employees could get if they took jobs elsewhere.

“There is a network that employs people in the community and voluntary sector. They say that there are 1,000 plus posts that are effectively unfilled - it’s a huge problem. The public sector pay increase of 6.5 per cent that was implemented has exacerbated the situation.”

There are fears within the sector that some services may have to be curtailed if the situation worsens.

Mr Cooper continued: “Unfilled posts manifests as people being left without services. And those people are invisible - the system doesn’t collect data on people who are without a service that isn’t there. There is a grave concern that vulnerable people in the community are going to be left without services.

“The only way to resolve the issue is to increase pay. Pay levels in the sector are too low, and they have been low for years, if not decades, since the recession. We need to see a very significant increase in the grants paid to voluntary



sector employees.

“Voluntary sector employees feel they are being taken advantage of, because they (the government) know that they won’t just down tools.”

Earlier this year, The Wheel’s HR partner, Adare Human Resource Management, issued its HR Barometer Report, which revealed that the non-profit sector is facing “unique challenges”.

The report showed a significantly higher rate of employee turnover in the nonprofit sector, with an average in 2021 of 25% and expected turnover of 28% this year, compared to an average of 18% among all sectors.

It suggested that nonprofit organisations should take “a more holistic approach by developing retention strategies that invest in people, focus on organisational culture and enhance the employee experience”.



Ckch, Hsc11, 1122 Community Worker
HSE (Health Services Executive)
📍 Cork, County Cork, Ireland
💶 Not Disclosed
📅 Contract
🕒 08 Nov
Location: Cork Kerry **Community Healthcare**. V and Kerry - a panel will be created as a result of future permanent and temporary...



Community Access Facilitator
HSE (Health Services Executive)
📍 Dublin, County Dublin, Ireland
💶 Not Disclosed
📅 Perma

Dublin City Council Culture Company: Head of Engagement



Dublin City Council Culture Company's work is focussing on embedding cultural experiences and increasing participation throughout Dublin.

The Head of Engagement

VALUES AND PRINCIPLES

It's not the law, but agencies and local and central government now have to pay more heed to relations with civil society

BY ALLEN MEAGHER

An overdue document was launched by Minister of State for Community Development, Joe O'Brien, with help from Ivan Cooper of The Wheel and Rachel Doyle of Community Work Ireland, on October 19th.

It was overdue in so much as it could be helpful for a couple living together for years, even if they sometimes drive each other bananas, to see what they actually agree on.

The seven-page document outlines an agreed set of values and principles to be used by central and local government, as well as state bodies, for collaboration and partnership when working with groups in the community and voluntary sector.

Developed by the sector, in partnership with Government, the aim is to support values such as social justice, and active participation along with principles like respect, collaboration and value for money.

From now on five values and six principles apply when local and national government is working with community groups.

It's not law, so local authorities, agencies and government departments are not obliged to follow it, but the push is on for them to start signing up.

Remarking on the need for such a drive, Ivan Cooper pointed out that one in three people delivering public services in Ireland today work for a charity, a community group or a social enterprise. The sector, he reminded everyone, has an annual turnover of over €14 billion and employs 165,000 people. He described this as "startling" and was of the view that these figures still had not sunk in among those devising policy.

The agreed values are:

1. Social Justice.
2. Empowering Communities, Sustainable Development.
3. Active Participation.
4. Human Rights, Equality and Anti-Discrimination.
5. Social Inclusion.

The agreed principles are:

1. Respect.
2. Subsidiarity.
3. Harmonisation.
4. Value for Money.
5. Implementation.
6. Collaboration.

The launch took place in Outhouse Resource Centre in Capel Street, Dublin, an organisation supporting the LGBT+ community, their friends, families and allies.

The values and principles document relates to plans first outlined in an earlier policy document launched by the Government in 2019 called 'Sustainable, Inclusive and Empowered Communities'.

Videos of the speeches by Mr Cooper, Ms Doyle and Minister O'Brien can be viewed on 'Changing Ireland's Youtube channel.



Minister O'Brien's speech on agreed Values Principles Oct 19 2022

Changing Ireland • 34 views • 1 month ago



Ivan Cooper's speech on agreed Values & Principles Oct 19 2022

Changing Ireland • 54 views • 1 month ago



Rachel Doyle's speech on agreed Values & Principles Oct 19 2022

Changing Ireland • 32 views • 1 month ago

• ABOVE, l to r, from top: The six principles; Dr Carol Baumann, CEO of the Irish Local Development Network chatting with co-director Martin Collins of Pavee Point; Lisa Keveney of DRCD chatting with Deirdre Garvey, CEO of The Wheel (who has since moved to a new job); Department personnel - Mary Hurley, Kathy Parkinson, Minister Joe O'Brien, Paul Geraghty, Michelle Casserly, Lisa Keveney, and Kieran Moylan; Mary Hurley, Secretary General at the Department; Our Youtube videos from the launch.

VALUES AND PRINCIPLES

THIS IS JUST THE START, SAYS COOPER

Ivan Cooper, director of public policy at The Wheel, spoke at the launch to argue for why he felt the values and principles document (see opposite page) was "very important". This is a slightly edited version of what he had to say. The full speech is viewable on our Youtube channel:

People are increasingly aware of the crucial role played by the community and voluntary sector in Ireland. The impressive facts are fairly well known thanks to work of the Charity Regulator and Benefacts. It's worth reminding ourselves that the sector consists of:

- 35,000 community and voluntary organisations.
- 86,000 volunteer directors and trustees.
- 165,000 people employed.

Over €14 billion turnover, half of that raised by the sector itself and half coming from the State in various forms such as grants, service agreements and contracts.

So, there is a real partnership here.

The sector is massive in every respect and is present across the country in many forms. There are tens of thousands of local voluntary community groups, most of them employing no staff and often taken for granted, and focusing on a multiplicity of areas from environmental action to community development.

One in three people delivering public services in Ireland today work for a charity, a community group or a social enterprise.

They form the fabric of our local communities and their presence came to the fore during the Covid crisis, when their work to reach out to older and more vulnerable groups was crucial to keeping communities safe.

The sector is also present in our activist communities it has control much of the resources, working and advocating for a world free of poverty and social exclusion and disadvantage, and for a world free of discrimination and prejudice in all its forms. There is much that remains to be done if the vision of a fair and inclusive Ireland that underpins the values and principles that we are championing is to be realised.

The sector is also present in the thousands of organisations that provide essential services and supports through our hybrid public services system.

Startlingly, one in three people delivering public services in Ireland work for a charity, a community group or a social enterprise. That is a mind-boggling number and it hasn't sunken into the policy system sufficiently yet.

That is the extent of the hybridisation of our public services.

It is important to note that these values and principles are intended to provide a foundation for collaboration and partnership between the sector and central and local government.

The essential role played by our community and voluntary sector across all these facets of national life means that this very diverse sector works in close partnership with the State. It collaborates with departments such as the departments of rural and community development, education, justice, social protection and environment, and also with agencies like the HSE, Tusla, Pobal and the education and training boards.

I cannot emphasise enough the entwined nature in the way the sector and the State collaborate in supporting people in communities and people in Ireland.

In the final analysis, community and voluntary organisations and agencies both work for public benefit. They are not for profit. I believe this crucial fact shows the similarity in the nature of community and volunteer organisations and their statutory counterparts. They are both expressions of our human need and desire to provide for ourselves collectively and inclusively - and to do so with care, fairness and inclusion.



• Ivan Cooper of The Wheel pictured at the launch.

This closeness in both spirit and work is what I think makes the values and principles so important.

I have to be honest. There are unfortunately many places where the relationship is strained and under stress. I need to communicate from the membership of The Wheel.

It is felt that lip-service is sometimes paid to the crucial values and principles we identified. We need to make sure doesn't happen.

How are we going to do that? The State holds a great deal of power in the relationship because it has control of much of the resources allocated to the sector. Remember, this is work that involves what would be regarded by the public, if they were asked, as essential services (that happen to be delivered by community and voluntary organisations).

These principles need to be applied, adapted and lived and there are already important positive processes underway, such as the health dialogue forum between the Department of Health and the HSE and the community and voluntary sector, and

such as Tusla's work to commission services in partnership with the sector.

Which brings me to my main point - while it is great that we have this document, we now need a sustained effort to lead the culture change that is needed at all levels in public services and in all spaces in the sector.

We greatly welcome and note the Minister's intent to champion these values and principles and to work with public sector colleagues to realise their intent. We would encourage a very proactive and ambitious approach to achieve the culture change necessary if these principles are to change the way we do things around here. That is what is needed if a partnership approach is to thrive".

This is just the start of a process, it is just a document. It is emergent, it comes out of places where these values live in the sector and in the system in public services. Those pathfinders need to be the norm. We need to put in place a process.

In furtherance of this, we believe we need to see a programme of awareness raising within the public service and across all relevant departments and agencies to promote these values.

We need formal acknowledgement of the principles and values by all relevant departmental and HSE management teams and the co-option of these principles into their practice.

We need to see reviews of engagement and

Too often we see legalistic and adversarial and conditional small print that takes precedence.

funding processes and procedures and funding agreements to bring them into line with the spirit of these values and principles.

Too often we see legalistic and adversarial and conditional small print that takes precedence and unhelpfully sets the tone in relationships between funders and the organisations they fund.

Finally, we need to see real case studies of what the application of these principles and values would actually look like in practice.

We need processes to roll out the application of these principles and those processes should model the way forward for departments and agencies.

In conclusion, we in the community and voluntary sector must look at our own practice at both organisation and sector levels and ask whether the approach our organisations take is in fact inclusive: Does it respect diversity? Do we genuinely value subsidiarity in our own organisations in the way we work, in terms of de-hierarchising and all the rest of it? We must ask: Do we actually provide and offer value for money?

The sector itself will have to look closely at these values and principles, and ensure that they change culture in the community and voluntary sector for the better. All of that will need resourcing.

VALUES AND PRINCIPLES

Doyle: We are heartened, but not naive

The values and principles document was co-developed by the State and the community and voluntary sector. Speaking at the launch Rachel Doyle of Community Work Ireland warned that without commitment the document “will remain simply words on a page”.

She is optimistic, yet nevertheless said, “I don’t think any of us want to see tokenism or a tick box exercise happening.”

She pointed out that the agreed set of values and the accompanying principles are “all interdependent”.

“They all require direct consideration and reflection on ways in which they can be put into practice. Without reflection and commitment to proactively ensuring they inform and impact on the design and development of policies and programmes, in particular those designed to meet the urgent and pressing needs of marginalised communities, they will remain simply words on a page,” she said.

She was upbeat, encouraged even, by commitment to date.

“We are very heartened by the statement we are making today. We



• Rachel Doyle of Community Work Ireland pictured at the launch.

think further commitment has been given to ensuring that the values are mainstreamed and accepted in the policymaking processes across government at national and local level,” she said.

She recalled how they began work on the document.

“At work we discussed the importance of a shared set of values and that did not come naturally to us.

“We knew what the ethos was,

which was about supporting communities, giving them a say in decisions that would affect their lives, empowering communities.”

She noted the agreed values and principles echo commitments given in the Programme for Government, in the Roadmap for Social Inclusion and in international human rights treaties.

“We have to be able to say what we stand for, what we stand against, what we are willing to support in terms of equality, justice and human rights.

“Overcoming the challenges requires us to work together. We don’t have a choice. All of us have something important to offer.

“To assume that putting values into practice would be naive. It requires all of us to engage in ongoing trust-building, increased power-sharing,

mutual recognition and respect and putting in place structures, processes and the dreaded resources.

“It requires us too to collectively challenge those who promote racism, sexism and disharmony in our communities and in society, including those who align with far right actors.

“I thank Minister O’Brien and all our colleagues and friends in the Department of Rural and Community Development for your work in seeking to ensure that those who need to be heard are heard and in your efforts to achieve what we all hope will be a stronger, better democracy,” she concluded.

- **WHAT WAS LAUNCHED?**
- *An agreed set of values and principles to be used by central and local government, as well as state bodies, for collaboration and partnership when working with groups in the community and voluntary sector.*



Minister says state and community and voluntary sector both want empowered communities

Officially launching the values and principles document, Minister of State at the Department of Rural and Community Development, Joe O’Brien, said: “The publication of these values and principles copper-fastens the renewed relationship and partnership between government and the community and voluntary sector, which has been central in addressing the crises of recent times.”

“These will form the bedrock of engagement and collaboration going forward. I am very proud of our record in working with the community and voluntary sector, but I know we can always go

further. Our mutual objective is to support and empower communities and the individuals within those communities.”

He said both sides had “come to a shared understanding” and he hailed “the values and principles that bind and drive both the sector and state.”

“These values and principles will support consultation, inclusion and participation of communities, particularly disadvantaged communities, in public policy and decision-making at all levels and forms a foundation for collective approaches to local and national issues,” he said.

“The success of this initiative will ultimately be in the realisation and embedding of these Values and Principles, and I look forward to championing them,” he added.

