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# CHANGING IRELAND

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COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT - COLLECTIVE ACTION - EMPOWERMENT - SOCIAL INCLUSION - [www.changingireland.ie](http://www.changingireland.ie)

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## PEOPLE WHO GO INTO HIDING ONCE THEY GET ON A BUS



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## OVERCOMING ADDICTION - WHAT NEXT?



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# BIGGEST RALLY IN YEARS

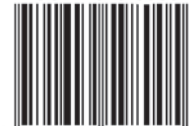
Civil society out in strength



**LOCAL AUTHORITY  
NEWS - BACK PAGE**

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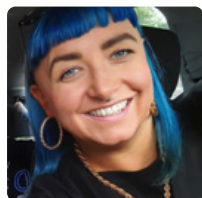
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*"I don't want these people to feel afraid"*  
- Sophia wants "an Ireland for all".

**Dublin, February 18**



The youngest person to speak at the Ireland For All rally on February 18 was 12-year-old wheelchair-user Sophia Mulvany.

Reading from notes in a phone her father held for her she asked tens of thousands of people:

"What do you see here? You see a young woman sitting in her wheelchair talking to you. What you don't see are all the people who helped to get me here - nurses from India and the Philippines, doctors from Africa, Pakistan and South America, China and Korea.

"I don't want these people to feel afraid. They belong here just as much as you and I. They have made homes here, started families here and made lives for themselves here. What's not to embrace?" she said.

"These people are vital in my life. They add to our society, they don't take away from it."

Sophia spoke over a year ago at a Le Chéile rally promoting inclusion, diversity and acceptance.

"I thought things would get better, but we're somehow more divided than ever," she said.

She asked why would anybody want to make migrants feel unsafe and unwanted. She wants to applaud and embrace them:

"I want to live in an Ireland that is diverse and inclusive. I want to live in an Ireland for all." she said.

# 22 YEARS OF COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

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## 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'.

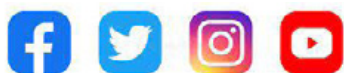
## SUPPORT

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**An Roinn Forbartha  
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Community Development**

## MEET US ONLINE



## Biggest rally in years Ireland welcomes people seeking sanctuary



It is almost unbelievable that we have people coming here for refuge and nowhere to accommodate them all.

We are not prepared, yet we're also not going to refuse people entry. That is to Ireland's credit.

The government is now well aware that it needs the co-operation of communities and it needs to support communities better, not least so they can properly look after refugees and asylum seekers. Funding programmes are being announced now on a regular basis and this shows recognition of the challenges.

There have been increases in investment in communities in recent years, though one might prefer to see more spent on hiring community development workers than on capital projects. It is community workers who bring people together, who foster civility.

Also, many areas also now need more GPs, more school rooms and so on. And just as people are integrating, some are moved.

Why were we not better prepared for Russia attacking Ukraine? There were already wars in Syria, Yemen and Somalia.

While more community workers, including Ukrainians, were hired in the past 12 months under the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme, the social needs are growing fast. More workers are needed.

### SOLIDARITY

The solidarity rally held in Dublin on February 18, was - said organisers: "to stand against hate and march to celebrate the rich diversity in Ireland and build on a country grounded in a shared vision of love, respect and equality".

Trade unionists, politicians, human rights activists, community workers, equality legends, teachers, nurses, mothers, fathers, grandfathers, sisters, old and young marched.

For an event that got plenty of press, the surprise was that media outlets ignored what the younger speakers had to say. The rally heard from vibrant young people from mixed ethnic backgrounds from Tallaght and

Clondalkin. They are Irish, proud and this was their day. You can read what they said and rapped about in these pages.

There was another reason for marching - homelessness at levels I never imagined growing up in a poorer Ireland, shortcomings in healthcare, untended community needs going back to the cuts of a decade ago. Blaming refugees and asylum seekers and migrants for these is incomprehensible to me.

The journalism by Kathy Masterson in this edition compliments the rally report. She spoke to Mexicans in Cork, Muslims in Dublin and Polish in the Midlands. So many things I never knew about before reading her reports. The reports give us a sense of the tremendous good happening at local level that we often overlook. They are uplifting!

*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.



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**Thanks To . . .** 'Changing Ireland' thanks everyone involved in the production of Issue 80.

**Front Cover:** Ann Marie Butler from Dublin and Georgina from London, living in Dublin. Photo by Allen Meagher.



## DISCLAIMER

The views expressed in this magazine are those of the author concerned. They do not, by any means, necessarily reflect the views of the editor, the editorial team, the voluntary management board of Changing Ireland Community Media CLG, or its core-funder the Department of Rural & Community Development.



## UP TO 20 PROJECTS CAN VIE FOR NEW €3M DISABILITY PARTICIPATION FUND

A new €3 million fund will be shared among up to 20 projects working with people with disabilities this year.

The Disability Participation and Awareness Fund was announced in February by Rethink Ireland in partnership with the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth.

Rethink Ireland has called for applications from non-profit organisations working to support people with disabilities in communities across Ireland including charities, community groups and social enterprises.

The one-year fund will support work across four areas:

- 1 - Building skills and removing barriers to participation for people with Down Syndrome;
- 2 - Providing valuable employment experience to people with disabilities;
- 3 - Supporting the participation of people with disabilities in artistic, cultural and community life;
- 4 - Fostering community participation and inclusion, including in sports and outdoor recreation.

The deadline for applications, via [www.rethinkireland.ie](http://www.rethinkireland.ie) is March 31.

## €33M FOR 278 COMMUNITIES CENTRES

Funding of more than €33 million has been granted for the upgrade and development of 278 community centres nationwide.

The announcement under the new Community Centre Investment Fund represents the largest ever capital investment in upgrading community centres and will see grants of between €25,000 to €300,000 provided to successful projects.

Extensions to existing centres, energy efficiency upgrades and improved access for people with disabilities are among the works supported.

Community centres, parish halls, scouts clubs, youth hubs, Family Resource Centres and sports complexes in every county in Ireland are set to benefit from the fund.

# Government indicates it wants communities more involved in decision-making

A resource guide has been launched to assist marginalised and disadvantaged communities to engage and participate in local planning and decision-making.

Minister for Community Development, Integration and Charities, Joe O'Brien officially launched the resource, entitled 'A Guide for Inclusive Community Engagement in Local Planning and Decision Making'.

He commented: "The voice of all members of our communities must be present in the design, implementation and review of decisions that impact on all of our lives – inclusive consultation and meaningful engagement are key to this. This is particularly important as our society grows and changes."

"I would encourage anyone involved in developing policy, leading consultations or making decisions that affect communities to use this guide. Ultimately, the best decisions are those which are made together, with the opportunity for everyone to share their perspective."

The document focuses on ensuring the most marginalised are consulted and heard, and includes a 'how-to' reference guide on engagement methods available to all organisations.

Inclusive engagement with marginalised communities, and the organisations that represent them, will ensure that their views are



reflected in local decision-making. The guide also aims to enable more sustainable development at a local level.

Local authorities, public sector bodies, community groups or any organisation committed to inclusive local decision-making can use the resource.

Pobal, Community Work Ireland and the Irish Local Development Network also collaborated on the development of the guide to support

inclusive participation.

This initiative is as part of a wider Dormant Accounts Funded project on the engagement of marginalised communities, and is one of the actions being delivered under Sustainable, Inclusive and Empowered Communities, the Government strategy to support the community and voluntary sector.

**The guide is available for download from:**

<https://www.gov.ie/>

## New funding model for 400 projects in the Community Services Programme



Under the Community Services Programme 420 community organisations across the country are to receive additional funding.

The initiative is designed to support community-based businesses, social enterprises and organisations that provide local services and create employment opportunities for disadvantaged people.

The new funding rate allocation model will see the Department's support for the programme rise by more than €5 million, to almost €49 million.

167 organisations will receive the higher rate of funding, 230 organisations will receive the middle rate, while 23 organisations will

continue to receive their existing amount of funding.

An increase of €4,000 for both full-time positions and a manager will be provided for organisations seen to have a 'high funding need'.

For organisations considered to have a 'medium funding need' there will be a €2,000 increase per full-time position and manager provided. There will be no change for organisations considered to have a low funding need.

Furthermore, as was announced on March 6, €1 million is available this year to give new organisations an opportunity to access support to employ additional staff in line with the programme's re-defined sub-programmes and new vision.

## "It's not a them or us," says Martin Collins

Should Travellers be housed first? No, it's not about competing with other marginalised, disadvantaged communities.

We put a couple of questions to *Martin Collins of Pavee Point* at the rally, asking him - What do you say to people who say we should house Travellers first and only then look after others?

Let me start by saying that my people have been on the island since the fifth century. And we've had an accommodation crisis, particularly over the past forty years.

So successive Irish governments had over forty years of opportunity to address the Traveller accommodation crisis and they haven't done so.

It's not about competing with other marginalised, disadvantaged communities. We all need to be standing in solidarity with each other and campaigning and lobbying the government to make sure that everybody's housing needs are met.

It's not a them or us. We shouldn't be pitting against each other and certainly no division. We need to be working in solidarity with each other to put the pressure on the government.

The problem here is successive failed government policies. That's the issue.

Would all Travellers see eye to eye with you?

I would say the majority of Travellers would probably share my perspective, but of course you will have some individuals who have a different view, which is not useful I have to say.

We should not be pitting ourselves against each other and competing. We should be working collectively to put the pressure on the government to change their policies, but their policies have failed miserably.

The housing crisis is getting worse, week-on-week, month-on-month and year-on-year. That is where we should be directing our energy, and not engaging in racist rhetoric.

*"The housing crisis is getting worse, week-on-week, month-on-month and year-on-year. That is where we should be directing our energy, and not engaging in racist rhetoric."*

*- Martin Collins, Pavee Point*



# Clear messages at anti-racism/housing rally in Dublin



## "Thank you Dublin, we feel your love!" - says MASI's Lucky Khambule

BY ALLEN MEAGHER

Oddly, the first person *Changing Ireland* met holding an anti-hate banner didn't want to join the Ireland For All rally. It was an unexpected start to a powerful day for people who believe in equality, fair play, solidarity and compassion.

The woman was standing near the GPO with a message on a tricolour which read: 'No Hate – Just Common Sense'. She said refugees were "getting too much" and while she volunteered to help homeless people here of all nationalities, she felt, "We should look after everyone already here first".

She and two others were the only people I saw to publicly oppose the rally as it brought O'Connell Street to a near halt.



• 'No Hate' but this woman did not wish to join the Ireland For All rally.

The woman beside her, Pauline, had her own hardships, but showed more empathy. She said, "My daughter is on a housing list for 17 years and I've grandchildren and they can't get a house."

"The government says we are racist to complain, but we should be able to speak our mind," she said.

She had some misgivings about men coming to Ireland from war-torn countries, yet she happily stepped off the pavement to join the rally. She could relate to the main messages: No to racism. Solidarity with refugees. More housing. Don't blame others for the Government's failings.

While people are furious over gaps in housing, healthcare and community services, the marchers support the main policy of seeking to accommodate Ukrainians and others fleeing war and persecution – almost 80,000 people have found sanctuary here in one year.

"Refugees welcome!" read a plethora of homemade banners.

Travellers were well represented at the rally – they know more than anyone in this State what it is to be discriminated against and they empathise with refugees and asylum



• The rally in Dublin on February 18 was called, said organisers, "to stand against hate and march to celebrate the rich diversity in Ireland and build on a country grounded in a shared vision of love, respect and equality."

seekers. This despite housing being one of the biggest issues they face.

"We are stronger together!" read the banners flying by as Pavee Point director Martin Collins made that very point to us.

### SIZE MATTERS

The largest anti-immigration/anti-refugee march to date in this country - held in Dublin on February 6 - attracted a crowd of around 1,000 according to *The Irish Times* or over 2,000 going by *The Irish Mirror's* estimate. Whether one or two thousand, it was dwarfed by the size of the rally on February 18 and while size isn't everything, it matters when some people on the so-called far right continually claim to represent "the majority".