He said he had checked with his Department and the values and principles have been “warmly welcomed” by other government departments. It was important to spread the word widely, he said.

“A lot of people in the community and voluntary sector don’t know that the government has bought into this.

“My Department will champion these values and principles as well as ensuring they remain at the heart of

all we do,” he said.

He singled out one value and one principle and quoted both in full from the document. These are the value of active participation and the principle of subsidiarity.

From now on, the document is intended to be widely used in interactions with the community and voluntary sector.

The seven-page document is available online at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/d4445-values-and-principles-for-collaboration-and-partnership-working/>

TIPPERARY

Communities and families to compete by comparing meter readings

BY KATHY MASTERSON

Tipperary was always a competitive county, but now they are taking it to the next level, pitting families and communities against each other in a competition to see who can achieve the greatest energy efficiencies.

Derry O'Donnell is the development co-ordinator at Energy Communities Tipperary Co-op (ECTC) and he spoke to 'Changing Ireland' about their 'Energy Saving Champions' initiative. It is one of the 18 successful projects under Strand 2 of the €5m Community Climate Action Programme.

ECTC is a community-led, home insulation upgrade and retrofitting organisation, which operates as a one-stop-shop to assist homeowners in securing grant aid, sourcing contractors and overseeing retrofit projects.

Derry explained: "We're a social enterprise, not-for-profit. Any extra money we earn from carrying out retrofitting goes into a community fund, so a community can pay for energy upgrades to their community centre, or parish hall.

"We're able to give people advice on their energy usage and how to access grants to carry out retrofitting. Also, a lot of people wouldn't have the finances available to carry out retrofitting, but hopefully we would be able to find other ways for them to reduce their energy usage."

The Energy Saving Champions initiative is centred on the provision of workshops to homeowners and community groups to raise awareness about household energy consumption.

"The workshops are aimed at helping people to reduce their electrical usage at home, and to get people thinking and engaging with their energy usage. It also includes things like teaching people how to read their bill, and how to check their meter reading," said Derry.

There's also a competitive element to the workshops. "We do a quiz, and one of the questions is: When did the rural electrification scheme begin?"

The answer is 1946 for anyone who is wondering!

Derry continued: "The last house in Ireland to receive electricity was



"The competitive element is a good way of getting the younger people involved in saving energy," said Derry.

in 1978. We use this as a way of highlighting to people how quickly change can happen - people went from having no electricity, to every house suddenly having a lightbulb that they can turn on. Similarly, when we look at electric cars, people say the infrastructure isn't there, there's nowhere to charge them. But where there's a will, change can happen.

"We also have a card game, it's based on a dystopian future where the only way to generate power is with a bicycle hooked up to a generator. We challenge people to pick which appliances use more power. It's an opportunity to talk to people about what individual things use more energy, instead of doing a powerpoint presentation where it can be harder for people to take in the information.

"The workshops help people to have a greater understanding of how energy is used and consumed, to get

people aware of their own energy consumption and ways that they can reduce it."

The funding provided to ECTC by the Community Climate Action Programme will enable the organisation to employ staff for 18 months to carry out the Energy Saving Champions project.

"Without it, the project wouldn't be going ahead," Derry remarked.

There are plans to introduce a further competitive element as the project develops, which would see families and communities compete against each other based on their meter readings.

"The competitive element is a good way of getting the younger people involved in saving energy," said Derry.

He concluded: "The goal is to make sure nobody gets left behind during the energy transition and to make sure that everyone can play their part when it comes to climate action. We are hoping to reach as

TIPP COMMUNITY ENERGY PROJECT STARTED IN 2012 AND IS UNIQUE

This project emerged from a pilot scheme in the Drombane/Upperchurch community in rural Co. Tipperary in 2012. 'Changing Ireland' covered it the time.

W: <https://energycommunitiestipp.ie>



18 PROJECTS SHARE €5M CLIMATE ACTION FUNDING

The Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications announced the 18 successful recipients of the new €5 million fund under Strand 2 of the Community Climate Action Programme on October 27.

The Community Climate Action Programme supports projects and initiatives that facilitate community climate action through education, capacity building and learning by doing.

The programme is administered by Pobal, on behalf of the department.

Altogether, 18 projects from around the country were selected from 72 applications.

They cover a range of activities across the five programme themes: Home and Energy; Food and Waste; Shopping and Recycling; Transport; Local Climate and Environment.

Pobal CEO Anna Shakespeare said: "The range of projects represented in these awards is an indication of this appetite for initiatives that can help communities move towards a more sustainable future. I'm looking forward to seeing the lasting impact your projects will have in empowering communities to change behaviours and habits, and am confident the outcomes will inspire other groups who may wish to participate in further funding strands."

Minister Eamon Ryan said: "There is a massive appetite to take action at individual and community levels. The Climate Conversations 2022, which my department undertook over the summer to get a sounding on where people are at, found that 83 per cent of participants across Irish society are motivated to take action to address climate change."



• Liam Lynch (left) and Derry O'Donnell (right) of Energy Communities Tipperary Cooperative with Minister Eamon Ryan (centre) at the Community Climate Action Programme launch.

Dingle project wins €10k in first 'Changemakers' pitchfest

- *Tuam women in tears after coming close second*



• Alina Barone and Vika Gailite of prizewinning Shamrock Squad Adventures.



• Siobhán Finn, national hub network manager at the CEAI, winners Alina Barone and Vika Gailite of Shamrock Squad Adventures, and Gary O'Meara CEO of Meath Enterprise.



• In tears - Flutura Rrebani, Jamal AlHousamy and Zandile Ndlovu of United Women in Galway. They were runners-up in the pitch-fest.

BY KATHY MASTERSON

An initiative founded by two women hoping to open up more outdoor spaces to children with additional needs has been named the winner of the Champion Changemakers National Pitch-Fest.

Shamrock Squad Adventures, from RDI Hub and Dingle Hub in Kerry, received a prize bursary of supports and services valued at €10,000 to further develop their project.

The social enterprise is a community of special needs families who work with support agencies, service providers and other special needs families to make the outdoors accessible for all needs.

Vika Gailite, Shamrock Squad Adventures co-founder told Changing Ireland: "We are trying to make the outdoors as inclusive as possible. Most of our children are on the (autism) spectrum. Some

have physical disabilities or other intellectual disabilities. We organise walks, nature walks and litter-picking.

"You look on websites and there is information about wheelchair accessibility, but other special needs families are neglected. There are people with hidden disabilities that you can't see. You could go out and the child could have a meltdown, sensory overload, and you don't know what's there that could trigger them."

The network includes ten dedicated families who conduct 'review walks', to investigate if a route is suitable for those with additional needs.

Shamrock Squad Adventures also organises 'open walks' that are attended by between 15 and 20 families.

Vika explained: "We try to make it as easy as possible for them to do these walks. It can be crazy hard to go outdoors when you have someone in your family with special needs. You want to make it as fun as possible for everyone, but most of the time you end up having to turn back and the family can't enjoy the outing."

Shamrock Squad Adventures aims to reach local authorities around the country to advise them which of the walks in their areas are suitable for people with special needs, and what improvements could be made.

'United Women' from Action Tuam is a group of refugee and migrant women living in direct provision in Galway who were 'Highly Commended' by the judges

at the National Pitch-Fest.

The women have come together to support each other and their community. Their ambition is to form a social enterprise using food to integrate communities, promote cultural identity, teach life skills, educate others on their traditions and create employment.

Other ideas presented to the judges featured a new eco concrete solution, a digital support platform for new parents from minority groups, social integration through music and an online marketplace connecting lift-seekers with vehicle owners.

The prize bursary awarded to Shamrock Squad Adventures includes: five dedicated mentoring sessions facilitated by the Local Enterprise Network, access to



FAMILY SUPPORT

ReThink Ireland's 'Start your own Social Enterprise Programme', legal advice from Arthur Cox, and a hot desk space for six months.

Shamrock Squad Adventures said they hope to use the bursary "to accelerate the platform development".

Ms Gailite added: "We are so delighted. It's the recognition; that what you're doing is needed and is worthwhile. The mentorship is gold - to have access to these people and to be able to pick their brains."

She said that their long-term goals include the development of a centre of excellence, to help families learn to navigate the outdoors with their children who have special needs.

"The sky's the limit!" she concluded.

Siobhán Finn, National Hub Network Manager at CEAI (Community Enterprise Association Ireland) said: "The energy, enthusiasm and creativity we saw from the finalists at the National Pitch-Fest was amazing. It was clear every participant is passionate about tackling social and environmental issues and creating positive change in their communities."

"We are so grateful to our excellent judges that were involved in the National Pitch-Fest, all the enterprise centres and hubs who participated in hosting the regional events and our brilliant partners who provided the range of supports and services included in the Prize Bursary. It was a privilege to witness such a high standard of social enterprise ideas and pitches, particularly during a time where these solutions are critical in society and to the economy."

She remarked that Shamrock Squad Adventures' pitch was "incredible".

"They deserve all the success going forward. I cannot wait to follow their social enterprise journey and watch it become a reality," Ms Finn concluded.

Pauline Gannon, co-founder and Director of Impact, Social Impact Ireland on behalf of the judging panel said:

"Champion Changemakers has provided a platform that supports community changemakers to develop solutions to the challenges they experience within their own communities, giving national recognition and supports, to local innovation."

She added that the projects "offer real solutions to overcome real challenges within communities across Ireland".

Campaigners in Erris - size of County Louth - secure project funding

The three-year campaign for a Family Resource Centre (FRC) in Erris, north-west Mayo, was finally brought to a successful conclusion on October 25.

Tusla CEO Bernard Gloster and regional and area managers confirmed to the local steering committee that funding was on the way for the long-awaited facility.

While Erris won't see a FRC established it will get the closest thing to it - funding for a Family Resource Support Service (FRSS).

"The professional and consistent campaign depicted convincingly to The Child and Family Agency and Minister Roderic O'Gorman that the Erris case for a resource such as this was unique and undeniable," said a statement from Tusla.

The distance from other services, the high levels of disadvantage, and the increase in complex family and social needs in the area led the agency to make a commitment to invest in a service to facilitate the community to respond to these needs.

Work on this project began with an initial application in 2018. Three new FRCs were established in the region - the Erris application just fell short coming in fourth place.

There were two key recommendations following the unsuccessful application: set up a local committee to ensure a bottom-up approach, and carry out more localised research.

In late 2018 local research was completed by Strategic Direction under Erris Interagency Network. In autumn 2019 a local steering committee made up of members of the community and representatives from organisations and agencies operating in Erris was established. There followed three years of hard work, dedication, and passion, overcoming obstacles in the campaign caused by Covid-19.

The committee's original request was for an FRC to be part of the national Family Resource Centre Programme. The programme is currently closed to new applications. However, campaigners said there was a compelling case for Erris.

"Taking seriously their statutory obligation, Tusla wanted to act and play their part in supporting a service for the rural community," added the Tusla statement.

Tusla CEO, Bernard Gloster, congratulated the Erris campaigners. He noted "the uniqueness of Erris



• Campaigners, young and old, gathered to celebrate the good news after their successful appeal for a family support project for Erris, Co. Mayo.

in the sheer distance from a whole range of services as set out in the committee's plan".

"That together with aspects of rural isolation presented a very compelling case," he added.

"As opposed to asking the community in Erris to wait for a further round of FRC consideration, I was anxious that we would respond to the acute need in the area."

In an official confirmation, he approved the establishment of a Family Resource Support Service and thanked the committee for their commitment.

Mr Gloster said he looked forward to visiting the area in the near future and to see "what no doubt will be the very positive progress for the weeks, months and years ahead".

Chairperson of the FRC for Erris campaign group, Leanne Barrett explained: "Our vision for the area is an inclusive, sustainable and independent community that is self-sufficient and provides a supportive environment to all those living here. We have always said that any project must be locally-based, embedded in the community, with local involvement and ownership."

"We now have the resources and investment needed to create a project that will strengthen the Erris community and ensure that local families have services and supports available to them in their own area. We really appreciate the support and engagement from local and national Tusla, and the Minister in seriously considering our case and acting on the evidence."

Ms Barret concluded "Cross party and interagency support were crucial

to the approval for this resource. We will continue to work closely with our Mayo TDs and other public agencies and organisations in completing the establishment of this service."

The FRC for Erris campaign set out an annual budget of €160,000 per annum as part of the strategic plan and proposal sent to Tusla and the Department.

The annual core budget granted is €160,000 and will allow Erris FRSS to hire three core staff to serve an area the size of Co. Louth and with a population of just over 8,500 people.

The new service will be run by a voluntary management committee as a registered CLG, and in time a registered charity.

There are currently 121 Family Resource Centres across the country. The Department of Children is not expanding the programme at present. The Erris FRSS will not form part of the programme, but it will work from the same model of family support and community development.



• Blacksod Lighthouse on the Mullet Peninsula, Erris, Co. Mayo. The community is as big as County Louth, yet has a population of just over 8,500 people.

Erris gets status and other opportunities should arise nationally - Tusla

Following the successful campaign by members of the community in Erris, Co. Mayo (see previous page) to secure funding for a family support project, we asked Tusla a few questions about the programme and prospects for other communities to apply for funding.

How many employees does Tusla fund in a typical FRC?

Tusla - Child and Family Agency provides funding to support the work of 121 Family Resource Centres (FRCs) throughout the country. This financial support is provided by way of a contribution towards the running costs of the centres, to cover the employment of two to three members of staff and some overhead costs. Funding with each FRC is agreed annually with Tusla Commissioning and Service Level Agreements are signed. Tusla provides 'core funding' to FRCs which acts as 'animation / stimulation funding' for targeted marginalised communities. This funding is not exclusively for 'Tusla clients' but is also to leverage broader community developments. In addition, some local Tusla Areas fund FRCs to provide additional and specific Tusla related services.

In 2014 the Family Resource Centre Programme incorporated into Tusla National Office and became part of Tusla, the core budget that the FRCs received is historical and came from the Family Support Agency. The Family Support Agency ceased to exist in 2014. The variation in Core Funding is historical.

When is the last time the FRC national programme was open for applications?

The Family Resource Centre Programme expanded in 2018 to welcome an additional 11 new FRCs into the national programme and there would also have been applications that did not become FRCs. It is important to remember that this does not mean that those local areas do not have a need for some type of family support. Tusla funds many family support services directly and through community and voluntary organisations. Family Support is not the exclusive remit of FRCs.

What's the difference between an FRC and an FRSS?

A Family Resource Centre core-funded by Tusla is part of a previous National Programme and while each FRC is an independent organisation, the 121 of them have a national alliance resulting from the original programme. This is helpful in terms of achieving some consistency.

Tusla report to the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth in relation to the FRC programme.

An FRSS is essentially a generic title to recognise that we are funding in Erris a new Family Resource Support Service that is not part of the FRC programme but brings all of the same benefits. If the Minister opens a new round of expressions of interest in FRCs, which he is considering for the coming years, then Erris and many others will be able to apply.



• Erris's new Parent, Baby and Toddler Group in action in October.

FIRST CIVIC FORUM HELD BETWEEN COMMUNITY SECTOR AND THE STATE



• Minister of State Joe O'Brien, Minister Heather Humphreys and Taoiseach Micheál Martin joined 130 delegates from the community and voluntary and state sectors at The Aviva Stadium, Dublin. The Civic Forum was called to start a national dialogue to explore how to strengthen public participation in policy making.

Around 130 people took part in the first civic forum for formal dialogue between national and local government and the community and voluntary sector, held on November 21 in the Aviva Stadium, Dublin.

Organised by the Department of Rural and Community Development, it was attended by Taoiseach Micheál Martin, Minister Heather Humphreys and Minister of State Joe O'Brien.

The theme for the day was 'Co-Creating a Shared Future' and included:

- National and international speakers and roundtable discussions;
- A review of current deliberative and participative approaches to policy making;
- Opportunities to influence how public policy is made;
- Open dialogue between the Sector and the State.

The commitment to set up a civic forum was made in August 2019 with the launch of 'Sustainable, Inclusive and Empowered Communities', the State's first five-year strategy to support the community and voluntary sector.

Attendees at the Aviva included community and voluntary sector leaders and representatives, officials working in local, regional and national government, statutory bodies and government agencies as well as academics and others interested in the event.



• ABOVE: Mauricio Mejia, OECD, was one of the speakers. He said a civic forum was "important because of the size of the community and voluntary sector in Ireland" and spoke of the need for "amplifying underrepresented voices".

INSIDE DUBLIN'S OUTHOUSE ON A DAY OF THUNDER

- CEO Oisín O'Reilly on why this place matters

BY ALLEN MEAGHER

The Community Employment staff and all in Capel Street's Outhouse provide an exemplary service running one of the most important cafés, not just in Dublin, but nationally. Outhouse is more than just a café. It is also an activists' base and has a queer library, a theatre venue, meeting rooms and a history that goes back decades.

The project doesn't just serve greater Dublin's queer community – and allies – but half or more of Leinster.

Most community centres cater for a few thousand people, while this one caters for a community of over 100,000 people, estimates manager and CEO, Oisín O'Reilly.

"We're the centre for the greater Dublin area which has a population of about 1.6 million people, so we're talking about 100,000 to 160,000 queer people who are served by this centre. Pre-pandemic, in 2019, 55,000 people accessed the centre – about one in three queer people in the greater Dublin area.

"So, this is a very alive, vibrant and thriving place," he said, giving 'Changing Ireland' a tour of the building on a day when the thunder and lightning was immense.

The tour begins in the ample basement that is home to Ireland's only queer theatre (it can be hired by any community group for a very reasonable price). Then up a rainbow painted stairs to the café on the ground floor (the soup is delicious) and up plain wooden stairs towards a beautiful long Georgian window and scaffolding (repairs are imminent after minor water damage when the

"Remember that everyone that walks into this building or into a queer space has that moment or question or self-doubt."



• Outhouse as viewed from Capel Street.

building was unoccupied during Covid).

Two rooms are situated on the first floor, each one unique, and he leads us into the one looking out on Capel Street.

"Welcome to the Red Room! (It's painted red). You are now stepping into history," said Oisín. "This room has a lot of meaning for queer people, because a lot of the crucial political meetings about the marriage referendum and gender recognition took place in this room.

"It was here and in the office above us that much of the marriage referendum and the repeal referendum were fought from – so the centre has a very strong connection to social change and

progress in Ireland over the last two decades, not only for LGBT people but for women as well," he said.

Ireland's queer library is in the room next door, with free membership open to the public and 4,500 titles to choose from (and each book is browsable online).

Several support groups use the library for meetings in the evenings, said Oisín.

"We run Alcoholics Anonymous three days a week and Narcotics Anonymous twice a week. We have acting classes, Irish dancing, yoga, book clubs – there's a whole range of activities.

So, what's it like for people visiting for the first time?



• Performing in the theatre in Outhouse.



• Oisín O'Reilly in 'The Red Room'.

"I was one of those people that had to cross this threshold as a young man. And I found a family that I didn't know existed for me," said Oisín. "You'll always find a smile and a welcome here.

"Remember that everyone that walks into this building or into a queer space has that moment or question or self-doubt. All I would say is you'll find love and warmth here," he added.

OUTHOUSE INFO

Outhouse has 15 employees and is open Monday to Friday from 9am to 9pm. It hopes to extend its opening hours to include weekends in 2023.

Outhouse as an entity exists for 25 years and has been on Capel Street since 1999.

The building itself is one of Dublin's oldest, dating back to 1722.

WEBSITE: <https://www.outhouse.ie/>

VIDEO: Take 'Changing Ireland's full tour and see inside Dublin's Outhouse here (7 mins):

<https://bit.ly/OuthouseTour>

GROUPS STILL NERVOUS TO REOPEN

- **Still shut:** Some men's sheds, active retirement groups, women's groups and more
- Work will continue in 2023 to reach out to socially isolated people

BY ALLEN MEAGHER

While most of society has marched on post-Covid, returning to life as it was before, many older people, especially in rural areas and those soaked with fear (justified or otherwise) continue to isolate. It is a challenge that local development companies are addressing.

Declan Costello, a community worker with Offaly Local Development Company, describes a recent 5k walk in a bog on a wintry day by 21 older people as a perfect example of "a good community activation event".

"It's normally a lot easier to reach out to women. They respond better, so we used International Men's Day as the lynchpin for this event and targeted men first. We reached out to all the mens' sheds in the county and after that we opened the invite to all. We still ended up with more women than men on the walk. In fairness, women are great to participate. It's often women who push men out to join sheds.

"We'd have been happier if we got more out, but it was a fairly wintry morning and that would have put off some people, although the rain eased off for the walk. But we were glad to see people such as Mick Lowe who is the secretary of Kilcormac Men's Shed join us."



• Offaly community worker Declan Costello (left) outside Pullough Mens' Shed with local volunteer Martin Buckley, now a community worker with Rehab. Photo by Changing Ireland, 2019.

WHY COMMUNITY GROUPS ARE SO IMPORTANT

Community development workers have solid reasons for seeking out club secretaries.

"There is still a hesitancy and that bit of fear," said Declan's colleague Louise Larkin. "We found out during the year that some chairs and secretaries are very slow to make the call to reopen. They might think of calling a meeting, but then they hear of a few people catching Covid and back off and the place stays closed.

"People might not realise it, but

not all mens sheds are back. Not all active retirement groups are back. It's the same with women's groups, choirs - indeed many groups led by older people. Some groups are nearly gone since Covid.

"We are using SICAP to get them back - not just by organising walks but also by organising coffee mornings for example. We cover the cost.

"We are trying to encourage men's sheds to think outside the shed too," she said.

Again for good reason.

"We are seeing a lessening of social opportunities since Covid," said Declan.

"There is still a hesitancy and that bit of fear... Some chairs and secretaries are very slow to make the call to reopen"

- Louise Larkin, community worker

"People have got nearly three years older since the pandemic and it has taken a toll on older people seeing their peers pass away. Shops and post offices have closed and there are fewer opportunities for people to meet. That's why the groups we support are so important.

"There are still people not back meeting anyone socially," he said.

"It might not be obvious to everyone what we're doing. We're still coming out of Covid and there is no doubt that this work will continue in 2023. It's a slow burn."

MORE: Read reporter Ray Lucey's report on the walk in Boora Bog - opposite page.

BOORA BOG, INTERNATIONAL MEN'S DAY, NOV 17, 2022



• Hardy Offaly walkers pictured at the tea/coffee house after a 5k walk on Boora Bog on International Men's Day on November 17th.

Jaw-dropping stories and regular coffee



• Offaly people at a coffee morning held as part of Social Inclusion Week 2022.

Re-opening after Covid has been slow for some and development workers have focused on reconnecting people.

On the Boora bog walk (see opposite page) community workers Declan and Louise made sure that people could walk at their own pace so they could chat as they went.

"However, it was when everyone sat down for tea, coffee and scones afterwards that people really got chatting," said Louise.

After walking 5k across a bog on a cold day, everyone has something to talk about.

"But it took the walk to bring people together in the first place," she pointed out.

"These are the kind of things we do to get people to socialise. We've learned to use occasions such as Social Inclusion Week, International Women's Day, Men's Day, Bealtaine in May, and so on, to get people together. We've had great success doing it that way."

Declan describes a storytelling day they helped to organise as part of the Bealtaine Festival in May.

"The stories they told were jaw-droppers. It was one of the best days I ever put down in twenty years of being a community worker," he said.

Storytelling online workshops during lockdowns in 2020 led to a book being published and another is on the way.

Reporter Ray Lucey filed a report (on our website) about the launch of 'The Way We Were', and early next year a book written by former Bord na Móna workers will be launched. These initiatives involved multiple agencies working together.

Turn off the news! - Turn on community radio!



BY NOREEN BYRNE

Older people should pull the plug on 24/7 news, believes Dr Noreen Byrne of UCC's Centre for Co-operative Studies. Her academic interests include place-based development and, since the pandemic, she feels senior citizens are being robbed of the latter part of their lives.

Older people like to listen to the news. They get up early in the morning, turn on the radio for the morning news and then might hear it on the hour, every hour all day, or at least at the staple times of 9am, noon, 6pm and again at 9pm. That's a lot of news and often bad news.

Perhaps it's ok, if in between listening to the news, you are out and about. But during Covid, the elderly were confined to their homes, with constant warnings of Covid booming from the radio and TV.

If they decided to tune into the internet for some relief from it all, there was usually a conspiracy theory that caused more stress and noise.

Now that the media have moved on from Covid, the elderly news listener, often at home now since Covid, is listening to the increasing likelihood of Third World or Nuclear War.

If this does not depress them enough, there are the dire warnings (justified yes) of increasing energy and food costs. And of course as we head into winter, Covid will rear its head as a filler on those slow news days. And if one is still not depressed enough, tuning into midday talk radio shows or TV chat

shows, with numerous stories of personal tragedy should do the job.

I have an overwhelming feeling that we are robbing this wise generation of the latter part of their lives. Perhaps, it's time for a grey rebellion which starts with turning off the radio (apart from perhaps John Creedon in the evening, or a historical documentary. Or maybe tune into community radio or an interesting podcast), but for the rest of the time, just unplug it and let the world do what it wishes.

Maybe the real news and stuff of life is just outside our door, in the living world all around us. Community groups across the country are eagerly calling us to take that step and make that reconnection.

Maybe to hear that call, we need to first turn off the constant stream of news. John Moriarty, an Irish philosopher, believed that there is an ancient wisdom in us all and that the world, much of education and the news (he particular singled out the news, although he may have made an exception for 'Changing Ireland') keeps that wisdom suppressed. He advocated an open relationship with ourselves, other people, the place we live in and nature to allow that wisdom to emerge.



WICKED HUMOUR ON WINTERY BOORA BOG WALK

BY RAY LUCEY



• Jane and Michael Lowe having tea and scones after the walk. Michael is secretary of Kilcormac Men's Shed.