There were well upwards of 25,000 people there – going by crowd sizes at previous marches - and not all the marchers were visible at any one time. They stretched the full length of O'Connell Street and beyond and it seemed bigger than the march in solidarity with early years educators in 2020 (30,000 estimate). The marchers walked with small, large, homemade and

printed banners that told how they felt. "Solidarity with refugees." "No to racism." "Government to blame." Those were the recurring themes.

Sorcha Grisewood, marching with a friend under the Amnesty banner, said she was there "to support the cause, because it's a great cause". Asked about the turnout, she said, "I wasn't expecting it would be this big."

However, even marchers were dismissive of the 50,000 later claimed by the rally organisers.

"Why not say a million?" said one we overheard chatting to friends on the train home to Limerick.

The turnout was appreciated by Lucky Khambule of the Movement of Asylum-Seekers in Ireland. He condemned recent protests outside centres hosting refugees and asylum seekers.

"The impact that those protests is doing is very huge – it's scary for the people in those centres. It's scary for the children who are asking 'Will they come to us?'" he said

Thanking people for marching, he said: "We feel your love - thank you very much."

"We want this movement to grow

in every town and village," he added.



Darragh Adelaide (pictured left) from Clondalkin began with the words, "Is Eirineach mé. Is duine gorm mé.

I'm black and I'm Irish." He said it was "very important we came out today" and that "Ireland belongs to everybody who calls it home".

Next up was a young poet from Tallaght and Sudan who rapped about how his name, Adam Mohamed, reflects his background.

"I'm named after the first male and the prophet. Want to know where I come from?" he sang, hopping from the stage into the crowd and back up again.

### BLACK AND IRISH



Leon Diop (pictured left) also from Tallaght, is the founder of an organisation and a podcast

series called 'Black and Irish'. He said, "The far right have played on

## DEVLIN: Everyone has one question to answer - Rally heard from poets, singers, activists, trade unionists and politicians



### "More blacks, more dogs, more Irish," sings Steo Wall

The sun strengthened as Steo Wall sang his anti-racism tune 'More blacks, more dogs, more Irish'.

The lyrics lament the troubles many children have today growing up homeless. At the same time the song calls on everyone Irish to remember that we were once looked down on when we had to emigrate as "Paddys and Micks".

The song is on YouTube.

people's fears to shift the blame over these long-standing issues onto refugees. That is absolutely wrong and it is the government's fault."

He called for "an Ireland we can be proud of" and for "solidarity with one another". He urged people to reject racism, hatred and fascism.

He quoted John Hume who once said, "Difference is the essence of humanity." So difference should be a cause for celebration not conflict, said Diop.

### TRAVELLER SOLIDARITY



Traveller and human rights activist Rose Marie Maughan (pictured left) helped to carry the Ireland For All banner down O'Connell Street.

Referring to recent protests against people seeking international protection, she said, "The misinformation is truly disturbing."

She said we should never forget the trauma inflicted on us under British rule, "but most importantly



### "We have a crisis of ignorance that needs sorting"

From Co. Tyrone, veteran human rights activist Bernadette Devlin made a powerful speech.

"There's a question to be asked of every person at a crucial point in the history of every nation," she began. "It's a simple question: Which side are you on?"

"That question has to be answered by our politicians, by the State, by the churches, by organisations and by individual people.

"When push comes to shove, there is only one side that decent human beings can be on – the side of humanity and equal rights and protection of every human being."

She urged people to decide carefully, "no matter how difficult you find it", no matter how many prejudices, fears and superstitions you have "or how much shit you have been fed by somebody else".

Addressing people who say Ireland has "no room" for more refugees, she said, "Before the Gorta Mór, before the genocide imposed on the people of this country by imperialism, there were almost 8,500,000 people living here.

"Our problem is not that we have no room, it's that we have a crisis of humanity, of capitalism, of greed, prejudice and ignorance that needs sorting."

"There's plenty of room for two million more people," she said defiantly.

not become oppressors ourselves".

She knew as a Traveller woman "what it was like to be oppressed in 2023" and said it took the pandemic to see Travellers given basic rights to water.

Statistics relating to Travellers lives are "an international shame on our Dáil", she said, and the crowd grew still as she recounted them:

"Only three per cent of us live to the age of 65.

"11 per cent of all our deaths are by suicide.

"83 per cent of us are unemployed.

"We are less than one per cent of the overall population, yet one in five homeless people are Travellers.

"We know what it feels like to be protested against. We know what it's like to have our homes burned down.

"And as an Irish Traveller woman, I say - 'I see you, I love you, I respect you and you are welcome.'"

### CHRISTY'S REVULSION

Rally organisers, Le Chéile, are a newly-formed umbrella group of trade unions, community organisations and opposition parties.

Minister of State for Community Development, Charities and Integration, Joe O'Brien, joined the rally alongside Green Party colleagues. However, only opposition party spokespeople addressed the crowd – including Richard Boyd Barret, TD (PBP), Cllr. Daithí Doolan (Sinn Féin), Gary Gannon, TD (Social Democrats) and Ivana Bacik, TD (Labour).

They spoke towards the end of the rally from a stage outside the Custom House, but none could outdo Christy Moore who had opened proceedings.

He was there, he said, "to express revulsion for the hatred and violence



### "We are nurses, we are doctors, we are Irish."

One of the most powerful speeches was by a migrant living in Dublin who said proudly:

"I am a migrant, but I am of Ireland. We live here. We work here. We seek refuge here. We are migrants. We deliver food. We care for the sick. We are nurses, we are doctors. We lay bricks to build homes. We are Irish."

Among the thousands listening were medical staff from overseas who marched with colleagues in the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation.

The speaker made the point that migrants were not the cause of inflation, nor of the 166,000 empty homes, nor of homelessness, nor poverty, nor inflation. He didn't come here for social welfare, he added.

"Thank you Dublin. This is my home," he said to loud applause.

being fermented by a small minority who daily attack those unfortunate people who have come here seeking sanctuary from war, hunger, poverty and oppression."

He criticised the Government, saying, "All around the city we see cranes building more offices, hotels and flash apartments for rental only as our government welcomes culture and hedge fund capitalists into Ireland - when what we need is social housing."

He finished by singing his anti-fascist anthem 'Vive La Quinte Brigada' and called on people to remember the Irish who died fighting fascism in Spain.

A day not to be forgotten.



**KATHY  
MASTERSON**  
*reports on  
Mexicans in  
Cork, Muslims in  
Dublin and Polish  
people in the  
Midlands.  
Everywhere  
she found  
people enjoying  
being part of a  
community.*

## Fiestas and food help Cork's Mexicans feel right at home

*- The Mexican Community in Cork group is 21 years in existence*



• The Mexican Community in Cork taking part in St. Patrick's Day Parade.



• Fun with pinatas at a celebration held by The Mexican Community in Cork.

It may be news to some, but Cork is home to a thriving Mexican community, which has become a vibrant and important part of life in the Rebel County.

In 2002, a group of Mexicans now living in the city and county set up The Mexican Community in Cork to help support the integration of Mexicans and their culture into Irish society. The group's aims also include preserving their culture and traditions, and promoting a positive image of Mexico abroad.

Members of the group include professionals working for multinational companies in Cork, Mexicans who moved here with Irish partners, and students at UCC and other third level institutes in Cork. Families who have adopted children from Mexico also participate in the group's activities.

Mexican ex-pat Karem Kollar in Bantry has been living in Ireland for 17 years. She told *Changing Ireland*: "I came here because of my husband who moved here from Hungary. There are about 150 people from Mexico in the group. There are actually a lot of Mexican people in Cork. We have a shop in Cork city and it sells products all over Ireland.

"We participate in a lot of events. We held a party for Mexican

Independence Day in September and about 150 people come to that. We hold a Christmas party in December. We participate in the Shandon Street Festival and we represent Mexico in the St Patrick's Day Parade in Cork."

Karem said it is "very important" for Mexican people to be able to attend events together and socialise with their compatriots.

"I have two kids and I want to show them my food and my culture, and for them to be able to speak Spanish. We show them pinatas, we play games, we show them how we celebrate Mexican traditions. It's nice for me to speak to other Mexicans as well, and to speak Spanish."

According to Karem, the group is also an important source of information and assistance for Mexicans who have recently relocated to Cork.

"We help other Mexicans arriving in Ireland with anything they need. We help Mexican students to find accommodation and things like that. We like to help each other; Mexican people in Cork know there is always somebody there to help. When we have parties, everyone helps out with food or making decorations," she concluded.

W: [mexicancommunityincork.ie](http://mexicancommunityincork.ie)

T: @MexicansInCork



• Mexican food forms an important part of the group's events.

## Lorraine O'Connor and her Muslim sisters volunteer for the community

- The group known for helping homeless people in Dublin does much more besides

Dublin native Lorraine O'Connor founded the Muslim Sisters of Éire after she converted to Islam and began to wear the hijab.

"Unfortunately I was the victim of racial attacks and Islamophobia and I wasn't sure how to cope with that. It made me think of the women who had immigrated here who wear the headscarf. How are they feeling when it happens to them?"

"A part of it was wanting to integrate into my new religion, but also wanted to reintegrate into Irish society. I had people say to me 'Go back to where you came from'. Where do they want me to go back to? North Dublin? It was a very traumatic time in my life," she explained.

Lorraine decided to take some time out and spent five years volunteering with women's organisations. She also returned to education, completing a course in Women's Studies.

In 2010 the Muslim Sisters of Éire was born.

"Myself and a few other women got together, we put whatever money we had into a cup and said 'There's the kitty, now what can we do?'"

According to Lorraine, the group has gone from strength to strength since and "achieved milestones that we never thought we'd achieve".

She added: "The growth we've seen in the women has been amazing. Some who had been afraid to have a voice are now leading this organisation in many different ways. We also have non-Muslim women working with us, who didn't understand much about Muslims before and are now seeing us in a different light. We're opening up dialogue about diversity, and integration and understanding."

The Muslim Sisters of Éire are probably best known for their charity soup run, and are a familiar sight on the streets of Dublin providing hot meals to people experiencing homelessness.

Lorraine continued: "Charity work is one of the five pillars of Islam. This is now the seventh year of the soup run. The Irish public have been just amazing. It didn't happen overnight, but our biggest supporters are the Irish people. Irish people have always been very generous, they are the backbone of the Muslim Sisters of Éire."

"When people were at their lowest point, during the pandemic, we were



• The Muslim Sisters of Éire are best known for helping homeless people.



• The Muslim Sisters of Éire are best known for helping homeless people with their charity soup run on the streets of Dublin.

getting lots of phone calls from non-Muslims looking for help. Our organisation is called the Muslim Sisters, but when we get a phone call asking for help, our response is not based on religion, it's based on empathy. We ran a Christmas trolley appeal with Tesco to help make sure families had enough food, even though we don't celebrate Christmas.

"On Christmas Eve we go out with 150 backpacks for homeless people. In those backpacks there is a hygiene kit, a scarf, hat and gloves, a first aid kit, a pop-up tent and a sleeping bag. We call it a bag for life because it can be the difference between life and

death," said Lorraine.

The members of the Muslim Sisters of Éire come from diverse backgrounds from all corners of the world - Mauritius, Somalia, Palestine, Bosnia and Pakistan, to name a few.

"We ran a multicultural day during the summer, and we had cakes from 26 different parts of the world. Muslim Sisters of Éire is for Muslim sisters from all over the world who now see Ireland as their home. The diversity within Islam is beautiful. You don't see someone's race or where they're from, you just see another sister."

***"Myself and a few other women got together, we put whatever money we had into a cup and said 'There's the kitty, now what can we do?'"***

Their charity work doesn't end with the soup run, as the Sisters also help to provide Muslim families in need with food and gifts for children for Eid al-Fitr, otherwise known as the Festival of Sweets, at the end of Ramadan.

Leading up to Eid, they distribute gifts to children living in Direct Provision and assist Muslim men in hostel accommodation who have no access to a kitchen at night to break their fast.

The organisation also plays a role in encouraging discussions between Muslims and non-Muslims.

"For World Hijab Day on February 1st, we brought together women who wear the hijab and women who don't wear the hijab for a conference of understanding. The hijab can be seen as oppressive, but actually when you make the decision for yourself to wear it, it can be very liberating," said Lorraine.

The group also organises an interfaith Iftar during Ramadan, where Muslims break their fast with non-Muslims after the sun sets.