Wonderful Lough Boora Discovery Park in County Offaly on a cool International Men's Day, November 19th, was where a friendly gathering of 21 walkers met and forged connections, reacquainted or simply chatted. The atmosphere and banter was infectious, like everybody knew each other, even if not. And thankfully the rain cleared.

Walkers **Michael and Jane Lowe** from Kilcormac said, "It means a lot to us to get out walking, especially at our age, and it's good for our health."

Walker **Philomena Hennessy** said the 5km walk was "thoroughly enjoyable". "Boora is perfect for walking," she added. Asked about the walk being held on International Men's Day, she replied wickedly, "Sure, every day is a man's day."

Louise Larkin of Offaly Local Development Company (OLDC) felt that the walk was a real success as "people got an opportunity to connect with themselves, others and the natural environment. Through these connections they enhanced their wellbeing and supported each other."

Declan Costello, also of OLDC, said the walk was one of a series of walking events organised through the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP).

"Post-Covid 19, it is really important to engage with people who were socially isolated during that time and still are. The main reason for these walks is to reach out to socially isolated older people. They are an emerging needs group."

Opposite page - read about the lingering impact of Covid lockdowns on older people and what is being done to help people emerge from isolation.

In Inishowen, the new Ukrainian Support Workers want to help everyone in the community

BY KATIE BARR

Three new Ukrainian Support Workers in Inishowen, Co. Donegal, want to do everything they can to help not only their people – but everyone in the local community.

Alina Edel, Olena Dzhos and Olha Kysliuk are Inishowen Development Partnership's (IDP) newest staff members. Unlike other staff at the community development organisation, Alina, Olena and Olha all fled conflict and arrived in Inishowen around six months ago from their native Ukraine.

The three women arrived separately in Inishowen last April and May, and now they are employed by IDP to help support other Ukrainian arrivals as they arrive in the country and help them in their journey towards independence.

Alina came from a small town near Kyiv. She provides support to the Ukrainian population living in the Malin and Carndonagh areas primarily, from her base at the Colgan Hall.

Olha, who has been living in Moville Hostel since May, has a central base in Moville Family Resource Centre, while Olena, who lives in Buncrana, works from the IDP office in the town.

The support workers provide translation services as well as employment and CV support for Ukrainians. Alina has also teamed up with IDP enterprise officer, Sinead McDaid, to run the popular Start Your Own Business course for Ukrainian nationals in Carndonagh.

"We have a lot of talented successful business people in the Ukrainian population – they just need a little help and guidance," said Alina. "I think these things will be key for independence as well as helping the local economy", she added.

However it is not just the Ukrainian people that the three women want to help. They are very keen to do their part and give back to the Inishowen people while they are here.

"We are aware of the problems that are facing everyone in Inishowen, not just Ukrainians," said Alina. "We know about the mica crisis and the pressures of the cost of living. We want to be able to help everyone in Inishowen and give back



• Alina Edel, Olena Dzhos and Olha Kysliuk from Ukraine are now living and working in Inishowen, Co. Donegal.

"We know about the mica crisis and the pressures of the cost of living. We want to be able to help everyone in Inishowen and give back to the people after they showed us such empathy and kindness when we arrived"

- Alina Edel

to the people after they showed us such empathy and kindness when we arrived," she said.

"Shortly after we arrived, I attended the volunteer fair in the Colgan Hall and I met a local woman called Carmel Doherty – she organised a lot of help and support for Ukrainian people and set up English classes for us.

"She organised activities for us and helped us to get involved in sports groups/hobbies. She is the heart of the Carndonagh volunteer scene – she is a beautiful lady," she said.

SOME NEGATIVE PERCEPTIONS

While most of the support is hugely positive, IDP is aware that there are some negative perceptions out there, and this has been felt by staff members as well. It's important that people understand that the challenges of housing are faced by many families, especially with the mica crisis in Donegal.

"We are running a charity shop in Carndonagh and people are so supportive and have dropped in to chat and connect. But we received some negative comments on Facebook – the general idea was 'what about us?'," said Alina.

"We know it is a big issue but the Ukrainian people are not guilty here. We didn't want this war and we didn't want to leave our homes – but now we are in this situation.

"I know the government has spent a lot of money – but hopefully as we become more independent, we will need less support from government and be able to contribute to the local economy.

"I feel guilty about it all the time – I realise it is not my fault, but I still feel guilty – psychologists say all the time how bad the feeling of guilt is for your mental health."

Olena explained how they have also had reports from parents that some Ukrainian children are taking up too much teaching time in the

classroom and their children are missing out.

"I cannot turn off the red alerts"
- Olha Kysliuk

Meanwhile, Olha is finding it difficult trying to explain the situation to her children.

"My kids are constantly asking to see Granny and asking when are they going home – they don't understand why we are here. It is very hard to explain it to them," added Olha.

The thought of home is a constant worry and stress facing our new Ukrainian population and IDP's support workers are no exception.

"I cannot turn off the red alerts"

Russia's renewed bombing campaign of parts of Kyiv and other areas, including those far from the front line and civilian areas have hit home for Alina, Olena and Olha.

"Things can change in an instant," said Alina. "I thought my parents were in a safer area in a small town outside Kyiv but anything can happen any moment. You just never know. We just have to hope that everyone will be OK – my parents told me to turn off the red alert texts but I cannot.

"I am very stressed all the time but now that I am working in IDP

“We’re proud of the connections and compassion that has been shown”
- Shauna McClenaghan, IDP.

• Continued from previous page.

Ukrainian people need to keep busy and stop reading and watching the news constantly.

and helping other Ukrainian people I am starting to feel better.”

Olena believes that it will help the Ukrainian people to keep busy and stop reading and watching the news constantly.

“We have a lot of people who were in Mariupol and were under constant shelling. We have one family who were living on occupied territory before they got out and they were denied food,” said Olena.

“But a lot of us are not ready to talk about it yet.”

Alina explained that one family living in the Carndonagh area were living in a town in Eastern Ukraine that was under constant shelling.

“They were very successful business people, but the Russians just came in and took their businesses. They were very, very stressed when they first came. But they began working in our charity shop in Carndonagh and that helped them a lot.”

INTEGRATING THE UKRAINIAN PEOPLE

For now the support workers are doing everything they can to help the Ukrainian people as well as trying to integrate them into the Inishowen community.

“I am glad to be in this job and be able to help the Ukrainian people when they first arrive in Ireland,” says Olha.

“When I arrived the support from the local community was great, but with language barriers there were no people we could ask to explain forms. But now we are here to help with application forms, preschool, school and try to support them into employment. I am there to take their hand and tell them this is the shop, this is the school and I can help with translations and to share information

in general.”

“We want to do everything we can to help our people but we also want to express our gratitude to the people of Inishowen,” said Olena.

“We have educated and skilled people here and we can use those skills to improve this community. We are learning about how strong the sense of community is here and we want our people to get involved also.”

As well as employing the three support workers, as part of their Ukrainian Response funded through the Social Inclusion Community Activation Programme (SICAP), IDP are currently supporting community groups in Inishowen who are providing supports for Ukrainians to aid in their transition as well as integrating them into our Inishowen communities.

IDP has seen first-hand the positive response from communities across the peninsula.

As Joint CEO Shauna McClenaghan acknowledges, “From the first support hub in Malin that led the way to the community groups and hubs that are supporting Ukrainians and building friendships in Ballyliffin, Clonmany, Moville, Carndonagh, Muff, Buncrana, Burnfoot, and elsewhere, this small grant programme is about recognising and supporting that effort.

“We’re proud of the connections and compassion that has been shown across the community, voluntary, and statutory sectors,” she said.



• Inishowen peninsula and Malin Head in Co. Donegal.

POBAL HAS A NEW 5-YEAR STRATEGY

The agency, officially a charity, administered €765m in 2021



• Pobal Chairperson Rosarii Mannion, Pobal CEO Anna Shakespeare with Minister Heather Humphreys for the official launch of Pobal's annual report for 2021 and its new five-year strategy. PHOTO BY CONOR MCCABE

Pobal has launched its strategic plan for 2022 – 2026 outlining how it aims to achieve its vision “to create an equal and inclusive society in partnership with Government and communities”.

Pobal delivers 38 programmes in collaboration with various government departments and its chairperson, Rosarii Mannion, said the plan “clearly outlines what Pobal hopes to achieve in the next five years to support and drive improvement for communities, families, individuals and children”.

Ms. Mannion said, “Progress on our new strategy will be continuously measured, evaluated and reported on and will identify areas for further improvement and to reassess the existing system to ensure that Pobal is well positioned to respond to future challenges.”

The strategic plan was developed in consultation with its staff, the Pobal Board and external stakeholders. Pobal, which is officially registered as a charity, performs an important role in helping to deliver and provide oversight of funding for national and EU-supported programmes in Ireland.

Launching the strategy, Heather Humphreys – who is both the Minister for Social Protection and the Minister for Rural and Community Development – said, “My Department looks forward to assisting and supporting Pobal to

deliver on the important objectives and actions identified over the period of this Strategy and to see the positive impact this will have on Pobal’s continued delivery of services on behalf of Government.”

Minister Humphreys also launched the Pobal 2021 Annual Report. Last year, Pobal allocated around €765 million in funding while administering 38 programmes in the areas of social inclusion and equality, inclusive employment and enterprise, and early learning and care.

She said, “This report clearly shows the key role played by Pobal working on behalf of Government, in administering and managing schemes and programmes funded by my own department and others as well as using its expertise to provide high quality services, projects and research to Government.”

Pobal CEO, Anna Shakespeare, said, “The report also clearly shows Pobal’s role as a unique and highly skilled organisation with extensive expertise in designing and developing programmes as well as providing a range of additional services to Government.”

She said the report “also demonstrates our ability to undertake new programmes on behalf of a growing number of Departments”.

You can download the strategic plan and annual report from:

<https://www.pobal.ie>

Three counties show best how to support social enterprises

INTRODUCTION

BY CAOIMHE LALOR



It's not usual for businesses in Mayo to call businesses in Tipperary or Limerick for advice, and vice-versa, but in the world of social enterprise surprising things are possible.

Over the past two years, three local development companies – there are 49 across the country – linked up 30 social enterprises in these counties for training and development. It culminated in a day of questioning in Newcastle West, Co. Limerick, on Thursday, October 20th.

The questions asked covered the future of social enterprise in Ireland and how national programmes such as LEADER and the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP) can be better attuned to support them. Who better to ask than staff and volunteers involved in heritage projects, community cafés, arts centres, carers' groups and local tourism outfits?

They included, to name but three, people from Roots Community Café in Co. Limerick, the Michael Davitt Museum in Co. Mayo and Burncourt Community Council in Co. Tipperary. (The full list of social enterprises is listed below).

They came together due to work in support of their semi-commercial ventures led by three LDCs – West Limerick Resources, South Tipperary Development and South West Mayo Development. The LDCs couldn't have done it on their own, but knew where to go for funding and support.

Overall, the 'Co-operating to Succeed' (C2S) initiative covered 11 areas through 22 workshops over the two years. Yvonne Corcoran Loftus, a museum curator from Mayo, said it helped her staff to upskill in areas such as marketing.

"The training has had a direct influence on the things we achieved," she said.

So what sets a social enterprise apart from a regular business? Social enterprises work primarily to improve the lives of people, with profits from their business activities reinvested in pursuit of social objectives. They are more often than not unable to operate fully commercially, but have a key business element to their operation. (An official definition is provided on the following page).

Training was one part of the C2S initiative. What made it different was that bespoke training was also provided on-site to each of the 30 social enterprises. The aim was to make them highly effective operators and for them to connect with and learn from each other.

Caoimhe Lalor, a community development student on placement with 'Changing Ireland' attended the final day in Newcastle West and spoke to organisers and social enterprise leaders. She wanted to know what made it work.



Katie Murray, rural development officer with West Limerick Resources, said, "Over two years ago, we sought to work with partners in the same position. That is how we have South Tipperary Development and South West Mayo Development working with us.

"We were all similar but different. The social enterprises in West Limerick generally would be new and wouldn't have [thought of] calling themselves social enterprises. We also had longer established ones. They needed supports that were different to what we normally roll out.

"We wanted a bespoke programme tailored for each of the social enterprises, which was similar to what Mayo and Tipperary wanted as well.

"We came together and submitted a form for LEADER funding, which was successful. Caroline Egan of Cramden Tech secured the contract and we worked with Caroline to develop a programme of supports.

"This was planned just as Covid was kicking off and we had to take into consideration the restrictions. We would have liked more frequent physical meetings, but we had to hold meetings online. The programme still met the objectives that it was supposed to meet and the three development companies worked very well.

"We have made connections between three counties. We have supported 30 social enterprises - ten in each county and they've all made connections among themselves.

"We as development agents also learnt from each other," she said.



The development companies saw that social enterprises had some common training and mentoring needs. Sara Bourke, rural development project officer with South Tipperary Development, recalled how everyone came together on Zoom.

Over the two years, 119 participants learned about governance, cyber security, communicating impact, accessibility in buildings, secure trading online, human resources and much more.

Trainers also called to each enterprise and stayed up to a week to help with "areas of difficulty".

"Depending on what each one needed, trainers went into each enterprise for up to seven days. They had a hands-on approach. That was the strength of the programme: There was the coming together, but there was also the individualised training," said Sara.

The three lead organisations knew where to go for support.

"All three of us work under the LEADER programme and we brought in colleagues from our SICAP programme because they also have a social enterprise remit and that was how it was born.

"Now the programme is coming to a close, a report will be produced that outlines its benefits. This will give us signposts to what enterprises need going forward. It will help us to inform the agenda of the next Rural Development Programme (RDP) and the next SICAP programme," she said.

SUPPORT

West Limerick Resources, South West Mayo Development Company and South Tipperary Development led the 'Co-operating to Succeed' initiative. It also received support from the Department of Rural and Community Development through programmes such as the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme and LEADER. The initiative also had support from local authorities and local community development committees in each county, the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development, and partners Local Enterprise Office Mayo.

MAYO, TIPPERARY & LIMERICK

119 staff and volunteers from 30 social enterprises in Mayo, Tipperary and Limerick upskilled and made valuable new connections during the two-year 'Co-operating to Succeed' initiative.



Norita Cleeshem, LEADER project officer with South West Mayo Development, recalled the first networking event which was held in Mayo.

"The theme was the environment. So we had different enterprises involved such as the Edible Landscape (a project in Westport) with nature activist Mary Reynolds as a key speaker. That was the first event we did post pandemic.

"Then we had the one in Tipperary and the theme there was social inclusion. We had speakers and enterprises there talking about their experience.

"The theme today was looking at the wider concept of enterprise and the future. We had very inspiring speeches and very good engagement.

"It showed us the value of networking. Even though the enterprises are different and geographically apart, there are a lot of similarities. You could see the learning in terms of challenges, vision and growth.

"The value of networking is that rather than enterprises developing and making the same mistakes, they can make new mistakes and they can learn from each other. We have set up relationships now and they can collaborate.

"Through the programme we introduced themed elements - heritage, community centres and community facilities. We married those so when the programme is over they can talk to each other. That was the ethos of the whole thing as this was a co-operation project. We have seen huge benefit in running it this way," she said.



Lorraine Higgins is the manager of West Limerick Sports Complex in Newcastle West.

"Our business has been running for 23 years and we changed to a social enterprise model in 2017. It seeks to help people with improving both their physical and mental health," she said.

"We have a health and leisure facility offering a swimming pool, sauna, exercise studio, gym and coffee dock. We are trying to take the barriers away from exercising, to open up our facilities to people that might not be able to afford or access a facility."

"We run an inclusive facility for everybody - no matter your age, fitness level or ability. We probably doubled our numbers in the last four years.

"We are expanding rapidly. We wanted to get involved in this programme because we needed professional guidance on how to expand, how to scale up and how to strategically plan for the next five years so we are able to tackle anything.

"Our board is made up of voluntary members and now we have a roadmap of where we were going and developing smaller steps on how to get there. We want to expand the centre on the two acres next door and we are planning for that," she said.



Yvonne Corcoran Loftus, curator of the Michael Davitt Museum, is also passionate about her project.

"Embarking on the 'Co-operating to Succeed' programme gave a chance to staff to upskill; in areas such as marketing, which is of huge benefit to the museum. The training has had a direct influence on the things we achieved. We have a more skilled workforce, more efficient work practices and a fantastic digital footprint. Our Facebook has grown from just over a thousand people to 4,500 followers now. It is because of the improved content - we have some fantastic content."

The programme included on-site training.

"It was fantastic. He really interacted with the staff. Ideas were emerging from the staff and he just discussed it with them. He helped them develop their ideas and put them into action," she said.

She thanked the trainers "for what we achieved with this".

"I would like to also thank Norita Cleeshem from South West Mayo, people from the LEADER project and everyone involved."

"It was a fantastic networking opportunity. You got to know other enterprises. You can touch base with them. You can question and promote each other.

"Enterprises do so much. I think it is fantastic that social good that is happening around the country," she said.

WHAT IS A SOCIAL ENTERPRISE?

"Social enterprises are businesses that work primarily to improve the lives of people. Their core objective is to achieve a social, societal, or environmental impact. They frequently work to support disadvantaged groups such as the long-term unemployed, people with disabilities, travellers, etc., or to address issues such as food poverty, social housing, or environmental matters.

"Like other businesses, social enterprises pursue their objectives by trading in goods and services on an ongoing basis. However, any surpluses generated by social enterprises are re-invested into achieving social objectives, rather than maximising profit for their owners."

For a fuller definition, see: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/624c74-social-enterprise/>



Social Inclusion & Community Activation Programme

30 GROUPS

The 30 social enterprises with a description of what each one does are listed at: www.changingireland.ie



Integrated young Castleisland boxers win awards as well as biggest haul of medals

BY KATHY MASTERSON

A County Kerry boxing club that was established in 2006 to help improve relations between youths from the Travelling and settled communities has become a knockout success.

Sliabh Luachra Boxing Club in Castleisland has enjoyed a record-breaking year, with two of its members taking home silver at European championships.

Club manager Jennifer O'Sullivan Coffey told Changing Ireland: "The club started in 2006 as part of a project by the then Sliabh Luachra Development Company. At the time there was some trouble in Castleisland between Travelling and settled children, so we had to come up with ideas on what would be an appropriate way to get people involved.

"On our opening night, we had 60 young people. We had no home, we had nothing, and we just decided to hire a hall."

Jennifer, who is also a development worker with North East West Development Company, added: "Really it's not just a boxing club, it's a tool to bring young people in, to see what's going on with them. Our aim was always that the boxing club would stand alone. It's non-profit, any money that is made goes back into the club."

Today, the club has more than 70 members aged eight and over, with a mix of nationalities and backgrounds.

Jennifer said: "This year about 60 per cent of our boxers are from the Travelling community and 40 per cent are settled. We have boxers coming from all over Kerry. We allocate spaces to local young people first and then open it up to people further away.

The club this year won six national titles, six Munster titles, 20 county titles, a gold Kerry Community Award and one member won a Garda Youth Award.



"We had a record-breaking number of wins this year. We won six national titles, six Munster titles, and 20 county titles.

"One of our members won a Garda Youth Award, and the club won a gold Kerry Community Award," she said.

Club member Jamesie Casey (14) from Killarney took home a silver medal from the European Schools Championship, held in Erzurum, Turkey in August.

Another, Mary McDonagh, is a European Junior 75kg silver medalist following the European Junior Championship in Montesilvano Italy in October.

"There is a rich history of boxing in Castleisland. My great-grandfather and my grandfather were involved in boxing. It's funny the way things happen; I'm now Chair of the Kerry County Boxing Club and manager of Sliabh Luachra Boxing Club," Jennifer said.

It is perhaps because of this rich history that the club has been able to benefit from a local pool of talented coaches, who Jennifer says also act as mentors to the boxers.

"The club is lucky in that we have fantastic coaches. They give massive support both inside and outside of the club to all our boxers. They know they can contact the coaches any

ABOVE: Members of Sliabh Luachra Boxing Club at their recent awards night. BTM RIGHT: Jamesie Casey, European silver medalist.

• LEFT: European silver medalist Mary McDonagh with club manager Jennifer O'Sullivan Coffey.

"About 60 per cent of our boxers are from the Travelling community and 40 per cent are settled"

time outside of the club if they have anything going on in their lives," she explained.

Aside from its achievements in the ring, did the club succeed in its original goal of helping to bring the community of Castleisland together?

"Oh it did, for definite," said Jennifer. "We did a presentation on the club for the Minister of Sport some years ago as an example of good practice, and we were given recognition for that.

"There is no difference, it (background) doesn't matter, that's not the culture in the club. The ethos here is that as soon as you walk in the door, you're part of our boxing family, it doesn't matter where you're from, once you follow the rules. They all work together."

Campaigners end social enterprise tour with a message to... **Measure your social impact!**

BY CAOIMHE LALOR

Social Impact Ireland (SII) - an organisation that supports social enterprises - held events in Galway, Dublin, Longford and Limerick recently as part of a campaigning tour to promote social enterprise. Along the way, SII staff met many social enterprises and their message was to “measure your impact”.

The ‘Impact Trail’ campaign’s final event took place in Limerick, on October 5th, and reporter Caoimhe Lalor was there. She spoke to staff members and to people from two social enterprises who had taken part in SII’s incubator programme:

Ciara Regan is a social inclusion officer for Social Impact Ireland (SII) with responsibility for research on outreach methodologies.

Her role involves finding out “how to reach more people effectively” and she developed an action plan for how to reach those most marginalised in society. It includes nine recommendations on how better to connect with people.

Through her work, Ciara has met many groups including “people with hidden disabilities, people with sight and hearing impairments, ex-prisoners, digitally excluded people and unemployed people”.

As part of her research, for instance, Ciara examined Limerick-based service ‘Gateway to Education’, which operates an afterschool programme and a charity shop. She found that part of the reason this enterprise did so well was because the community was under-served, forgotten about. However, Ciara noted the challenges: “People don’t want to volunteer forever. And without impact you don’t have a business.”

Evelyn Pepperrell is Social Impact Ireland’s office manager and programmes communication officer. She is also the mother of three children on the autism spectrum. She

first became involved with SII in her role as chairperson of parent support group Attention Deficit Disorder Midwest. The group took part in an eight-month business incubator programme to learn about marketing and other areas of enterprise.

In 2020, Evelyn joined the SII team and now helps to create the organisation’s online programmes. She said, “It’s about meeting other enterprises that are doing good for their community. We have designed a platform to connect people called Closer which is about sharing stories, sharing ideas and collaboration.”

WORKING AND WALKING ENTERPRISES

SII runs an incubator programme designed to develop sustainable businesses that make a positive social impact. It includes workshops, mentorship and other supports. The organisation also runs a business advice clinic, which offers consultancy sessions to help social enterprises address challenges.

Daragh Forde is a job coach with Cork-based advocacy group **The Ability Board** which strives to see more young people with intellectual disabilities and/or autism enter the labour market. He was a guest speaker at the Impact Trail event in Limerick where he spoke about the value of going on SII’s incubator programme in 2021.

“It was fantastic being part of a group. I was new to social enterprise. I was going in as a person that knew nothing. They helped you through every part of the process,” he said.

“What was actually phenomenal was that after you graduate from the programme the support continues. It was really tailored to your own social enterprise. You can email, call or text them with anything you need help with. It’s an incredible amount of support,” he said.

He also learned how to apply for



• Daragh Forde and friends at the 'Impact Trail' event in Limerick.

funding – “what terms to use, what people are looking for and how to measure impact.”

Incidentally, the Ability Board recently won an Aontas Star award for giving learners a voice.

T: <https://twitter.com/abilitycork>



Siúl Eile is a social enterprise that develops walking programmes for rural communities. Founder **Liam Fleming** attended SII’s first incubator programme in 2016.

He said: “We knew nothing about enterprise. That first incubator programme taught us all about enterprise. It helped us get up off the ground.”

Now, his group’s walking trails help thousands of people reach higher ground. Over the last six years, over 6,000 people have participated in Siúl Eile’s walking programme. It has organised around 1,500 walks, from 2km walks to mountain trails, in over 25 communities.

W: <https://siuleile.com/>

WHAT IS SOCIAL IMPACT IRELAND?

Established in 2016, Social Impact Ireland helps social enterprises. Its co-founders are Pauline Gannon and Eamon Ryan and it employs six people operating from offices in Limerick, Dublin and Cork.

SII is partners with Nexus Innovation Centre and the Kemmy Business School in UL, the Ludgate Hub in West Cork and three local development companies - Clare Local Development, South East Cork Area Development and North East West Kerry Development.

The organisation strives to make a difference in people’s lives through social enterprise.

As per its mission statement, SII helps social enterprises through five main actions:

- Leadership;
- Elevating;
- Collaboration;
- Passion;
- Expertise.

To find out more, visit:

www.socialimpactireland.ie

ADVICE SITE LAUNCHED FOR SOCIAL ENTERPRISES AND OTHERS

Good advice is worth its weight in gold and new governance resources for community-based projects, in particular social enterprises, have been developed and published online where they are now freely accessible.

The extensive online library of resources, launched in November, is part of a new project called the **Social Enterprise Policy Bank**.

Resources include, for example, a 25-page guide for boards of directors of organisations with charity status.

Downloads include:

- Social Enterprises and Community Development.
- Pobal's Managing Better Series.
- The Spark Toolkit.
- A Social Enterprise Toolkit.

The website has links to national bodies such as the Irish Social Enterprise Network, the Social Entrepreneurs Academy, and Social Enterprise Republic of Ireland.

It links to a 60-minute recording on Youtube of a Governance Workshop for Social Enterprises delivered by Philip Isard. He has produced seven more resource videos for the project. They are worth checking out even if your community organisation is not a social enterprise.