The Muslim Sisters of Éire's other activities focus on youth development, with summer camps open to Muslim and non-Muslim girls. They advocate for women's health issues, such as period poverty, domestic abuse and breast cancer, and work to promote a better understanding of Islam with school visits and cultural awareness training.

W: [msoe.ie](http://msoe.ie)

T: @Msoe\_Dublin



## Lights, camera, action for the Midlands Polish Community

*- In 2020, with the country in lockdown, the group set up a YouTube channel to keep Polish people informed*

An Athlone-based community group for Polish people has fully embraced new technology to reach their fellow countrymen in the Midlands and beyond.

The Midlands Polish Community CLG was established in 2018 by a small group of volunteers.

In 2020, with the country in lockdown, the group set up its own YouTube channel, MPC-TV, to help keep Polish people informed.

The group's president Slawek Kazek said the channel is "working very well" with many of their events now live-streamed.

"In 2020, we had an informational project for Polish migrants. We invited experts, Polish people who are living in Ireland, for example: a nurse, a Polish GP, a guy from SIPTU, a Polish accountant, a Polish lawyer. We recorded I think 10 episodes of the programme."

The group reached out to a television company in Poland for tech advice and have benefited from the assistance of volunteers with experience in the industry.

Over Christmas the group reached out to the volunteering centres in the Midlands.

"We got replies from four different volunteer centres. A guy who worked professionally in TV in Brazil, and is now living in Dublin, drove to Athlone to help us to do a livestream from the Christmas market in Athlone."

In January, two Polish actors travelled to Athlone for a charity fundraiser, which was also livestreamed on the Youtube channel.

Slawek said, "Our video editor, who has her own video creation business, is from Limerick. We use her skills if we need to. I'm really passionate about it; it's a fantastic opportunity."

"Maybe it's niche, but there's so much happening in the Polish community and you know, RTÉ won't travel from Dublin to Athlone to do a production on the panto or whatever."

Ultimately, Slawek would like to set up a community TV channel, but the regulations are a hurdle.

"I looked into the rules on how to set up a properly licensed community TV station in Ireland. Don't go there, basically! The BAI – the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland – is a dinosaur. The regulations are out of the 1950s. So that's why everyone is on YouTube. But who knows what's



• Members of Midlands Polish Community at a get-together on January 29.

***"We exist because we believe integration is crucial in modern Irish diversified communities."***

going to be in the future?" he said.

As well as operating their Youtube channel, the Midlands Polish Community organises various events and fundraisers throughout the year.

"We exist because we believe integration is crucial in modern Irish diversified communities. We have our registered office and a drop-in centre on the outskirts of Athlone. We operate in the major towns in the Midlands – Athlone, Mullingar and Longford – all the projects are really happening in those locations."

Slawek continued: "The integration is twofold; it's integration

of Polish people who are scattered in rural Ireland between different localities. It's not like in Limerick, Cork or Dublin where you have thousands of Polish migrants living in one place.

"Our aim is to integrate Polish people, and have integration with organisations in the community. We are trying to organise different events so people can exchange thoughts, culture, create some emotions, etc."

The group's website features content in both Polish and English, encouraging integration.

The Midlands Polish Community

***"Our aim is to integrate Polish people, and have integration with organisations in the community."***



sometimes joins forces with groups of ex-pats from other parts of the world. Last year, a darts tournament was held with the Longford African Community, and a group of Brazilian nationals living in the region.

The organisation also holds events to celebrate important dates on the calendar such as Polish Independence Day on November 11.

Slawek concluded: "We organise Children's Day in Drum Community Centre every year, Women's Day in March – it's not as popular in Ireland, but in Central Europe and Eastern Europe it is quite popular."

"It's important, because there are certain dates that are very familiar to the migrants from Poland that are not maybe celebrated in Ireland as much. Our events are open for everyone. We are well known in this region and what we have actually noticed is that more and more Irish people are getting to know us and our work as well."



**YouTube:** [youtube.com/c/midlandspolishcommunity](https://youtube.com/c/midlandspolishcommunity)

**W:** [polishcommunity.ie](https://polishcommunity.ie)

## LGBT+ people grateful to the 300 people championing more inclusive healthcare

BY KATHY MASTERSON

Society on the whole tends to view older people as non-sexual beings. Inaccurate as that may be, it is nothing new. However, it can have a particularly detrimental effect on the healthcare needs of those in the LGBT+ community.

Since 2018, a course for health and social care professionals has been helping to make healthcare settings more welcoming.

Run by LGBT Ireland, the national support organisation for LGBT+ people, the LGBT Champions Programme aims to help older members of the community feel more comfortable accessing health and social care services.

James O'Hagan, LGBT Champions training programme co-ordinator, explained: "We worked with the likes of Alone, Age and Opportunity - organisations that provide supports to older people to add a weight to our work in that space.

"We developed a training programme and started rolling it out to older people's services, targeting the more frontline services initially, the ones where people would arrive in the greatest crisis.

"We found a population that wasn't really being considered, not out of any malice, it was just purely that older people aren't really seen as having a sexuality. So when your sexuality is different from the mainstream, it's a step to even consider you as having an interest in sex or sexuality from the beginning," he said.

The programme began with a one-day workshop that allowed participants to learn about the experiences and preferences of older members of the LGBT+ community, how they would like to be treated, and the

*"So many of them mentioned walking into a space and seeing a little rainbow icon put up somewhere."*

importance of understanding their identity.

"Many older members of our community had to fight a very hard fight to be who they are, and coming out is something that gets harder and harder when you are in crisis and feeling vulnerable," continued James.

"We would see people who had been out and proud their entire life. But if they have a cancer diagnosis, or some illness that's going to need prolonged intimate homecare, they'll be concerned whether the person assigned to give that care is going to be accepting of their identity."

He told of one older man he knew of who - before the public health nurse would call - went around the house taking down any sign that he may be in the LGBT community.

"When you're in that position that you need that sort of intimate homecare, the last thing you should be worried about is who's going to come into your home and take against a picture of a flag."

During Covid-19 lockdowns,

LGBT Ireland reached out to older members of the community through social media to provide support and companionship. This helped the organisation to connect with 400 older LGBT+ people who previously were unaware of any LGBT+ supports or services available to them.

LGBT Ireland now works with a network of approximately 300 LGBT Champions working in services that older people tend to access. Once they have completed the training, they create an action plan of how they can start implementing changes in their own services. After three months, they provide feedback to LGBT Ireland about what measures are working well, and what areas they may need additional support with.

James said the response from older members of the LGBT+ community has been "incredibly positive".

"So many of them mentioned walking into a space and seeing a little rainbow icon put up somewhere, the sense of speaking to someone who has a sense of your identity. Or who knows that your identity has nothing to do with what you're there to speak to them about - perhaps you've broken a toe - but you feel fully comfortable being yourself. You're not concerned with having to hold anything back; if you're talking about your partner or husband or wife, you're going to be respected for who you are. That has made an enormous difference to the older people in particular, older people who live more rurally.

"If you're based in Dublin you're most likely linked in with the LGBT+ community. You have spaces, all these supports that exists, massive Pride parades, gay couples walking around holding hands - you have that positive reaffirming of your identity

everywhere you go. When you go a bit more rural, it's less visible.

"So having these trained professionals who are indicating their inclusiveness is really important. It is all about that sense of 'I can relax. I know this is a service I can use, this is someone I know I can rely on'."

While James says Ireland is "a very inclusive country", sometimes there is a need to make that welcome more visible.

"It's understanding these nuances, understanding why a person who grew up in an Ireland of the 70s, 80s or 90s might need that additional sign of safety before they feel comfortable to share.

"Research shows that where healthcare and social settings haven't historically been visibly inclusive, LGBT+ people do have worse health outcomes because they're less likely to access them, and when they do it's at a time of acute crisis. They're also less likely to assert their needs in those places, so you'll have trans people who will be misgendered for example," continued James.

"A trans woman in Cork was in an accident on her farm. It was early in the morning so it was before she'd had an opportunity to put on her makeup and jewellery. She hadn't put on her gender armour that told people 'This is who I am', and she chose not to contact an ambulance. She ended up for a number of days living with a very serious injury because she felt as if she was going to be seen as something other than she was, and wasn't going to be understood, and that her identity wouldn't be taken seriously."

He says that this is what the LGBT Champions Programme aims to address: "It's that split second decision when you have an accident - before you get to the logical point of 'I'm going to call for help now', something sticks in there and says 'Oh God are you really going to put yourself in this perceived danger?'."

"It's about breaking down those barriers so the older people know the people helping them understand their identity and won't see it as a big deal. They will just treat them as they find them and will respect them as who they are."

More info: <https://lgbt.ie/>

• James O'Hagan.



**Where are we going?**  
Côte d'Ivoire.

**When?**

Start packing.

**Why?**

Look keep it quiet, but President Michael D Higgins is about to claim sweeping new powers. He was a bit pissed about some people in Ireland turning racist, so we're all off for a year overseas.

**Are you for real?**

Yes - what do you think Michael D was doing in Africa recently! Somehow he talked President Ouattara into the swap. Everyone in Côte d'Ivoire is moving here and we're moving there. And yes, it's an all-island thing so we've to try bring the unionists with us. Inclusiveness and all that.

**Why Côte d'Ivoire?**

It's 24-28 degrees centigrade year-round and we have the same flag as them.

**What will we be doing?**

Mostly farming, some surfing.

**That'll be fun. But who'll mind my cat and dog?**

A couple of families from Côte d'Ivoire will be living in your gaffe - freezing with the cold - they'll mind your pets.

Look, it's only for a year, then we all move back again.

**Is this community development?**

No, strictly speaking this is called development education under dictatorship.

**What if I want Supermacs?**

Pat McDonagh (the founder) is coming too, although he'll be fairly busy with the farming.

## ABOUT HORACE:

A former civil servant, community worker and agony uncle, Horace is utterly solutions-focused and has been writing for 'Changing Ireland' since he was a nipper.

He has addressed everything from world poverty to one-stop shops and can speak fluent Poblaise.

A few of his better columns are available on our website.

# QUEER IRELAND

## "When they got on that bus, they went back into the closet"

BY KATHY MASTERSON

It's a scenario that most of us probably thought had been left behind in the early 90s. A member of the LGBT community travels by bus to attend an event run by an LGBT organisation. There, they can be open, they can let their barriers down and be their full selves. However, once the event is over, they get back on the bus to travel home to their rural community, and the walls come back up again.

Unfortunately, this is a scene that still plays out every week, all over the country. As a society, we may have clapped ourselves on the back after the passing of the Marriage Equality Referendum in 2015. But, according to members of the LGBT+ community, there is still work to be done.

Speaking at a recent Rural Ideas Forum, vice-chairperson of Amach LGBT in Galway, **Maria Molloy** explained: "The milestones of the Marriage Equality Referendum and the Gender Recognition Act show how much we've come on in relation to the LGBT+ community. But there is still a way to go, and 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 (the fact) that they can't be their whole self in the place they live," she said.

"We've had a lot of people - when we had Teach Solais, our LGBT resource centre open - that would get on a bus or get on a train for several hours" to come visit the centre.

For many it was their first time.

"We had an 80-year-old farmer come in and say 'I'm part of this community, and I feel that I belong.'"

"We were there for people and heard their stories, and 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."

Community youth worker with Waterford and South Tipperary Youth Services, **Debbie O'Rourke** works with 10 to 24-year-olds who attend the Chillout LGBTI+ Youth Project.

She told *Changing Ireland* that the gaps in transport links were "a huge problem".

She said that young LGBT+ people who find themselves isolated without



• A city bus in Galway.

a space where they can meet others from the community often "withdraw into themselves".

"The effect is very negative. Anyone who's withdrawn is not living their full life. It really affects young people's development in terms of their attachment to education, their life progression. Some young people are afraid to do anything for fear that they might be found out, or that they'll let it slip, so they just kind of retreat," she said.

She stressed the importance to LGBT+ young people of "seeing someone who's like them".

"Role models are really important to young people, in particular in the LGBT community, because for young people to see adults living their best life - or even just living a normal life - it convinces them that they're going to be ok. So for young people who don't see someone else, or don't hear any mention of the LGBT community, that can cause them to retreat in a way that they don't always come out of. Then that can cause increased mental health difficulties."