For aspiring students, the website provides a link to Maynooth University's Certificate in Social Enterprise. More courses offered elsewhere such as by UCC's Centre for Co-operative Studies should be added in time.

The project's overall aim is to help Irish social enterprises achieve good governance and meet their statutory and legal obligations and it was officially launched in Monaghan by Minister Heather Humphreys on November 14th.

The project was developed by Monaghan Integrated Development, Cavan County Local Development and Louth Local Development with support from a research charity called Quality Matters. The project is funded through the Department of Rural and Community Development with support from the Dormant Accounts Fund.

Have a gander and decide for yourself!

W: <https://sepolicybank.ie/>

Faithful county takes Welsh path to forging community resilience



• Activists gathered in Offaly recently to see the old ballroom in Kilcormac which is soon to be transformed into Green Offaly's HQ. Pictured above are members of Green Offaly, Youghal Blue & Green Community Network, Loop Head Together, Dingle Hub, Inishowen Development Partnerships and Aran Islands Energy Cooperative with Duncan Stewart.



BY KATHY MASTERSON

In 2021 Bord na Móna announced that its suspension of peat harvesting, effective since 2019, was to become permanent. This was welcome news for environmentalists. However, for those living in peatland areas, it raised concerns about employment and the future of their towns and villages.

Offaly resident Rebekah Keaveny came up with a solution drawn from her experiences living and working in former mining towns in Wales.

She is the co-founder and project development co-ordinator of Green Offaly, a Development Trust that helps communities to set up green enterprises to create a more sustainable future for their area.

A Project 2040 seminar in Dublin entitled 'Empowering Communities

in the Fight Against Climate Change', which Rebekah attended as Offaly Public Participation Network environmental representative, set the wheels in motion.

She told 'Changing Ireland': "The Government ministers said: 'We have €22 billion committed to help do this transition to a sustainable future. What is needed is a seismic shift in society'. They didn't know quite how that was going to happen. How do you get citizens on board? How do you change behaviours? So I went away from that meeting and I thought 'How would you do it?'"

"Offaly PPN then got funding to engage with communities, ask them how they felt about climate action, ask them what was stopping them from initiating environmental projects, and we also introduced the idea of a Development Trust.

"Wales was very much an extracted landscape in parts; you had the coal mining communities, you had the closure of steelworks. There wasn't a just transition, communities were left - for two generations pretty much - until the Development Trust model was born in the early 1990s.

"A Development Trust is set up within a community or a town, and works in partnership with the community, with businesses, with

"It's not so much about climate action, it's about resilience. It's about communities being food secure, energy secure, economically secure, those are the things that are really important."

local authorities to regenerate a place. So they'll take a building, they put social enterprises or services in it, basically giving life and regeneration back to the town. I thought: 'We're in Offaly, we're looking at an extracted landscape and the Development Trust model might work here.'"

And so, Green Offaly (GO) was born. The company is split into two arms - GO Projects, which is mainly focused on assets, regeneration

• Continued on next page.

Green Offaly is the only county-wide organisation of its kind in the Republic and probably all of Ireland

• Continued from previous page.

and income generation; and GO Futures, which is centred on training, education and research.

The first regeneration initiative undertaken by GO Projects is the Fiesta Ballroom in Kilcormac. Green Offaly received funding under the EU's Just Transition Fund, which aims to provide support to areas facing socio-economic challenges arising from the transition towards climate neutrality.

Working in partnership with Offaly Local Development Company and the Trench Trust, who purchased the building and provided match funding, Green Offaly plans to transform the old ballroom into Ireland's first Green Headquarters.

Rebekah explained: "It's going to be a community-centred climate action green enterprise. We'll have a hub for start-ups that are working towards sustainable and green solutions in Offaly."

"The old cinema will become a lecture theatre. We'll have conferencing space. We're going to keep the cultural heritage aspect of it so we'll still have music and events. The front will be a coffee house; a local social enterprise will run that."

Green Offaly has also completed a feasibility study to determine whether Offaly's peatlands would be suitable for UNESCO Biosphere Reserve status.

Rebekah says that for many peatlands communities, the end of peat extraction "came out of the blue".

"These communities thought they had until 2027 to prepare. In the consultations there was a lot of worry about the peatlands, about the towns being deserted, young people leaving, and a dystopian vision of Offaly being a windfarm reservation. So we thought 'How can we address that?'"

"We thought the Biosphere Reserve could be the answer, evolving the peatland identity, securing income from tourism - a continuing legacy of employment, but through a different lens. Now we've completed that study, the upshot is yes, it would be very beneficial for Offaly, but we still have a good four years' work ahead before we'd be able to make a submission to UNESCO."

Green Offaly also discovered that many communities were seeking



• Bridie Costello Hynes, Green Offaly Director; Rebekah Keaveny, Green Offaly Project Development Coordinator; and musician Luka Bloom at the launch of Green Offaly in 2019.

advice and technical support around community-owned energy schemes.

They are currently working with Community Power, an energy provider that buys renewable electricity from small hydro and wind generators across Ireland, to write guides for communities interested in establishing a community-owned energy project.

When asked if enough is being done at Government-level to support a just transition in local communities, Rebekah said: "I think there's a disconnect between government policy and what is happening on the ground, and the reality of delivering on that. It's a whole new arm of community development and it needs to be resourced as such, it needs to be a national programme. You can't expect volunteers to do this."

"People have to address their social and economic needs before they even have the luxury to think about climate change. Electric vehicles, retrofits, they're prohibitive to the majority of the population."

She recalls a phrase she heard at a recent Local Futures conference in Cork: "'We're not faced with a series of problems, because problems have solutions. We're faced with a series of predicaments'. From that perspective, it's not so much about climate action, it's about resilience. It's about communities being food secure, energy secure, economically secure, those are the things that are really important."

On communities and a just transition: "It's a whole new arm of community development and it needs to be resourced as such, it needs to be a national programme. You can't expect volunteers to do this."

CONTACT GREEN OFFALY:

Website:

<https://greenoffaly.ie/>

Instagram:

<https://www.instagram.com/greenoffaly/>

Facebook:

<https://www.facebook.com/GreenOffaly/>

CALL FOR VOLUNTEERS

Take action over violence against women

Singing is one way to protest and singer/songwriter Lisa Murray from Meath launched a new single 'Woman in a World' in November with all funds going to Women's Aid. Her song was one of hundreds of actions taken as part of the 16 Days of Action campaign.

The campaign runs annually from November 25th (UN Day For the Elimination of Violence against Women) until December 10th.

If you wish to take part in a long-term action, Women's Aid is recruiting for its volunteer team for the 24hr National Freephone Helpline (1800 341 900).

For more on the campaign, or to volunteer, visit:
<https://www.womensaid.ie>



WINNERS

Donegal school wins top Social award

Students from Mulroy College, Milford, Co. Donegal have won the Foroige-sponsored 'Best Social Enterprise Youth Entrepreneur Award'. It was presented to them by Minister Heather Humphreys at the National Social Enterprise Conference on November 17th.

The students won the award for producing a book to help children understand hidden disabilities.

Mulroy College is a co-educational post primary school under the management of Donegal Education and Training Board.



• Minister Humphreys congratulates prize winning social entrepreneurs Livvy, Lucy and Millie from Mulroy College in Milford, Co. Donegal.

RURAL IDEAS FORUM

100 people propose ideas for a more socially inclusive rural Ireland

BY KATHY MASTERSON

The sixth Rural Ideas Forum took place in November, with participants focusing on the issue of social inclusion in rural Ireland. The virtual gathering of almost 100 key rural stakeholders aimed to generate ideas about tackling exclusion and isolation, through SICAP and other social inclusion initiatives.

Opening the discussion, Minister for Community Development, Joe O'Brien, said the Department's Our Rural Futures plan was "a hugely ambitious plan for rural Ireland and one which is already having a positive impact in communities, towns and villages across the country".

A poll among the participants found that the issues of transport, access and employment were viewed as the biggest challenges to a socially inclusive rural Ireland (see our pie chart).

Paul Geraghty, principal officer for the Department's Social Inclusion and Communities Unit, told participants that he was "determined to reflect any good ideas" as his team designed the next iteration of the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme.

There were key inputs at the event from Maria Molloy, AMACH LGBT Galway; Justin Sammon, Mayo North East Local Development Company; and Eamonn O'Reilly, CEO, North East/West Kerry Development.

CULTURAL EROSION

Mr Sammon told the online gathering: "One of the great poverties of rural Ireland has been cultural erosion, where we have been divorced from our language, divorced from our countryside, and we need to readjust that."



• Justin Sammon, Co. Mayo.



• The Tidy Towns competition, in existence since 1958, was one of the best ideas for rural Ireland. Above - Tidy Towns volunteers in Sligo. The photo was used to promote the Rural Ideas Forum held on November 15.

"One of the great poverties of rural Ireland has been cultural erosion, where we have been divorced from our language and divorced from our countryside. We need to readjust that."

"It's like what happened with Travellers in the 60s when plastics came in - the basis of their culture, of making things, was destroyed overnight, and therefore you get a dispossessed sort of people. The same has happened in rural areas, if you take the example of islands and the Gaeltacht, where the lack of population and the lack of leadership has left these people isolated."

He highlighted some of the successful initiatives currently being undertaken in Mayo North East, such as a Folklore initiative, which saw elderly people share their stories with the community, and a restorative agriculture project in which native cattle breeds were reintroduced to Achill Island.

He said that Mayo North East Local Development Company is also collaborating with NUI Maynooth and UCD on an Anthropology of Food research project, which examines how a particular landscape dictates the

food available to a community.

"We tried to bring in universities in those initiatives because there's a dearth of leadership in rural areas sometimes due to migration and we need the intellectual rigour of universities. In the folklore department for example we have George Mason University in America in Virginia and the professor has seconded herself to Mayo North East for the year to work with us on developing folklore and getting American students to talk to the elderly in Achill and Mayo," he added.

RURAL ISOLATION IN THE LGBT+ COMMUNITY

Maria Molloy, Vice-Chairperson of Amach LGBT+ in Galway acknowledged the advances made in Irish society in terms of the LGBT+ community, but warned "there is still a way to go".

"We see through the work we do that there are members of the LGBT+ community who are in rural settings and have a fear of not being accepted. The isolation comes from that they can't be their whole self in the place they live."

"We had people who, probably for the first time in their lives - we had an 80-year-old farmer - come in and say, 'I'm part of this community and I feel that I belong.' They felt that they could be their whole self with us, but when they got back on that bus, they went back into the closet, so that's the aspect that we wish to tackle," explained Ms Molloy.

She revealed that Amach LGBT+ opened its resource centre, Teach Solais in 2017, but due to the Covid-19 pandemic it closed in 2020, and has not opened since.

"Our aim is to reopen an LGBT resource centre, if we get sustainable funding again."

Covid brought about alternative ways to access people so we've maintained that blended approach to the activities that we use. We're conscious of the fact that some people in rural settings mightn't be able to afford to get into the town, or they mightn't be out, they mightn't be comfortable, but online is a comfortable space for them," Ms Molloy added.



• Around 100 people took part in a forum for a more socially inclusive rural Ireland. They looked at the challenges and despite a tight timeframe of two hours, came up with plenty of suggestions.

FOUR PILLARS OF SOCIAL INCLUSION

Eamonn O'Reilly, CEO of North East and West Kerry Development (NEWKD) stressed the importance of looking at social inclusion under four pillars: income, contribution to society, support, and decision-making.

Regarding supports, Mr O'Reilly said: "The third pillar that I'd look at is support. The network of support that people feel; whether it's their family, the community itself, people of like-mind. The issue here is the lack of resources in community development since the recession. We haven't really got back to meeting people where they're at, and giving them the time to talk to them and see what are their issues."

He also highlighted a successful project that NEWKD has carried out for several years, which provides tractor-driving lessons to young people.

"We've been trying to bring people in, between 14 and 16 years of age, who are allowed to drive but don't have the skills and maybe don't have the awareness. It draws them in to activities that community groups like ourselves do. So it's not just about the tractor-driving, it's a bit about how can we get more young people involved in our sector. Once you have them linked in, other things will flow from that."