According to Debbie, outreach work with schools in rural areas is vital. Earlier this year, she also worked on a rural outreach project with 18 to 24-year-olds in rural areas of Waterford and South Tipperary.

"I surveyed young people of that age in that area and in community and voluntary organisations in that

area. I thought: 'It's unrealistic that there's going to be enough LGBT projects in every area for every rural person to access'. The way I looked at it was, how do we make sure that what does exist is inclusive? Most organisations just had never thought about it before.

"There are amazing groups out there, it's about how do we make that a place where if an LGBT person wanted to come and join it, they would be able to share all parts of their lives; they wouldn't have to hide.

"You can't put a price on visibility, a lot of the work I did with these organisations was getting them ready to put up that flag," she said.

Debbie has called for additional resources to fund community workers. She concluded: "A building and materials cannot replace what a worker can do. I would specifically call for more investment in youth work and community work, because youth workers and community workers go out and, particularly when it comes to rural isolation, that's what it's going to take."



**Cillian Flynn**

(pictured left) is operations manager with GOSHH (Gender Orientation Sexual

Health HIV) in Limerick and he says

• Continued on next page.

## Community workers tell how LGBT+ organisations are working to tackle rural isolation and what is needed.



• Maria Molloy, Galway.



• Debbie O'Rourke, Waterford.

***“A building and materials cannot replace what a worker can do. I would specifically call for more investment in youth work and community work.”*** - Debbie O'Rourke, Waterford.

• Continued from previous page.

access to LGBT+ groups are vital for the mental health of people in the community.

“Part of it is that they don't have to come out in social settings. It's also so people can see they're not ‘the only gay in the village’ for want of a phrase. It's good to just come in here and be with similar people and that social anxiety is not there,” he said.

When asked whether transport or attitudes were the main contributors

***“It's a massive thing that they can't be themselves where they grew up, around their loved ones.”***

- Cillian Flynn, Limerick

of rural isolation for people in the LGBT+ community, Cillian says “it's a bit of everything”.

“For some people, they grew up in the 80s and 90s where being out and gay was illegal. So a lot of people buried it deep down, they got married, had families, so that has led to some of the isolation.

“It has an effect on family relationships because people choose not to visit home as much because of mental health. It's a massive thing that they can't be themselves where they grew up, around their loved ones, around the people who in theory should care for them the most.

“There is a small town mentality, but I think some of that is changing. Like the town I grew up in - seeing a little Pride festival happening there. It's lovely to see that happen.”

However, Cillian believes that many members of the LGBT+ community prefer to move to larger urban areas.

He said: “For some people who haven't come out, they want that segregation, that separation. ‘I can be myself once I go to that city’.”

This is a view echoed by **Kate Moynihan**, CEO of LINC, a community resource centre for lesbian, bisexual and trans women in Cork.

“There is a huge need in rural spaces, but at the same time, people like to go away, they like to go to a city where they're a bit more anonymous.”

“You might not know other LGBT people in your small town or village for that social interaction. We have women from Kerry, Limerick and Waterford who would drive to our groups because they're not happening in their own places.

“LGBT people are say five to ten per cent of the population; if you're in a small town. It's a very small group of people. Everybody's going to know each other, so you do need to go away often to meet (new) people, or to meet someone you want to have a relationship with.”

“While there have been huge improvements in Ireland, there is still a way to go. There's still that prejudice, and that's not just rural, that's everywhere,” she explained.

## COMRADE DERMOT HAYES PUBLISHES HIS MEMOIRS



Nationally known activist and campaigner Comrade Dermot Hayes has published his memoirs – ‘The Road That Rises - a memoir by Dermot Hayes, a boy from Kells’.

Like many activists and volunteers, Dermot is a force of nature.

He calls all his friends ‘Comrade’ and has been active for decades in youth work, community groups, LEADER projects, trade unions, worker co-ops, environmental causes, and disability rights.

Dermot is well known for volunteering, advocating and campaigning for human rights, in particular with the Independent Living Movement in Ireland.

He spent the last year writing his memoir with the aid of well-known ghostwriter Breda Shannon.

“I have been immersed in the local, national and international movement for over thirty years. During this time, I founded, co-founded and headed organisations to represent, campaign and progress rights for people with disabilities,” he says.

“The book explores and documents my life as a child growing up in Kells, Corofin, County Clare and through to my years as an activist and campaigner across many causes over seven decades,” says Dermot.

Corofin's town hall was packed for the official launch on March 4.

All profits from ‘The Road that Rises’ will be donated to two causes: the Clare Leader Forum and the Corofin Hall and Field Fund. You can buy the book in Clare shops. If living outside the county, contact Dermot on Twitter: @HayesEnnis

# Travellers' Lives Matter

*Unique research by Traveller men themselves shows impact in one county of racism, discrimination and poor accommodation*

**BY KATHY MASTERSON**

A major study of Travellers' lives in Dublin published in mid-February pointed to racism and discrimination for directly leading to many Traveller suicides. Research among a smaller group, focused specifically on Traveller men's mental health, came to the same conclusion. This study was launched in December in Donegal and it marked the first time that Travellers themselves conducted all the research.

Facilitated by David Friel, the first Traveller in the North West to be educated to Masters level, the research paints a picture of the daily lives of 12 Traveller men living in Donegal.

The report, entitled 'Our Lives Our Voices Our Future', makes for sobering reading. Of the 12 men who agreed to be interviewed for the study, seven had experienced suicidal ideation, or had attempted suicide in the past.

All 12 reported having negative experiences with members of An Garda Síochána, including being subjected to racial slurs, and random searches. Unemployment, poverty, poor housing conditions, and negative experiences in the education system were also common themes.

Donegal Travellers Project (DTP) has been running since 1996; it delivers projects and workshops in a number of areas, including Traveller accommodation, men's health, women's health, employment, as well as an education project, a preschool, and afterschool support. DTP also operates a Roma project, which began in 2016.

Martin Mongan, a community worker with DTP who was part of the research team, spoke to *Changing Ireland* about the ground-breaking report.

"When it (DTP) was originally established, nearly all of the staff were from the settled community. Now about 70 to 80 per cent of the staff are Travellers; a lot of them came up through the literacy project and different educational projects. We also have one Roma staff member.

"I left school at 12, then I came back to education through the Donegal Travellers Project youth programme. Most of the staff would have left school early, and without the project we probably wouldn't be in employment.



• At the launch: Thomas Pringle, TD; Mags Casey, co-ordinator of Tipperary Travellers Project; main researcher David Friel; Hugh Friel and Michael Mongan of Donegal Travellers Project; Senator Eileen Flynn.

"It's unique in that it's Traveller research by Travellers. The participants are Travellers from all around Donegal. There are men from the LGBT community, men who are in prison, or homeless. Some are employed, but most of them are unemployed. They were from different age groups, from about 18 to 60 years old, so it was a very diverse group from all walks of life. It's the first piece of research like it in Ireland."

The questions covered employment, accommodation, engagement with the guards and mental health.

"All of the men had similar experiences. Mental health was a major factor for all the men, as well as the lack of adequate and suitable accommodation," said Martin.

"One of the families had 10-12 people living in a three-bedroom house. There were issues with overcrowding, damp, and poor heating. Others were living on the roadside in a caravan."

## SCHOOL STORIES

Martin says the contributing factors to mental health difficulties were consistent among all the men, beginning with negative experiences in educational settings, followed by a struggle to gain employment in adulthood, which results in poverty and being forced to live in poor quality accommodation.

"Lots of Travellers leave school at a young age, due to segregation and low expectations. Even when they might have the training for a job,

when they have the skills, once they (the employer) hear your name, or where you live, you might not even get an interview.

"It was like this 23 years ago, and it's still like that today. It hasn't changed a whole lot. Little bits and pieces have improved but not much.

"If you don't have access to decent accommodation, your life expectancy is lower. If you don't have employment, you can't better your circumstances.

"If you have employment, you can get better housing. You'll have better health, you have access to better food and you can take better care of yourself. Your mental health is better, you've got a daily routine, you're talking to your colleagues."

## WHAT HELPS

Regarding integration, Martin says it has improved in some areas of Donegal "due to Travellers being housed in housing estates among the settled communities". However, it seems like society still has a way to go.

He said: "I can't go to any bar. They hear my accent, look at my appearance and they think I'm violent, it's that negative stereotype. Even things like looking to hire a digger to do some work can be difficult. Companies won't hire to you. All of that has consequences for your mental health and eventually you crack."

He spoke of Traveller men living miles from the nearest town in poor accommodation and having "no engagement with anyone outside

their own community".

It would help if there was more integration and greater engagement between the settled and Traveller communities, as well as more cultural awareness among service providers.

## WORK

Martin said more employers need to be willing to give people a chance: "Travellers do want to work, but we can't get employment."

He welcomed the fact that some local employers in Donegal give jobs to young Travellers.

"If you don't give someone a chance, you won't know if they're good or not. Society needs to be more open to giving people a chance."

## SUICIDE RATE

"The suicide rate among Traveller men is seven times higher than the general population. If you're being told all your life that you're not wanted, if you can't get employment, it can lead you down a bad route where you feel like you've nothing to live for. In some parts of the country, like Limerick and Cork, we've heard of children as young as 11 and 12 taking their own lives."

The life expectancy for Traveller men is 15 years less than in the general population and unemployment rates are at about 80%.

## STIGMA

As was highlighted in previous studies, there is a stigma in talking about mental health and especially so among Traveller men. This challenge is compounded for Traveller men who are gay.

The report also cites previous research, which stated that 90% of Irish Travellers live in insufficient and inadequate accommodation. A common theme from the interview data was the connection between substandard accommodation, homelessness and Traveller men's mental health.

The research was carried out in conjunction with Connecting for Life Donegal, the National Traveller Partnership, and the Traveller Men's Advisory Group.

To get a copy of the report, or to contact the author, email: [travcomdtp@gmail.com](mailto:travcomdtp@gmail.com) or [david.friel@mail.itsligo.ie](mailto:david.friel@mail.itsligo.ie)

# IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Traveller men of various ages, employment statuses and circumstances spoke to researchers in Donegal about their experiences on subjects such as accommodation, education, and employment, and how these experiences affected their mental health. Here are seven people's stories and comments:

## PARTICIPANT 1:

**TEACHERS:** The teachers didn't like me, and I didn't like them, so I just left. I didn't finish my Leaving Cert. I think that being a Traveller made them dislike me. Travellers stayed in groups and were placed in classes as groups. When the teachers are like that, it makes you feel like not going in.

**GOING OUT:** If you want to go for a pint or two there's a big chance you will not get served in any pubs for being a Traveller. You go into shops; I just look at the screens. You can see the cameras looking at you, following every step you take like. It's shaming, to be honest. It makes me not want to go out, I just avoid any of these situations.

## PARTICIPANT 2:

**NO HEATING:** I'm in a house and have been there for the last ten years. There are no flushing toilets or working showers. Only one tap is working in the sink. Now we reported this two years ago to the council. We have no heating or anything. To be honest, it makes me feel angry because I'm ten years out pushing them [council] to help us and nothing is getting done...it is one of the things that worries me the most.

## PARTICIPANT 3:

**NO GYMS:** I can't get a gym or swimming pool membership anywhere. All I get is that: 'We're fully booked'. There was one time I rang the hotel and they were not taking on new members. I got a settled friend to ring, they got a membership no problem. They cop your last name and know you're a Traveller.



**I NEVER COMPLAIN:** Where we live affects every part of our lives, especially my children in school. I never complain to the school. My kids are called knackers, gypsies and stuff like that. This is going on since I was at school, you're chatting 25 years ago. It will never change. I complained as a child and was told to stop causing trouble.

**IN THE SPOTLIGHT:** My second name puts me in the spotlight, I am tarred with a heavy brush. They will try everything in their power to do [criminalise] you. I was wrongly accused by the Garda for a serious crime I didn't commit, I could give you a number of examples where cases have been dismissed.

## PARTICIPANT 4:

**MALE SUICIDE:** I have cousins that completed suicide due to whatever reasons and its mostly my male cousins. You walk into a graveyard now and you are not seeing Travellers dying at 40,50 or 60. It's 20, 30 and 40.