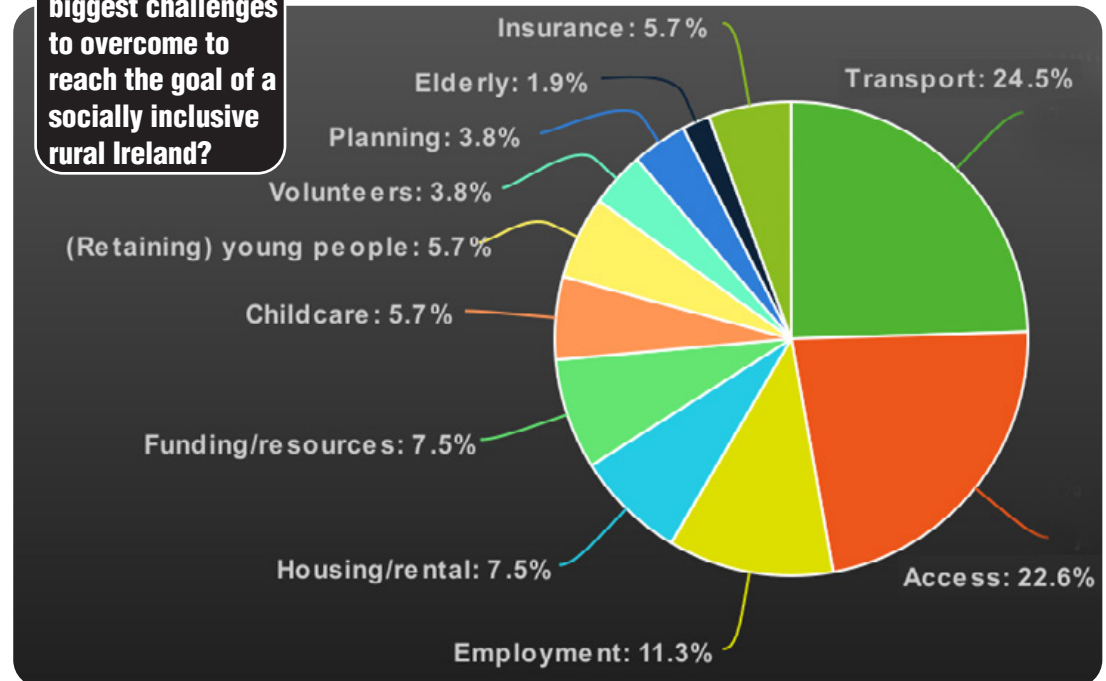
NO ONE TEMPLATE

At the close of the discussion, Mr Geraghty noted: "We're really hearing that there's not a single template for solving the issues of urban and rural exclusion in Ireland. We're hearing that, we're working with you through that."

Minister O'Brien remarked that intergenerational projects, such as the folklore project mentioned by Mr Sammon, "is something we probably could and should do more of".

10 challenges facing rural communities

Q: What are the biggest challenges to overcome to reach the goal of a socially inclusive rural Ireland?



• At the Rural Ideas Forum, participants were asked the above question. Our piechart comes from a count of the keywords that came up most often in their responses. Transport and access to services were the top two challenges.

10 ways to improve inclusion programme

Participants in the online Rural Ideas Forum were asked: How can the next Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP) best tackle the above challenges? Almost every reply covered one or other facet of community development. For example, respondents called for:

1. Indicators that measure social value and change.
2. Cross-county collaboration to find solutions to issues and inform policy at national level.
3. A case study from each county on spatial poverty that can inform future planning.
4. Community Development core principles to remain as core to the SICAP programme.
5. More community development workers employed to support groups to truly advocate. More funding

resources in the next SICAP.

6. More local flexibility. The programme needs to be designed to facilitate the local identification of issues and how best to address them locally.

7. Support for local communities trying to access public land for growing food, for energy and for biodiversity.

8. Support for communities to develop whole community plans linked to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and Public Participation Network Wellbeing Visions.

9. More support for social enterprise in rural areas.

10. To ensure that it is inclusive and equitable the programme should be cognisant of the Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty.

€10m extra to support Ukrainians in Ireland

The Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP) has supported community responses at local level as refugees arrived last Spring from Ukraine and this is set to continue.

As announced in the budget, €10m in additional funding for 2023 is going to Local Development Companies delivering supports to people arriving from Ukraine.

The Department of Rural and Community Development said in a recent statement: "The

additional funding ensures that normal SICAP service delivery will be maintained together with the on-the-ground response and services for people arriving from Ukraine."

Thanking community workers and volunteers for their efforts, Minister of State Joe O'Brien said, "Over 600 programme workers have been agile in adapting to an ever evolving situation."

He said it was "important that we all continue to play our role in fostering supportive communities across Ireland by offering a warm

welcome to all people seeking protection in their time of need".

The general SICAP budget remains largely unchanged on the previous year taking inflation into account, rising by €1.3m (3%) to €44.3m. Rising costs have been partly addressed by a separate fund to help community groups pay high energy bills.

Last June, SICAP was awarded a prestigious United Nations Public Service award.

• Further budget details can be found at www.gov.ie/drcd



ERASMUS+ IS ONE OF EUROPE'S GREATEST IDEAS

- SO WHAT'S IT LIKE?

A 19-year-old Corkonian fresh from 10 days in a kibbutz writes about a trip he says will stay with him for the rest of his life.

BY CAI DESMOND-SADD

In my experience, many people in the western world think of Israel and Palestine as they would any other Middle Eastern nation: full of nothing but conflict, poverty and sand.

This couldn't be further from what I experienced.

When I was invited to go on a youth exchange to an ecological kibbutz in Israel as part of the 'Building Walls Breaking Walls' youth exchange, I was ecstatic.

There were to be participants from Ireland, Switzerland, Israel, and Palestine. The exchange is co-ordinated by Mahon Community Development Project in Cork City and is hosted by the Centre for Creative Ecology in Kibbutz Lotan, Israel. The aim is to bring together young people for a week of inter-cultural discussions and workshop activities, along with learning about ecological restoration practices. We also had to build a wall.

It was to be a week of happiness, learning and peace.

On arrival in Tel Aviv airport, I was instantly taken aback by the sheer wealth of the place. I was shocked by the utter opulence of the airport alone. Huge golden columns shot up from floor to ceiling.

We left the airport and the city on a four-hour bus journey into the vast emptiness of the Negev desert to our kibbutz on the border with Jordan. Dotted among the endless sea of sand were tiny communities that looked like shanty towns. I found out later that these are the dwellings of the Bedouin, nomadic Arab people. Their living conditions contrasted greatly with that of the city dwellers, and the colossal discrepancy between the two stuck in my mind.

By the time we finally arrived at Kibbutz Lotan, the beautiful desolation of the desert on the bus journey had deeply pacified me.

We walked through the mud arch of the ecological campus and were shown to our rooms in small domed buildings, also made out of mud. The beds were comfortable and the interiors were tastefully decorated. Air conditioning units were also present, but we didn't need to use them as the domes seemed to regulate a comfortable temperature.

The ecological aspect of the kibbutz



• Cai Desmond-Sadd (btm row, third from right) with the group he met in Israel. Erasmus+ is the EU's programme to support education, training, youth and sport in Europe.

was fascinating and I learned so much about the different techniques that can be used to reduce wastage. We were staying at the eco-village, and everything was designed to be as eco-friendly as possible, including the toilets.

All compostable waste from the kitchen was put into a contraption which converted the waste into bio-fuel, which was then used for cooking. Our electricity was generated by a large solar farm. I like to think of myself as fairly ecological, but I find myself

"One of the best experiences of my life"

being much more aware of my consumption habits since my visit to Lotan.

Each day was very well structured. After breakfast we were split into three groups:

One group would work on building the mud wall - which was hard work

but great fun. We were building the walled entrance to a children's maze.

A second group would do inter-cultural activities such as discussing similarities and differences and stereotypes and prejudices.

The third, smaller group was the kitchen group, and they assisted the chef with the preparation of meals. (After lunchtime, the group roles were reversed).

Dinner was always exciting - five of the nights were used as a "culture night" for each country. During these nights, a country group presented everyone with a meal that consisted of traditional foods and culinary staples of their country.

After the meal, the country group made a presentation telling their country's history, geography, culture and more. I looked forward to these nights as I enjoyed learning about others' cultures and eating the delicious food!

We had lots of free time too during which we could do as we pleased - a visit to the swimming pool being a popular pastime.

One evening, we went on a hike into the desert and we bedded down in sleeping bags looking at shooting stars.

On another day, we travelled to Eilat city and went snorkelling in the Red Sea where we saw coral reef and exotic fish. It was a phenomenal experience.

And when our time in the kibbutz came to an end, we left for



• Cai Desmond-Sadd (back) with two fellow wall-builders.



Erasmus+



• Members of the group pictured at a separation wall in Bethlehem.

Jerusalem. We spent two days there as tourists, and saw magnificent sights such as the Western Wall, the Dome of the Rock, and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.

These sacred sites made a big impact on me personally, and I found it to be a very powerful experience. The grandeur and prosperity I had witnessed in Tel Aviv returned, however this time in a very different way. These streets lived and breathed history, and had been preserved and modernised in a way that was tasteful and respectful to the ancient architecture.

On the second day, we took a bus to Bethlehem, which is in Palestine. Nothing could have prepared me for the polarity in difference from there and everywhere I had been so far. Of course I will never truly understand the struggles of the oppressed, but I felt as though I gained an insight into the lives of the people who live in the giant prison that is Palestine.

These streets, while still brimming with antiquity, were not so well-maintained as those in Jerusalem. In truth, this place was downright destitute in comparison. I could see the pain in the eyes of the men, women and children whom I passed. These were the suppressed, the abused, the tyrannised.

We walked along the Israeli West Bank barrier towards an exit, and our collective emotions can be summed up by the words of one of my peers, "I feel like an animal in a zoo."

I know that was a dark note to end on, but the reality of the situation in Palestine is an unavoidable feature of any conversation regarding Israel and Palestine. All in all, I had a fantastic time on the youth exchange.

I met some of the most amazing people I have ever encountered and I am sure that I have made some lifelong friends. I learned so much about the reality of others' cultures and lives, and I feel as though I have a greater sense of empathy for the struggles of those around me.

I can say without a doubt in my mind that it was one of the best experiences of my life, and I am so grateful to have had the opportunity to take part in such a thing. It was a truly unforgettable experience that has become integrated into my psyche, and I will carry it with me for the rest of my life.

MY EXPERIENCE: AYALA SIEGER (ISRAEL)

It felt so amazing connecting to people - just as humans and not letting stereotypes or politics define the way our relationships should be. It was such a mind opening journey.

We didn't only learn about different cultures but actually got to know people from so many places and create deeper connections. It gave us so much knowledge and was much more meaningful.

The mud building was extremely fun and interesting, and in my opinion worked perfectly as a group activity to bring us all together.



• Ayala Sieger and Moira Lansdell.

MY EXPERIENCE: MOIRA LANSDELL (SWITZERLAND)

The thing that surprised me the most was how the kibbutz felt like a whole different world.

Kibbutz Lotan felt so disconnected to the rest of the world in a positive way - a way that made you think about yourself and the world. I just felt so peaceful, surrounded by the desert and the quiet. It makes sense in a way, because the desert physically separates you from the rest of civilisation and gives you space to think and to feel; it gives you a sense of peace you normally cannot feel in the tumult of today's world. You would think that the proximity we had to such danger and conflict would contradict this feeling of peacefulness, but that was not the case. The powerful feeling of peace in the kibbutz itself transcended everything else.

WHAT IS ERASMUS+?

It had a €3.9 billion budget in 2022

Erasmus+ is the EU programme for education, training, youth and sport. The 2021-2027 programme has a budget of €26.2 billion which is nearly double the funding for its previous programme (2014-2020).

Erasmus+ currently has a strong focus on social inclusion, green and digital transitions, and promoting young people's participation in democratic life. The part of the programme for youth is referred to as Erasmus+: Youth in Action.

CONTACT INFO

For information on Erasmus+ in Ireland, visit:

<http://erasmusplus.ie/>

<https://www.leargas.ie>

Léargas is one of two partner organisations supporting Erasmus+ in this country. Its offices are in King's Inns House, Parnell St., Dublin.

What is 'Building Walls Breaking Walls'?



• Participants learned to make a mud mix and to apply it to walls. The above walls are made from mud, straw and tyres - notice the shape.

Building Walls Breaking Walls is a youth exchange programme which brings together young people from Ireland, Switzerland, Israel and Palestine.

Mahon Community Development Project in Cork is the Irish partner organisation in the quartet and when the exchange comes to Ireland it convenes on Cape Clear island. It also runs in Switzerland.

Young adults from each country come together for a project week

to construct a wall and experience each other's cultures through discussions, outdoor activities and cooking. The project is about walls, both physical and intangible, between cultures and how to overcome them.

The young people come from three major religions (and some none) and the exchange lets them see which things separate religions - and where religions can serve as bridges. The initiative is funded through Léargas via Erasmus+.

MY EXPERIENCE: GAZEL KHOURY (PALESTINE)

Building walls breaking walls in Kibbutz Lotan was a unique experience for me. Despite the different cultural backgrounds and the variety of locations that we came from, we still managed to find harmony and become really close friends. It's especially unexpected for me as a Palestinian interacting with Israelis.

It's not my first time meeting Israelis, but I usually do at work or college, never got the chance to do so on a personal level, let alone living, eating, dancing and doing activities together for a week.

During that week, I got to the conclusion that despite all the differences, we are all humans after all, and most of the time what the people want is not represented by politicians. We should all start looking and thinking of each other simply as humans.





• Geraldine Harnett and Njabuliso Moyo - graduation.

Njabuliso Moyo recently graduated from An Cosán with a BA Degree in Applied Addiction Studies and Community Development, which she completed via their online blended model. Njabuliso now works in addiction services for the Peter McVerry Trust.

"I'm from Zimbabwe, I was a teacher by profession, but teaching was really a stepping stone for me. It never really gave me the chance to bring the change to the community that I wanted to.

"When I came here, somebody introduced me to addiction studies and I realised that was what I really wanted to do all along - to play a part in giving somebody a chance to improve their life, to bring change to people who are faced with stumbling blocks.

"I work in the Peter McVerry Trust stabilisation centre in Phibsborough. The work is mentally challenging, you are working with people from a lot of different backgrounds.

"I was living in Kerry in a direct provision centre; it was a very challenging environment. I remember the first time I went to An Cosán for the presentation about the course, it was raining and I had to get the bus from Kerry to Dublin.

"Most of my fees were paid for with a grant; An Cosán helped us to access the grants. I also got counselling support, and a laptop grant."

To anyone thinking about returning to education, Njabuliso says: "It's never too late. I was 49 when I started the course. Just take it one step at a time; it has the potential to change your life."

An Cosán tells how its novel approach to education works

BY KATHY MASTERSON

From an idea born at a kitchen table, to a nationwide network that has empowered 20,000 learners, An Cosán is a powerhouse that continues to transform communities.

The organisation was founded in 1986 by Katherine Zappone and her late wife Ann Louise Gilligan in The Shanty, their home in the Dublin mountains overlooking Tallaght, where its main base is located.

From its humble beginnings, it has continued to grow and evolve to meet the needs of the communities it serves, and now operates seven centres around Dublin, as well as working with a network of community partners from Donegal to Wexford.

In October, An Cosán launched its ambitious new strategy 'Vision 2026: Transforming Lives Together', which announced its goal to reach a further 20,000 learners by 2030.

Changing Ireland spoke to Maria Flanagan, An Cosán's Community Partner Lead, to find out what sets the organisation apart from other education providers.

"One of the ethos of Katherine and Ann Louise from the very beginning would have been 'listen to the community'.

We operate a learner-centred holistic approach to education, where the learner is at the centre of everything.

"When we design programmes and courses, they would be done around the needs of learners and the time of the day that suits them. An Cosán started as a feminist organisation; we are open to all but we have a special focus on women and children," she explained.

An Cosán is not just an adult education provider, however. It offers its learners 'wraparound supports', such as childcare, advice on financial supports, and digital skills training to give them the tools and confidence to complete their chosen courses.

"A big part of the ethos is what we call the scaffolding of supports that are provided to learners and people who use our services," said Maria.

An Cosán operates six Early Years Education and Care services for learners and people in the local



• Graduates at an An Cosán's Awards Ceremony.

community.

"Katherine and Ann Louise identified very early on that in order for people to be able to access education, one of the big barriers was childcare, and people couldn't afford childcare, so they wanted that to be part of the solution. When you think of it, it was a mastermind of an

"The idea is that if you're supporting a mother to empower herself and her family, you lift a family out of poverty forever."

idea back then because childcare can be one of the biggest challenges for people going back to education."

Hospitality and nourishment is another of An Cosán's key values. "In order to be able to engage the mind, you have to have a nourished body. So when our learners come to our centre in the morning, they would get a cup of coffee and a scone, and the little ones get breakfast. So that's a really important part that you don't get in other education organisations," Maria added.

At the beginning of each lesson, An Cosán's tutors perform an 'opening circle', where they read an extract or quotation, to allow the learners some quiet time before the class.

Says Maria: "The purpose of that opening circle is to allow time for learners to have pause before they go in to learn. We do it in our staff meetings as well."

Counselling, mentoring, digital skills training, a family resource team, and a laptop loan scheme are just some of the other supports available at An Cosán.

In the classroom, both online and in person, there are technology moderators to help students with any technical issues, and classroom facilitators, for those who may need some extra support.

"All the barriers that are out there - physical barriers, financial, not having access to a laptop - the biggest one is the invisible one and that's confidence for a lot of people. When people become confident in all those things like digital skills, the counselling, their overall confidence lifts and then they want more learning, and they become empowered. They start speaking out when they didn't speak before and they start doing things in their communities," revealed Maria.

"If we engage in education, we are becoming learned actors and we are becoming more participatory in our community. We're not just affecting ourselves, but we're transforming ourselves and our families and the community around us, because

• Continued on next page.

• Continued from previous page.

we're going to be more actively engaged, get involved in community issues, we'll be social actors in our community.

"People talk about transformative education, it's about people being empowered to transform themselves. So many people have amazing ability, they just don't realise it or recognise it, and they maybe have never been given a voice before."

Courses range from Access courses to Further Education courses with a QQI Level 5 or 6 award, up to Higher Education degree and certificate programmes.

An Cosán has fostered links with South East Technological University, so students of its higher education courses have access to SETU's Carlow campus and the facilities and supports available there.

"Cosán means pathway, and no matter what level you're at there is a place for you to join that path back to education," said Maria.

In 2014, An Cosán developed its blended online learning model.

It was officially launched in 2016, and Maria came on board that same year to help grow An Cosán's reach nationally and develop relationships with other community organisations.

"The biggest barrier is the invisible one and that's confidence for a lot of people."

An Cosán's online learners are also offered the same wraparound supports as those attending in-person courses.

An Cosán's community partners also help to link learners with supports and services in their local areas.

What sets An Cosán apart from other online education providers is the level of support available to learners, and the determination of tutors and support staff to see learners succeed and complete their courses.

"Pure online is not new, it's been around for many years. But for the learners that we work with, it might be very difficult for those learners to stay engaged, because you do need to have a lot of self-motivation, you need to have all the tools to be

able to do it, you need to have the resources," said Maria.

The objective that underpins everything at An Cosán is lifting people, women in particular, out of poverty through education.

Maria explained: "The idea is that you're supporting a mother to empower herself and her family, you lift a family out of poverty forever. It changes the trajectory of a family."

"If a mother is studying and the child sees that, the child is more likely to continue in education. With an education you can be uplifted and empowered to get better jobs, to get quality employment. And that's an important point, quality employment, because there are a lot of people who may be in employment but they're on very low salaries and they're just about surviving."

Speaking about the power of education and the effect it has on learners, Maria said: "It's transformative; you see people come in one day with their head down and they're not too sure, and then you see them brightening. They have so much to offer and so much to contribute, and when they realise that themselves then, it's a wonderful place to be part of, to see that happening."



• Dolores O'Sullivan from Blessington, Co Wicklow, received a QQI Level 6 Award in Early Childhood Care and Education from An Cosán in September.

Dolores O'Sullivan (pictured above) said: "The two years I spent at An Cosán have been more beneficial, rewarding and enjoyable for me than the 14 years I spent in mainstream education. An Cosán gave me belief in myself that I could go back to study and get a qualification."

"Before I started, I was given all the information I needed about the modules involved and about the financial and other supports An Cosán offers."

"An Cosán has had an enormous impact on my life. It is a special place with very special people who are making a significant impact on people's lives in the most positive and nurturing way."

"I was incredibly fortunate to have an amazing lecturer and mentor in Christina. Christina went above and beyond for each of her students, always guiding us on our educational journey. Christina is, without doubt, the reason I'm now pursuing a BA degree programme," she said.

"Cosán means pathway, and no matter what level you're at there is a place for you to join that path back to education."

Q&A: AN COSAN AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

We asked Maria Flanagan (pictured) how can community development workers and co-ordinators connect people or groups with An Cosán?



Any community educator, community development practitioner or community organisation who is interested in finding out more about becoming a Community Partner, can contact our Community Partner Lead Maria Flanagan, who supports our national network of over 200 Community Partners.

We invite community educators, practitioners, coordinators to become Digital Champions in their community and avail of our free training for Community Educators on our Digital Inclusion Tools.

Is there a fee/cost to community projects?

Our Access Introduction classroom-based programmes in Tallaght are funded by the Dublin and Dún Laoghaire Education and Training Board, the HSE and TUSLA.

Fees apply for learners who register for our Further Education and Higher Education modules and programmes.

An Cosán offers phased payment options and has a small Bursary Fund available for individual learners.

We have also put together a guide to other funding supports from third party organisations and will help learners in the application process.

We are constantly seeking funding to support programmes for specific underserved groups so that no one is left behind.

Does An Cosán offer a service in every county?

Learners can join our blended online programmes from anywhere in Ireland once they have access to the technology. If they don't, we can work with them to provide supports and introduce them to a Community Partner or connect them with a community organisation in their area.

Can you give an example where An Cosán has worked with a Local Development Company, Community Development Project, or Family Resource Centre?

Yes – Wexford Waterford Education and Training Board, Wexford Local Development Company, and Southend Family Resource Centre.

For example, a group of learners from Southend began in 2016 and now more than 35 of them have

completed modules and 10 of the group completed a Certificate in Leadership and Community Development (and one transferred to BA Addiction Studies and Community Development).

In January 2022, this group graduated with a BA Degree from South East Technological University. Waterford Wexford ETB funded Year 1 and Wexford Local Development funded the remainder of the programme.

What An Cosán courses are most popular with community workers?

At access level: Introduction to Community Development (Unaccredited) six weeks online.

At further education level: Major Award in Community Development (QQI Level 5)

At higher education level:

- Community Development (NFQ Level 6)

- Certificate in Leadership and Community Development (NFQ Level 6)

- BA Degree in Leadership and Community Development (NFQ Level 7)

- BA Degree in Applied Addiction Studies and Community Development (NFQ Level 7)

LOCAL AUTHORITIES IN THE COMMUNITY

FINGAL TREATED TO TELUGU SHOW

A showcase of cultural diversity at the Irish Telugu Association formed part of Fingal Social Inclusion Week.

Telugu is one of India's many languages.

The week-long event was an initiative of Fingal County Council Community Development Office, Fingal Integration Team, and the Fingal Public Participation Network.

The week seeks to raise awareness of the barriers experienced by citizens of Fingal that lead to social exclusion and promote an understanding of inclusion in Fingal. The theme for 2022 was "Health and Wellbeing".



WATERFORD'S HISTORY IN QR CODES

Waterford City and County Council has launched a new digital story trail featuring augmented reality (AR), which offers tourists an engaging way to discover Waterford's history via their smartphone.

The trail can be accessed for free by scanning one of the numerous QR codes on signs located throughout the city trail.

LIMERICK: OLD HOMES TO NEW

Limerick City and County Council (LCCC) intends to compulsorily acquire 22 more derelict properties across the city and county.

In the past three years LCCC has compulsorily acquired 145 properties. Since 2019, the Council has sold 19 of the compulsorily acquired properties on the open market.

CORK AMONG TOP SIX LOCAL AUTHORITIES

Cork County Council celebrated its results in the Local Authority Environmental Enforcement Performance Report 2021.

The report says the local authority demonstrated excellent results in air and agriculture monitoring. It also earned strong results on waste enforcement activities, septic tanks, private water supplies and local noise issues.

Cork County Council was one of only six local authorities achieving the required standard of strong or excellent in all five tests on governance processes. The others are: Dublin City, Fingal, Galway City, Longford and Monaghan.



MONAGHAN STUDENTS IN NURSING HOMES

As part of Social Inclusion Week 2022 in Monaghan, students of Beech Hill College launched an intergenerational project. It involves students recording news from the Northern Standard newspaper and broadcasting a weekly news show in local nursing homes.

Monaghan held its Social Inclusion Week from November 14 to 29 and the theme for this year was 'Tolerance'.

The week of events – held around the country – highlight positive work undertaken to try and reduce social exclusion and poverty. It also raises awareness of barriers people face to social inclusion and celebrates the diversity of people.



€31M FOR 3 TIPP TOWNS

Tipperary County Council received €31 million in funding under the Rural Regeneration Development Fund to regenerate and transform the towns of Carrick on Suir, Cahir and Roscrea.

It submitted three funding applications and all three "shovel-ready projects" were approved. The overall cost for the three projects is €38.5 million with matching funding to the value of €7.5 million to be provided by the Council.

PURE THINKING IN CARLOW

Mayor of Carlow Municipal District Cllr Fintan Phelan officially unveiled an eye-catching new mural at Bridewell Lane in Carlow Town.

The mural was created by artist Gala Hutton. The project was artistically directed by Connie Byrne and the Pure Thinking Community Group and was managed by Castlerath Construction.



BRAZILIANS IN DUBLIN CELEBRATE WITH HUGE MURAL

Lord Mayor of Dublin, Caroline Conroy and the Brazilian Ambassador to Ireland, Marcel Fortuna Biato this month officially unveiled a striking mural on Ormond Quay celebrating 200 years of Brazilian Independence and the diversity of Dublin city.

The project is the initiative of the Association of Brazilian Families in Ireland (AMBI) together with the Brazilian Embassy, Dublin City Council, and Monteco Holdings Ltd. The mural is a collaboration between Brazilian artist Neto and Irish artist Asbestos.

AMBI is a non-profit community organisation, founded in 2010, to collaborate in the integration between Brazil and Ireland and promote Brazilian culture and Portuguese as a heritage language.