## PARTICIPANT 5:

**MY ACCENT:** I am never going to get from 9 to 5 or whatever. I haven't got an education and when I use my accent, especially in England, they simply listen and say no way. When we did maintenance work people thought we were scammers or cold callers because of my accent.

A lot of men are pushed into poverty. Travellers can get work in certain places, but most of the time Travelling men haven't got the education. I hated not working...it makes you feel down man, like worthless.

**SOME ADVICE:** Traveller men have too much to unpack because we are told to suppress it from day one. Don't let anything get you down; keep your head up and keep walking. I think that is where the high rate of suicide comes from in our community.

**HUMAN RIGHTS:** Where did they march for Travellers' rights? Travellers that are dying younger, are killed in fires because of poor facilities and the children leaving school not being able to write their own names.

## PARTICIPANT 6:

**HIDDEN SEXUALITY:** Traveller boys who are gay live nothing but a life of a dog inside and outside of the community. They have to hide that they are gay, they have to deal with discrimination from country people and deal with the expectation that Traveller men are strong and emotionless.

**FAMILY:** After walking away from my marriage because I was gay and experiencing domestic violence, I am homeless. Having no place to call home makes my anxiety and panic attacks worse. You are in a constant state of worry because you don't have space of your own. You feel like a burden on your family... everyone really.

## PARTICIPANT 7:

**TRAGEDIES:** I have lost three children. Two in tragic circumstances and one to suicide. It never gets easier. It's hard to think that you have outlived your children...the death of my family has led to my depression. I was going to take my life a few times, I have lost so many people and have experienced difficult situations since I came to Donegal. Settled people don't know what's going on in your life, they just want you gone.

## Participants make 18 recommendations

Possible solutions for the issues faced by Traveller men were suggested by the participants. These included:

1. Create consciousness among Traveller men about their human rights and legislation to empower them to report racism/discrimination.
2. End racism in all its forms.
3. More job opportunities and apprenticeships.
4. An LGBTQ+ support group or worker based in Donegal Travellers Project.
5. A health awareness campaign on the impact of mental health on physical health and vice versa.
6. More physical sports and social gatherings for Traveller men.
7. Review local authority policies to take

account of Traveller homelessness and accommodation deprivation.

8. Educators should undertake anti-racism, anti-discrimination and cultural training.
9. Training initiatives for Donegal Traveller men that match their interests while also meeting the needs of employers.
10. Governmental policy should address the high unemployment rate among Traveller men.
11. Culturally appropriate counselling services.
12. Locally, the development of a Traveller mental health response team.
13. The development of a National Traveller Mental Health Strategy.
14. Anti-stigma interventions among

Traveller men with a specific emphasis on mental health literacy, and sexuality.

15. Primary healthcare workers should receive cultural competency, anti-racism and discrimination training.
16. Local authority staff should receive training on interculturalism, anti-racism and the accommodation needs of Travellers.
17. Diversity, anti-racism and cultural competency training for gardaí.
18. An Garda Síochána should establish a dedicated policing plan to improve and develop relations with the Traveller community.

• Also see next page.

• Continued from previous page.

## What makes life extra hard for Traveller men?

The research carried out in Donegal identified the following as contributing to mental health difficulties among Traveller men:



- Severe accommodation deprivation and homelessness was correlated with Traveller men's experiences of poor mental health, with anxiety, stress, low self-esteem and self-worth being self-reported by Traveller men as a result.

- Traveller men's early childhood experiences of racism, segregation and low expectations in the school setting are internalised, having a deep-rooted and long-term impact on their mental health.

- Unemployment and subsequent poverty.

- Traveller men self-reported having either fair or poor physical health. Contributing factors were accommodation deprivation, poverty, racism and discrimination from health/fitness establishments.

- Extensive research indicates that Irish Travellers have a higher death rate than the general population in Ireland. Traveller men reported increased incidences of family bereavements (from suicide or sudden death) impacted on their mental health.

- Increased experiences of bereavement coupled with precarious life circumstances and social exclusion led Traveller men to utilise drugs and/or alcohol.

- Lack of access and inadequate experiences of mental health support. Most Traveller men reported having negative experiences with their GP and mental health services.

- Racial/ethnic policing from the gardai. Experiences of being subject to racial slurs, wrongful convictions and involuntary interactions were identified as chronic stressors.

# Volunteers prove towns such as Skerries need Community Cars



• Aidan Herron and Eric Byrne are volunteer drivers with the Skerries Community Car.

The North Dublin coastal town of Skerries might not be the first place that comes to mind when we think of areas in Ireland that have issues with transport. However, as Patricia Cassidy of Local Link points out, public transport is only accessible for those who can walk to the nearest bus stop or train station.

Recognising the need among Skerries' older population for a safe, reliable and affordable door-to-door service, the town's community car initiative was established in November 2019.

The project is a partnership involving the Local Link Transport Co-ordination Unit for Louth, Meath and Fingal; Fingal County Council; Age Friendly Skerries; and car hire company GoCar, which provides the vehicle – an all-electric Hyundai Kona.

Since its launch, the Skerries Community Car has completed more than 600 trips – an impressive feat considering the service was put on pause for several months at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Patricia told *Changing Ireland*: “You look at a place like Skerries and say, ah sure they're all right, they have buses going to Dublin every day, and they can get to Balbriggan. But the problem is the distance between the house and the bus stop.

*“It's humbling how grateful people are. I would encourage other people to volunteer.”*

And then when you get off the bus, where do you go from there? They're the pinch points on a transport system.”

According to the 2016 census, about 25 per cent of the population of Fingal and its environs were over the age of 55.

Patricia believes that down the line, this will create a need for several more community cars.

Currently, about 150 people, mostly aged over 55, are registered with the service, and about 40 volunteer drivers have been trained and garda vetted.

“Age Friendly Skerries helped us to identify passengers and they also helped us to identify volunteers.

“It's easy to book; passengers ring us here in the office. And the first interaction they have is with a human, and our phone number is

free. We contact our drivers and ask them if they can do trips. Then the drivers use the GoCar app to book the car,” explained Patricia.

“Safety for people is a big thing. Our volunteers make contact with passengers before they travel so that they're very aware who they're going to meet.”

That helps them sleep better the night before their first journey in a community car.

“It's a real trauma for some people. They need transport and they don't know where to go. And then when they find us, they fear that the car isn't going to turn up or that it's going to be late.”

Passengers are asked to give a small donation on all volunteer-led services run by Local Link Louth Meath and Fingal.

Patricia says: “The reason why we look for a donation is not to make money on it. But it's to make sure that people understand that there's a value on what they're getting. For the Skerries scheme it's €3 to go down the town and €10 to go to the hospital.

“We say to people that if for whatever reason they can't afford the donation, that's not a reason not to travel.”

• Continued on next page.

**T**he National Transport Authority (NTA) first piloted community car schemes in 2020 by providing grant aid for six trial runs in five counties.

A spokesperson for the NTA said the initiative “proved to be a valuable service in tackling rural isolation, but its operation was hampered by the pandemic”.

The scheme is now being expanded to cover up to 15 new schemes for another year’s operation. The NTA will approve one new community car scheme per Local Link area and will allocate any outstanding funding to subsequent applications at its discretion.

The pilot schemes that began in 2020 were in: Goleen (Cork), Castlemaine/Keel (Kerry), Louisburgh (Mayo), Kilcormac (Laois Offaly), Rath Mhuire and Dolmen (Longford Westmeath Roscommon).

Applications for the expanded programme are currently being assessed and new services are expected to start shortly.

The NTA said, “A community car service should be used to

provide a transport service to the benefit of the social and welfare needs of a local community or communities.”

The service must be free for passengers and drivers must not be paid for their time. It can also be used for urgent or essential logistical support to other community services.

“However, reasonable expenses can be redeemed as appropriate,” added the spokesperson.



• Robert Montgomery (centre) of GoCar along with volunteers from Skerries Community Car and members from Skerries Age Friendly.

## *A successful community car scheme requires a strong community and dedicated volunteers.*

– the whole day is gone. Getting on trains and buses is especially hard for people with mobility issues.”

Aidan says the initiative gives passengers “independence and a sense of security”.

“They know who is coming and when. They love it, when you compare it to the stress and the strain they had to go through. And the strain on their families, trying to support them and their daily needs.”

He concluded: “You know that some people are going back home to an empty house. So you make sure that they’re ok for everything, if they have another need such as going to the shop. It’s humbling how grateful people are. I would encourage other people to volunteer. It’s a very worthwhile thing to do, and it’s a marvellous initiative.”

Patricia advises anyone thinking of establishing a community car scheme to first speak to their local

“A community car service can be made up of one or several suitable vehicles, as necessary. Each vehicle will need to be registered for exemption individually with the NTA,” they said.

Running costs may include fuel costs, required emergency equipment, parking and toll charges, occasional cleaning and maintenance, advertisements, phone bills and insurance costs.

community council or development group to determine if there is a need.

She advised: “Talking to the county council is a good thing as well. They’re looking at putting in mobility hubs, to have a one stop shop where you can get what you need in terms of electrified vehicles, whether that’s a scooter, a bike or a car.”

Most importantly, says Patricia, a successful community car scheme requires a strong community and dedicated volunteers.

“Our volunteers keep going all the time. They don’t like to see people stuck, so they’ll always be available. You do need a good team of volunteers, and the volunteers need to be supported as well. They don’t get paid for what they do, they feel like they get a payment in the good that they do. So it is important that volunteers have their own little community or support so that they don’t feel like they’re alone, because driving can be very lonely.”

In a further development, this year the National Transport Authority hopes to develop a strategy for setting up hubs that offer people shared car, bike and powered personal transporters (ebikes, pedelecs, battery-powered scooters).

The future is shared and will be driven by volunteers!

## 21 AREAS TEST OUT NEW RURAL HACKNEY IDEA

**T**his year, a one-year pilot scheme in 21 areas around the country is going to test out the idea of a localised, specially licenced taxi service to provide an extra transport option for people in rural areas.

The Local Hackney Pilot Programme provides grants and seeks to encourage the setting up of new part-time local hackney services in communities that could not support a full-time taxi or hackney operation.

The pilot programme will take place in 21 rural areas across the country for one year. All drivers will be licenced, insured and Garda vetted and will be able to pick people up from their doors to drop them to where they want to go. The service promises to provide that essential ‘last mile’ connection for people living in more isolated and rural areas.

At the launch in January, Transport Minister Ryan said, “This pilot responds to the reality of rural life in Ireland in a creative and local-based way, connecting people from their doors to local towns, healthcare centres, the post offices, or onto other transport stops and hubs.

“We will monitor it over the coming year and learn from it so that we can roll it out across many other areas. This pilot is an important tenet of the Government’s National Sustainable Mobility Plan 2022-2025 and a key deliverable under Our Rural Future 2021-2025.”

Each successful applicant for the local hackney license may be granted €6,000 as a subsidy to ordinary fares income, to run the service.

The special limited local licence aims to ensure that existing taxi or hackney services already operating and providing services in any area are not displaced.

The local hackney operates exclusively on a pre-booked basis and can only pick up passengers within a designated area of seven to 10 kilometres from a chosen point, normally the residence of the licenced driver. The drop off point has no restrictions, with trips to healthcare facilities and transport hubs further afield anticipated.

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The organisation also oversees a scheme in other parts of Louth, Meath and Fingal where volunteers drive their own cars. Local Link helps to match passengers with drivers living in their area or as close as possible. Volunteer drivers in this scheme receive a travel allowance for diesel or petrol costs, and for wear and tear on the car.

The impact of the community car scheme goes further than helping people to attend hospital appointments.

“It supports community. It also supports health services. And it means older people can live better at home, and they can stay at home for longer. And it means then that their family members can participate fully in employment, or do whatever they used to do, without having to take a day off here or there,” noted Patricia.

Volunteer Aidan Herron from Skerries signed up to drive the community car after spotting an ad in his local shop.

He told *Changing Ireland*: “Most of the drivers are retired people who are looking for something to do. It’s a nice thing to do, and you meet lovely people; you hear some great stories.

“If you have to do two to three runs a week to Beaumont Hospital, a taxi is impractical. People were having to get the train into town (Dublin city centre) and then the bus

# COMMUNITY EMPLOYMENT

## QUIETLY WORKING FOR OVER 20 YEARS

# Special projects help people break addiction and change their lives

BY ALLEN MEAGHER

Barry Corkery is one of this year's selectors on the Cork senior football management team. He is less well known in Cork for his day job as a senior addiction counsellor managing a HSE-funded treatment centre in Tralee, Co. Kerry.

Corkery is obviously good with teams and, as he once told *Irish Examiner* readers during an interview about fitness, the work of his addiction support team in Brandon House, Tralee, is tremendous.

Speaking of his colleagues supporting people in recovery, he said, "You would be just blown away by the work being put in."

The staff in Brandon House work closely with equally dedicated staff supervising a special Community Employment (CE) scheme next door.

Through collaboration between the HSE and North East West Kerry Development, people supported by Brandon House are often encouraged to seek a place on the special CE scheme. CE projects nationally are funded through the Department of Social Protection.

Last July, *Changing Ireland* met with participants on the scheme. They provided rich testimony about personal, physical and career development goals they reached or were striving towards on the scheme.

Many of the participants, as they moved on from addiction, had plans to study at third level, become counsellors themselves, or gym



• *Róisín, one of the Tralee participants, sings for her classmates and visitors.*

instructors. One former engineer wanted to change his life and was, at the time of our visit, abroad in Scotland on a course in forest meditation.

Such is the level of transformation possible for participants who emerge from a treatment centre clear of their addiction, but not yet ready to slide easily back into society and find regular employment or know

what they want in life. By taking a place on the CE scheme, they allow themselves three years to grow and develop.

The reason for the gathering in the kitchen on the day *Changing Ireland* dropped by was a ministerial visit, and there was a quiet, dignified atmosphere in the room as the participants told their stories.

"I had fear coming in here at first

and I'm now here two years," said one person who was afraid at the beginning to even speak.

"It has changed my life," said a fellow participant, and she explained how.

A third chose instead of speaking to sing beautifully for the visitors.

The staff explained why the programme works so well.

• *Continued on next page.*



• *ALL SMILES: Development workers and HSE staff with Community Employment Scheme participants and staff during Minister Joe O'Brien's visit.*

## ***“We know it works because it has been tried and tested,” says the HSE's Barry Corkery***

• *Continued from previous page.*

“We go softly. Personal development is a key part of it,” said Daniel O’Shea, CE supervisor.

His colleague Tara Conway, piped in: “We follow the academic calendar from September to May. It helps people get structure and routine after they come out of (addiction) treatment.”

The project gets its training through Education and Training Board tutors and classes run from 9am-1pm, Monday to Friday.

“During the summer, they do a lot of outdoor activities such as paddle-boarding, rock-climbing, drumming, meditation, running, art – it’s wide-ranging,” added Tara.

Barry said, “We know it works because it has been tried and tested.”

He said that people come because of heroin, cocaine and tablet use. “However, alcohol is still the number one addiction that we see in our services next door in Brandon House.”

He said it was helpful to have the CE scheme operate alongside – “under the same roof” as the HSE’s Brandon House treatment centre.

“The opposite of addiction is connection,” he said, adding that the locally-based response was “hugely significant”.

Minister of State Joe O’Brien was duly impressed.

### **OVER 20 YEARS**

Some people may not have heard of CE drug rehabilitation schemes, despite their having been in existence for over 20 years.

In 2003, this magazine reported on concerns in Dublin that CE project funding would be cut, and Macro Community Resource Centre was especially worried.

Macro expressed pride in the achievements of the 13 participants on its drug rehabilitation scheme. Each one was a former opiate user. Four were early school leavers who were excelling in education; four more had just run a mini-marathon to raise €500 for the CE project; two others were on work placement and all had completed a range of courses.

Nevertheless, the project felt compelled to appeal to then Community Minister Noel Ahern to maintain funding.

While drugs taskforce funding was reduced, “shamefully” said youth

workers, the special CE schemes survived. (Today, Macro still operates a CE scheme).

Moving forward a decade, in 2013, there were 47 CE drug rehabilitation schemes around the country, with the vast majority (35) of them in Dublin. Together, they provided training and support to around 1,000 participants. Funded by the Department of Social Protection (DSP), they helped recovering drug users to develop their personal and employment skills and where possible find a pathway to work.

In a study conducted in 2013, the DSP recognised that unemployment was high in many areas where drug use was also most prevalent, yet it nonetheless “strongly valued” the role of the schemes.

Speaking nearly a decade later – last May - Minister of State Joe O’Brien said the schemes have “a very significant social inclusion focus”, they are “well embedded in our local communities nationally” and are “engaged in significant levels of local service support”.

Two months later, he visited the project in Tralee.

The scheme there was begun in 2017 by two community workers, Cathal O’Shea and Robert Carey from NEWKD.

Tara recalled, “There was one supervisor and 13 participants. Because of the success of the scheme, we got one more supervisor and two administrator roles and increased the participant number to 18.”

Recently, the scheme was approved to take on another supervisor and eight more participants on a bespoke programme for people in recovery and on methadone. The same programme worked well ten years ago for Macro.

Figures for 2022 show there were 905 drug rehabilitation scheme places across the State that year. Roughly half of those were in schemes in the capital. There were 94 places in the mid-west, north-west and west, but only six places in the midlands.

In 2023, there may be scope to extend such schemes further. David Lane, co-ordinator of the HSE’s Southern Region Drugs and Alcohol Taskforce, hopes to see each ‘hub’ in Cork and Kerry with at least one CE drug rehabilitation scheme in the future.

## **Tralee's TEAM project is a place where together everyone achieves more!**

**T**ralee's Team Project is a Community Employment Scheme for people in recovery from addiction. It gives people coming out of recovery a safe space to find out what they want to do next. Often people in addiction have chaos in their lives. This project provides a calm environment in which every person is nurtured while they grow roots to anchor themselves in life.

### **AIMS**

**The aims of the scheme are individualised depending on the future goals of the participant. The main aim is to improve the participant's life by:**

- Encouraging health and wellbeing.
- Supplying access to training and education.
- Sourcing relevant work placements and work experience.
- Supporting progression to further education and/or employment.

### **PROJECT PARTNERS**

**The key partners behind the project are:**

- North, East & West Kerry Local Development Company;
- Addiction treatment services - Brandon House, Edward Court, The Grove, and Coolmine Treatment Centre;
- The Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection;
- The Southern Regional Drug and Alcohol Taskforce;
- Kerry Education and Training Board;
- The group participants are referred by HSE addiction services, Coolmine addiction services and the Grove residential treatment centre.

### **CONTACT THE PROJECT**

**Contact:** CE Supervisors Joanne Kelly-Walsh or Daniel O’Shea (*pictured right*). Tara Conway has moved on to a new job.

**Email:** joannekellywalsh@newkd.ie or danieloshea@newkd.ie



### **WEBSITE**

Find out much more here about the project and what participants can typically expect: <https://newkd.ie/employment/team-project/>



# COMMUNITY EMPLOYMENT

Killian and Geraldine tell their stories after joining a Community Employment scheme

## We moved from destructive patterns to building new habits and it's transforming our lives

BY ALLEN MEAGHER

Geraldine and Killian, both participants on a Special Community Employment Scheme, spoke to *Changing Ireland* about how they moved from being panicky, nervous and withdrawn to becoming confident, hopeful and action-orientated people. They had both been through treatment, but found the scheme was necessary for them to move on from addiction.

Geraldine is in her third year on the scheme. She said it "absolutely" made a big difference going from a treatment centre to a CE scheme: "Because of all the years of relapsing, I came to the stage where I knew I had to do this very slowly."

She was nervous.

"Back then I could not speak in public. I was afraid of my own shadow. I was isolated."

The scheme focuses "mainly on physical health, mental health and personal development" and she said she needed it. "Coming out of addiction, my self-belief and self-esteem was shattered, broken, on the floor."

In her fourth year in recovery, Geraldine is now confident.

"With the benefits of what we've been doing here on the scheme I have found my voice. I can speak. I push myself further. In personal development, one of the things we do here is taking little steps to push past the fear. It's gently done.

As a group it helps that we're all going through similar stuff.

"Structure is a big thing here. We have our timetable. We know what we're going doing for the next week. It varies from doing workshops, doing steps, to doing kayaking, mountain climbing. There are around 17 in the group – the number varies," she said.

"We call it the T.E.A.M. project – Together Everyone Achieves More," said Killian. "It's like a family. We all bond through our experiences. It's a safe place."

### NEGATIVE TO POSITIVE

Killian is a year and a half on the scheme.

"After treatment there wasn't a hope I could have gone straight into college. I'd have been too anxious.



• Killian and Geraldine have changed their lives and hope to help others.

*"If you can get into a project like this you've struck gold."  
- Killian*

"You need a bit of time to yourself to get to know who you are. I thought I wasn't able to socialise with people, that I was socially incapable.

"From working in the scheme, I noticed that actually I'm not a bad communicator. They were just negative beliefs.

"It was like creating a new life. Addiction is soul-destroying because you do things you thought you'd never do, but that's just you with the drink or the drug. You lose the connection with yourself. The real you you have to unearth.

"I find with the help of the scheme, doing tasks daily, having structure – it helps you get balance in your life. For example, we learn basic life-

skills like cookery, but it's not just about the culinary skills, it's about learning to eat nutritious foods.

"As addicts our heads go very fast, so we do things to slow down our minds, like meditation and art therapy. We do things like hillwalking, paddle-boarding and kayaking to get the endorphins going.

"Working with (CE supervisors) Daniel and Tara, they help you to come out of yourself, to rebuild you. It's like when you're building a house, you need a good foundation – before you go on to get jobs, or go into college.

"We came in here with all sorts of destructive patterns, but day by day

• Continued on next page.



*"On the scheme I found my voice. I can speak. I push myself further."*  
- Geraldine

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we're building new habits and it's transforming our lives. Anything is possible. The world is our oyster.

"This is like my secondary treatment," he said. "I found it was the best thing I've ever done."

## ADVICE FOR OTHERS

Asked for advice to anyone thinking of going into treatment and wondering what will happen afterwards, Killian said:

"I think after treatment you do need a whole year to yourself just to kind of find out who you are. If you can get into a project like this you've struck gold."

Geraldine joined the scheme after "it was suggested to me to come here".

"Really and truly, for anyone out there, I know in my heart and soul, after many, many relapses, after feeling hopeless, that getting onto a scheme like this was the next right thing I needed to do.

"It was very simple to pick up the phone to Daniel and Tara here to get that organised (to sign up for the scheme).

"My addiction had changed so

many lives, but now my recovery is changing lives too, gently and slowly. It's beautiful," she said.

## FUTURE PLANS

When we first spoke to Killian, his ambition was to do a personal training course in a gym.

"That was my passion before. I want to be a coach, to maybe become a life coach and help people with their mental health through fitness. That's what helped me. I got through my addiction by renewing my old passion for the gym."

Since then, and while remaining on the CE scheme, Killian has gained an industry standard qualification in fitness by completing a personal training course with Elite Fitness and Performance Academy in Dublin.

Geraldine was interested in studying addiction counselling and psychotherapy. She could study part-time and stay on the CE scheme.

"Wouldn't it be wonderful if I could turn my life story around and take that experience and channel it in a positive way - that would be amazing," she said.

She looked forward to "going back into the workplace and doing a course" and since then she has begun a Level 6 course in Mental Health in the Community in UCC.

## MORE SCHEMES

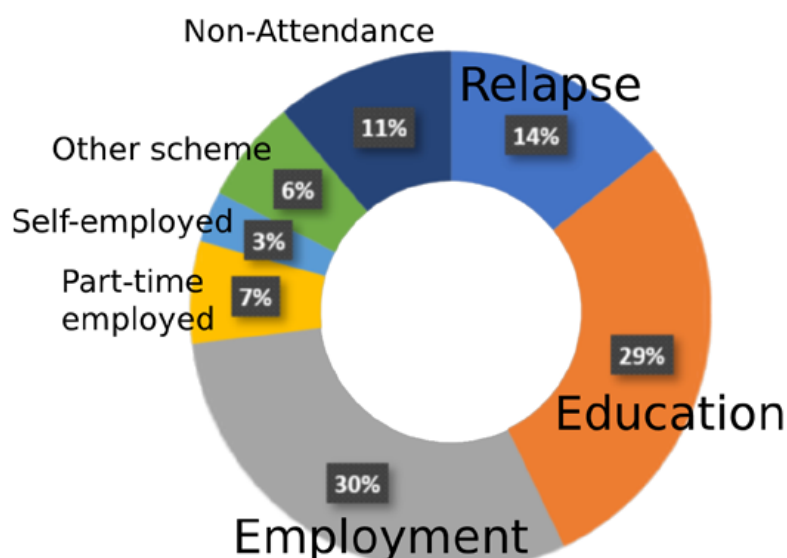
Both Killian and Geraldine would like more people to know about the scheme and welcomed last summer's visit by Minister Joe O'Brien.

Geraldine said, "It's great to see someone at that level taking interest. We're so passionate about the scheme. It has changed my life. Those changes weren't just for me. I have two sons at home. The positive ripple effect on them. I can put that down to the support and to the work I've done here."

"And it was nice to see him acknowledging the work by Daniel and Tara," Killian added. They both agreed that "There should be more of these schemes around the country."



## TEAMS - Past participants outcomes to date (Jan 2023)



## MORE PEOPLE SHOULD GET INVOLVED WITH PUBLIC PARTICIPATION NETWORKS

A new public awareness campaign for Public Participation Networks (PPNs) was launched in February to encourage community groups to join and have their voice heard in local decision-making.

The campaign also aims to encourage groups that represent young and marginalised people to join their local PPN.

Public Participation Networks allow local authorities to connect with community groups and give people a greater say in local government decisions that affect their communities.

Each county and city in Ireland has its own PPN, and more than 18,000 community and voluntary groups are currently members.

Some of the projects and initiatives undertaken by PPNs include: summer camps for children with autism in Longford, the development of an Anti-Poverty Strategy in Clare, and liaising with women living in Direct Provision in Galway to help improve their employment prospects.

Cliona Kelliher from Kildare PPN said: "More than a thousand PPN representatives are currently on boards and committees of local decision-making bodies. They are contributing to decisions on climate, transport, migrant integration, community health and wellbeing, policing and many more."

In June 2022, the Department of Rural and Community Development published the PPN Structural Review Report.

It found that not all PPNs operated independently and recommended a review of the PPN structure to ensure independence is improved.

Membership of a local PPN brings benefits. It gives groups access to training programmes, information on funding and grants, and on proposals or decisions being made in their county, as well as networking and learning opportunities.

For more information, see: [www.gov.ie/PPN](http://www.gov.ie/PPN).

## Moate volunteers raised a million euro to turn a cowpark into a major Midlands visitor attraction

BY KATHY MASTERSON

A green space of 27 acres that was formerly a cow park – yes, there is such a thing – is now a popular recreation spot and a thriving centre for Irish culture and heritage in the Midlands.

Dún na Sí Amenity and Heritage Park in Moate, Co Westmeath, welcomed about 60,000 visitors last year, and serves as an important social and educational hub for the local community.

An hour from Galway and 75 minutes from Dublin, it rates highly on Tripadvisor. Remarkably, the park which opened in 2015 is run by a dedicated community group and over 100 volunteers play their part annually – alongside staff – to keep the park running smoothly.

More recently, it has provided opportunities for integration and inclusion in the area, with volunteers from all walks of life, including direct provision residents and students from the local school, coming together to care for the park.

### MILLION EURO

Secretary of Midlands Amenity Park CLG, Olive Quinn, told *Changing Ireland* how it all began: “Back in 2008, I was asked to attend a meeting. It was chaired by Frank Kelly, a building developer here in the town. He had a vision to create an amenity on what was a cow park here in Moate. A cow park is commonage land left to the people of the town to graze a donkey or a cow.

“In later years, it was taken over by the (Westmeath) County Council. As there were no people using the cow park for grazing, the council decided that they want to sell it off. So a group of volunteers approached the council. And they put forward their idea of leasing the land to develop it into an amenity for the town and beyond.

The voluntary group took out a hundred year lease at a very reasonable rate of €100 a year. Then they raised almost a million euro for the project.

“We were very fortunate to get the full amount of LEADER funding, which was over €650,000, and then our volunteers raised in excess of €400,000 to make up the difference,” said Olive.

### HERITAGE

The Heritage Park charges visitors an entry fee and features reconstructed buildings such as a ring fort and farmhouse, as well as a Teach Ceoil and a pet farm with goats, donkeys, rabbits and birds.

The Teach Ceoil was originally opened in 1985 by the Moate branch of Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann, which joined forces with the Midlands Community Park Association in 2015.

The Amenity Park is home to a playground, a turlough, various sculptures, an arboretum and well-maintained walkways. Entry to the park is free.

“Since its inception, Dún na Sí has been at the heart of the community in Moate. And thanks to many wonderful volunteers and staff, it remains so,” Olive continued.

“It operates mainly under a Community Services Programme (CSP) and we’re allowed four staff under the programme (which is administered by Pobal on behalf of the Department of Rural and Community Development).

“The CSP staff are assisted by the Community Employment workers from Monday to Friday, and volunteers step in at the weekend and

look after the animals.

“For events like the Halloween event, and the Christmas event, we had in excess of 120 volunteers. Volunteers come from the direct provision centre to those events, and to attend those events.”

### INTEGRATION

Residents of the Temple Spa Direct Provision Centre in Horseleap, Co Westmeath, have begun to play a vital role in the upkeep of the park.

Maria Flanagan, a volunteer with the Athlone-based New Horizon refugee and asylum seeker support

group, explained:

“During the summer, last year, a small number of volunteers came into the garden, and that has continued. We’re hoping to grow that this year. Their English is really improving and they’re getting to know people in the community. It’s becoming a space for them to get to know what’s happening in the community get to know other volunteers from around the town.

“It’s very good for their mental health and for their wellbeing. They’re a couple of miles outside town in a very isolated part of the country. So for them to come into town and have a routine and to



• Dún na Sí Amenity and Heritage Park is a true community endeavour – what was once a cow park has become one of Westmeath’s and the Midlands’ most popular visitor attractions. ABOVE: Lugh the Celtic God.



• Maria Flanagan, Margaret Mandal, Zakaria Saidi, Olive Quinn and Zakaria Djafer in the sensory garden.



• L-to-R: At Moate's Dún na Sí, Sinead Muldoon and Karen Nugent (manager) are pictured with two visiting Vikings.

***"I cannot stay in my room all day. Every day was the same before..."***  
- Zak, a volunteer and resident in direct provision

engage with other people is really important for them. We always end the evening with a cuppa."

Zak, one of the direct provision residents, said: "I cannot stay in my room all day. Every day was the same before I became involved with Dún na Sí Amenity and Heritage Park."

"Volunteering is a beautiful experience that I recommend to everyone. For me it is an enriching way of giving back to the Irish community. I get the opportunity to meet and work with my sweet friends Maria, Margaret and Olive as a team sharing tasks in the park and saving our globe," he said.

The volunteers improved their teamwork skills, made friends, learned better English and felt they became more integrated.

Maria believes that volunteering in the park could eventually help the direct provision residents to find paid employment.

She said, "They've got to know about all the things happening in the park, and can get to know about potential job opportunities down the line when they're able to work. It helps with getting work experience and a reference for their CVs."

## OLD IRISH WAYS

The Dún na Sí Irish Music and Genealogy Centre, located in the park, gives visitors the opportunity to learn about the history of Irish music, song and dance. Music and dance lessons are also available, and the centre hosts monthly céili and 'Rambling House' events.

Karen Nugent, general manager at Dún na Sí explained:

"The Rambling House is a lovely way for older people to come together to just sit around a fire and tell stories. Just a real old Irish way of life, they're really trying to preserve that."

Karen stressed the importance of making the park and its events affordable for all: "We're very conscious of how we price things so that it's affordable for everybody," she said.

The Amenity and Heritage Parks are in a constant state of development. Work on a sensory garden is currently underway, and an app was launched last August.

Karen added: "The park has 18 attractions and ten are on the app. People can download it and have a look at what's in the park even before they go. We have a lot of local stories on the app as well, local history around the mass rock and different things like that.

"We also are just starting to open to external events. The park is so popular and it's such a beautiful space. When people come in they see the potential of actually holding events there.

"It's gaining traction all the time. It's got fantastic potential; we're just working over the next few years to get the word out there just to get more people knowing about it."



• Volunteer Maria Flanagan.

## COW PARK TO PEOPLE PARK

**1985** - The Moate branch of Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann (CCÉ) opens a centre for Irish culture called An Teach Ceoil and, the same year, the Dún na Sí Folklore Group was established.

**1989** - Westmeath Genealogy project begins.

**2001** - Moate Heritage Company is established so that it can host a team of Community Employment workers.

**2006** - A rural museum opens in the park.

**2007** - Midlands Amenity Park CLG is formed and the cow park is leased from Westmeath County Council for 100 years.

**2013** - LEADER funding comes through. In January, landscaping of the Amenity Park begins and the park opens to the public later in the year.

**2015** - The area is renamed the Dún na Sí Amenity and Heritage Park after a formal partnership is agreed between Moate CCÉ and Midlands Amenity Park CLG. Dún na Sí is Irish for "the fort of the fairies".

**2018** - Midlands Amenity Park CLG is awarded long-term funding support through the national Community Services Programme; this means the project can take on four staff.

**2021** - Dún na Sí is awarded €126,000 under the government's Outdoor Recreation Infrastructure Scheme to renew outdoor infrastructure, to repair and develop the paths and to improve toilet facilities.

**2022** - An Teach Ceoil is allocated €76,810 under the Government's new Community Centre Investment Fund. The funds are for roof repairs, wall insulation, a heating upgrade and better lighting.

**2023** - At least 60,000 people are expected to visit the park this year, a decade after the park first opened to the public.

## GIANT OF THE WEST IS LAID TO REST



A human rights activist, social worker and campaigner for the West of Ireland who had a national impact on how we think of communities has passed away.

Fr Micheál MacGréil (92) from Mayo helped to popularise social studies in Ireland and was seen as ahead of his time on many fronts.

He was hailed by President Michael D Higgins for leaving "a deep impact".

"Micheál emphasised the need for economic arrangements to serve as a means of strengthening community, family, volunteerism and cultural values, rather than at their expense," said Higgins. He pointed out that MacGréil constantly called out our social prejudices.

Also paying tribute, former communities minister Éamon Ó Cuív said the full reopening of the Western Rail Corridor all the way to Sligo would be a fitting legacy to MacGréil's memory.

The pair had campaigned with others for 34 years for the reopening of the Limerick to Galway passenger rail line and *Changing Ireland* was with them in the driver's carriage when the first train made the historic journey in March, 2010.

"Something that was dead has come alive," he said then, predicting a future with electric trains powered by wind and wave power.

"He was a great campaigner. He never gave up. He was still campaigning in hospital," his friend Ó Cuív said.

MacGréil showed foresight, warning in 2017 that Ireland was becoming less welcoming to refugees. He abhorred discrimination against Travellers which he saw as "a case of Irish apartheid" and he welcomed "advances" in regards to tolerance of gender and sexual orientation.

He wrote extensively, campaigned widely and will be remembered, said The Mayo News, which he often wrote for, as a giant of the West.



BY SORCHA GRISEWOOD

## Is Monaghan the most 'Irish' town in Ireland? (outside the Gaeltacht)

**T**he town of Monaghan might not be the first place that would come to mind when you think of towns where Irish is spoken. However, there is a growing community of Irish speakers there and huge efforts underway to promote the language.

Could the town possibly claim to be the "most Irish" town in the country outside of Gaeltacht areas? We put the question to people in Monaghan.

**Seán Ó Murchadha** is chairperson of the local branch or 'craobh' of Conradh na Gaeilge in the town, Muineachán le Gaeilge. He says,

"Monaghan is up there. We have the highest percentage of pupils attending Gaelscoileanna in the town. We have three youth clubs, lots of 'ciorcal comhrá' and lots of events.

"As a result of the all-Irish schools, I'm able to go up the town and obtain service 'as Gaeilge' in many places. There are young people now who have grown up with Irish and started their own businesses and I can avail of service 'as Gaeilge' from them.

"We have an Irish language speaking community in Monaghan, an Irish language network, and you wouldn't be reluctant to speak to someone in Irish as there's every chance you'd get an answer back in Irish. It's fantastic."

Minister for Social Protection, Rural and Community Development, **Heather Humphreys**, a Monaghan native herself, believes that "there are numerous signs and evidence" to show that the Irish language is growing in Monaghan.

In an email reply, she pointed to the work of Muineachán le Gaeilge and the "high demand" for Gaelscoileanna and Gaelcoláistí. She noted that Gaelscoil Ultain had to add on two new rooms to their school, such was the demand for places.

"I do believe County Monaghan is doing a better job than other counties to promote the language and increase the number of Irish speakers and long may it continue," she wrote.

Her belief seems to be born out by evidence published on the Irish-language news site Tuairisc.ie stating that Monaghan was the best county for education through Irish.

Out on the streets, I asked people, firstly, if they agreed that Monaghan was the most "Irish" town in Ireland outside of the Gaeltacht and, secondly, if they thought the Irish language was alive and well locally.



• **MONAGHAN TOWN:** Seán Ó Murchadha, chairperson of Muineachán le Gaeilge, with local volunteers from An Dream Dearg.



• *Even staff from Africa speak Irish in the Bee Healthy shop in Monaghan town and it is a popular place for people to visit, speak a cúpla focal - and hopefully spend a few euro.*



• **Seamus MacAdam** is the owner of Missy A's Café which hosts a weekly 'ciorcal comhrá' group. He sees "a big revival" in the language locally.

**Robert Henderson**, a supervisor in Wilson's Menswear, laughed at the first question and said "probably not". However, like many who replied "no" to the first question, he believes the language is flourishing, partly because of the number of Irish schools. **Helen Scott** from Clontibrett also felt the language is "coming back" because of the presence of the Gaelscoileanna.

**Noel Harraghy** of Wineways off-licence agrees that the language is alive and well and sometimes comes across people in a local leisure centre speaking Irish – though he feels it can be a kind of "exclusion" as well.

**Hilda McManus**, a primary school teacher and a member of the Muineachán le Gaeilge committee, says, "Monaghan is probably the most Irish town in Ireland, but there's still a lot of progress still to be made."

**Eimear Ó Murchadha**, another primary school teacher from Monaghan (living in Dublin) isn't sure if it is the "most Irish" town, but the language is "very strong" and it is obvious that people have a real interest, particularly the young. "They are positive about it and happy to speak it," she says.

**Seamus MacAdam** is the owner of Missy A's Café which hosts a weekly 'ciorcal comhrá' group, and he sees "a big revival around here."

The Bee Healthy food shop is another place to practise your cupla focail - three of the shop assistants speak Irish, including a lady from South Africa, and they promote an Irish speaking day on Saturdays. Shop assistant **Charlotte Batsaikhan** says, "Customers will actually come out of their way to come in and speak Irish."

The most unequivocally positive responses to the question of whether or not Monaghan was the most Irish town in the country came from young people.

**Cathal McEnaney** (28) works in The Western Arms and he says a lot of the staff working in the hotel attended the local all-Irish secondary school and are fluent.

**Orla Corrigan** (19) works in the same hotel. We chat 'as Gaeilge' and she tells me that Monaghan is "definitely" the most Irish town in Ireland and that when she's working on a Sunday, "You'd always have a couple of people saying something in Irish...even just 'Go raibh maith agat'".

How are other towns doing in comparison?

## Naas, Ennis, Loughrea going well... Cobh and Gorey less so



• Coláiste Oiriall in Monaghan caters for 400 pupils on campus.



• Orla Corrigan (19) at work in The Western Arms hotel. She claims that Monaghan is “definitely” the most Irish town in Ireland outside the Gaeltacht.

**DÉAN DO MHACHNAMH FÉIN FAOI!**  
(MAKE UP YOUR OWN MIND!)

It's abundantly clear from talking to people who work directly in the areas of Irish language promotion that there is considerable determination and energy focused on getting more and more people speaking Irish.

It's clear that the presence of first level and second level education through Irish is what's keeping the language alive in many places along with small businesses providing opportunities to use Irish.

However, as to the original question of whether or not Monaghan is the ‘most Irish’ town in Ireland, the jury is very much out on that one... over to you.



• KILDARE: The Glór Aniar group perform in a concert for Cill Dara le Gaeilge.

**F**or the sake of comparison and to see how well other big towns around the country were doing at promoting the language and keeping it alive, I contacted the Irish language planning officers for several other towns around the country.

Aoife Ní Chonghaile is the language planning officer for Loughrea, Co Galway, and despite the fact that only 1.18% of the town's population (according to 2016 census figures) speak Irish on a daily basis outside of the Irish education system, she says there are “a lot of fluent speakers of Irish as well as native speakers in the town who have relocated from Gaeltacht areas”.

These people are now raising their children through Irish. In addition, there's a whole new generation of people who have made the decision to bring their children up speaking Irish. The local Conradh organise conversation classes, summer camps, pop-up Gaeltachts, a book club, a film club, a festival called ‘Féile Rairfeiri’ and an all Irish radio show on the local community radio station every Saturday morning called ‘An Brekkie Breac’.

There are also plenty of opportunities to use your cúpla focail in Loughrea in places like Hope's Coffee Shop (the menu is in Irish) and Charlie's Bar as well as in the local Family Resource Centre and some of the local shops.

### NAAS / SALLINS

Naas and Sallins in Co Kildare are also not places you'd normally associate with the Irish language, yet it's obvious from speaking to Caoimhe Ní Shúilleabháin, executive officer with Cill Dara le Gaeilge, a non-profit company with the aim of promoting Irish across the

county, that they are also extremely ambitious and optimistic.

They are doing everything they can to promote Irish, including targeting the ‘new Irish’ as part of their language plan. They are hoping to obtain ‘líonra’ status from Foras na Gaeilge which means that they would have developed a “critical mass” of Irish speakers and as part of that, they also hope to obtain a “Cultúrlann” or cultural centre.

While the twin towns do not have quite the numbers of Gaelscoileanna or Gaelcolaístí they might like (there's only one of each in Naas) they do support businesses in the town who wish to provide services as Gaeilge or to promote the language. There is also a ‘Tús Maith’ scheme to help parents learn Irish whose children attend a naíonra or Gaelscoil.

There are also a number of parents in the town who are bringing up their children through Irish and an interesting programme run by one Kate Maher who gives forest education classes through Irish.

### DUNDALK AND COBH

On the other hand, towns such as Gorey in Co Wexford, Dundalk in Louth and Cobh in Cork don't seem to be doing as well with regards to Irish language promotion.

Séamus Ó Choscair is the secretary of Gorey's Conradh na Gaeilge group which runs weekly Irish language classes and conversation circles. Despite the fact that the town's population is growing, largely due to the influx of ‘Dubs’, he says, “You don't hear much Irish spoken”. Also, while there's a Gaelscoil in the town, there's no Gaelcolaíste, so no way of progressing your Irish language

education.

Dónall Breathnach, chairperson of Cobh Conradh na Gaeilge, doesn't think Irish is particularly strong in the town and puts it down to the “huge influence” of the English (the town was formerly known as Queenstown) and he does not think there are enough opportunities for people to use Irish locally.

Niall Sluáin, secretary of Dundalk CnaG branch tells a similar story to Cobh's, but he believes that what is holding them back is the lack of second level education through Irish in the town.

### ENNIS STRIVING AHEAD, BUT IRISH STILL OCCASIONAL

Ennis, Co Clare, has already achieved ‘líonra’ status. Tomás De Buítléir is a development officer with An Clár As Gaeilge (which is funded by Foras na Gaeilge) and he says you do hear Irish spoken “occasionally” in the town. However, it could be because they know him at this stage and associate him with the language. They have conversation groups and classes, a Whatsapp group for language learners and speakers, an Irish language book club and a walking club, and they're just beginning a campaign to get local businesses involved in promoting Irish.

Ennis has two naíonraí, a Gaelscoil and a Gaelcolaíste operating as an Aonad (unit) within the Community College. It is not an independent, standalone school with its own campus and roll number.

- Sorcha Grisewood

## SMART BENCH

We've heard of smart televisions, smart fridges, smart arses and so on. Now a bus stop in Carlow Town has a smart bench.

Powered by solar energy, Carlow's smart bench offers a public wi-fi hotspot and a charging facility for mobile devices. It also features environmental sensors.

The upgraded bus stop area in the town centre now has fully-accessible bus stops and more capacity. The project was managed and delivered by Carlow Municipal District office and forms part of the Active Travel Programme.

## BOYLE: TOURISM ISN'T JUST ABOUT LOOKING GOOD!

We previously featured the Úna Bhán Tourism Co-operative, which operates out of King House in Boyle. Tourism isn't all about looking good. King House sounds beautiful too – it has a grand piano and Roscommon County Council Arts Office has commissioned three pianists to perform in 2023. Bianca Gannon, Peter Leavy and Fiona Linnane (pictured) are recipients of the King House Piano Commission 2023 Awards.

Each composer has been awarded €2,500, along with additional supports, to write a six-minute piano solo which responds to a literary text with a local theme.

The ethos of the King House Piano Commission is to celebrate the history and heritage of the county through music.



## HEART OF LETTERKENNY TO BE TRANSFORMED

Contracts for the design and development of the Letterkenny 2040 Strategic Urban Regeneration Site were signed in Donegal in February.

Donegal 2040 DAC, in partnership with Donegal County Council, signed a contract with Vincent Hannon Architects for a major development in the heart of Letterkenny. It will see the regeneration of town centre lands in the heart of Letterkenny between Pearse Road and Port Road.

The development includes a seven-storey innovation centre, an eight-storey business centre, and an open public area with high-quality pedestrian/cycle infrastructure.



## UKRAINIANS CREATE JOBS

Some 80 displaced Ukrainians have completed a Start Your Own Business programme thanks to a collaborative effort between the Fingal Ukrainian Response Forum and the Irish Red Cross.

The programme covered finance, business management, networking and legal requirements and Mayor of Fingal, Cllr Howard Mahony, congratulated the participants on their efforts which will result in new businesses and new jobs.

## SAVED FROM BULLDOZER

Hundreds of rare orchid flowers found beside a golf course outside Midleton during building work are to be carefully removed and resown.

In a sign of growing maturity and increasing appreciation for biodiversity, Cork County Council and BAM Construction will save the population of rare Bee Orchids found in the Water Rock area.

## MEATH: 96 NEW HOMES BUILT AND 84 ON THE WAY UP

In Dunshaughlin, Co. Meath, 96 new socially affordable homes were officially opened in January.

The scheme at The Willows consists of 24 terraced houses (three-bedroomed) and 72 apartments (one, two and three-bedroomed).

Cllr Nick Killian, chairperson of Meath County Council, thanked colleagues in Meath County Council and staff working for the developer, the not-for-profit Clúid Housing, for "making this happen".

Also in Co. Meath, construction work began in February on 84 social housing units at a new estate, Gort na Glaise in Farganstown, just outside Navan.



## LOUTH LEADS ON DOG CONTROL

Either the dogs in Louth are the boldest in the land or the authorities there are the best for cracking down on errant behaviour by dog owners.

Louth County Council leads the way when one takes into account population size: In 2021 it issued the second highest number of Fixed Penalty Notices (FPNs) in the country. Its 147 FPNs under the Control of Dogs Acts are second only to Cork County Council's 170 FPNs in the same year.

The fines are issued to one in ten people complained about. Louth County Veterinarian, Garrett Shine, said, "Dog wardens in County Louth are very proactive and respond to an average of 1,500 call-outs a year."

Most complaints concern dogs not under proper control, causing a nuisance, fouling, and excessive barking - and occasionally attacks on livestock, on other dogs or on people.

• Our photo shows Minister Heather Humphreys helping to highlight the responsibilities on dog owners particularly during lambing season.



## MATERNITY LEAVE AT LAST

By comparison to many EU countries, Ireland has a low rate of female participation in local government. The situation may improve, however, following a successful campaign for maternity leave for city and county councillors. Astonishingly, there were no arrangements in place before this year.

The first person to avail of the new dispensation is Fine Gael Councillor Thomasina Connell of Laois County Council.