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CHANGING IRELAND

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COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT - EMPOWERMENT - COLLECTIVE ACTION - SOCIAL INCLUSION - www.changingireland.ie

INSIDE:
Special report
from County
Donegal

RIGHTS, NOT CHARITY

The social model makes waves

Boats, gyms, money, no problem



- ALSO INSIDE:**
- Ukrainians at work, school, parenting and volunteering.
 - Ex-prisoners seeking fair access to work.
 - Islanders keeping fit.
 - One day at a time volunteers.
 - Travellers' accommodation should be A+.
 - The democratic deficit.
 - Food poverty.
 - Solidarity.
 - Measuring social impact to combat greenwashing, pinkwashing.



• No Barriers gym members, Letterkenny, Co. Donegal - story, page 10.

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'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 aim to give people who are rarely heard a voice.

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

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

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

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

SUPPORT

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



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BUILD HOMES NOT HATE

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SOCIAL MODEL OF DISABILITY MAKES WAVES

Imagine if community-based, social enterprises were the preferred choice for delivering goods and services, even infrastructure. We would live in a fairer, more equal world, with more choices.

This aspiration ties in with the social model of disability, which says that many of society's barriers can and should be removed. It is the opposite to the medical model of disability which is now a multi-billion euro industry and seen as generally disempowering.

As seen with the recent referendum outcomes, people take disability and work as carers seriously. The State and wider society needs to make transport, work and independent living truly accessible. Rights, not charity.

This edition features three examples where people have pursued the social model. With the right supports people can do the things they want to.

The No Barriers gym in Letterkenny takes a currently novel approach to equality and delivers a service that costs about 10% of what private companies would need

to charge to provide the same (they currently offer nothing comparable).

Similarly, Lough Ree's accessible fishing and boating venture shows what can be done.

In both instances, volunteer-managed social enterprises have turned ideas into successful ventures while tackling inequality.

Meanwhile, in Dublin, a local development company is using a council flat to provide real-life training in money management for people with intellectual disabilities. When Viv Sadd, co-ordinator of Mahon CDP and a member of our editorial team, read this article, he declared: "We have to have this in Cork." What is rare could and should be commonplace.

SOCIAL IMPACT

Social enterprises often deliver goods and services that the private sector either cannot deliver or will not (eg if profit margins are low).

See pages 20-23 where six winners of a recent competition explain why they measure their social impact and how they do it.

VOLUNTEERS CAN'T FILL FOOD POVERTY GAP FOREVER

Food insecurity impacts more than 10% of households nationally. However, food banks are not everywhere and community groups fill the gap in some remote rural areas, but their funds and volunteer hours are not limitless. They want the Government to set up a national fund to support their food poverty work. If they are not listened to, they are able campaigners and will "make some noise".

It augurs well that Minister for Rural and Community Development Heather Humphreys has made inroads in regards to food poverty.

Most recently she announced that, from this April, pupils in 900 more primary schools across the country will receive hot school meals.

No doubt she will listen to the people of Donegal.

REALITY V RACISM

Negative stereotyping portrays Ukrainians coming here to avail of Ireland's social welfare system. Some Irish now ignore facts including the war itself. While many refugees in rural areas have limited access to the labour market, official figures show over 24,000 Ukrainians are in jobs here. The true figure is much higher, Ukrainians here say.

It would be a disaster to let a small number influence others with their racist rhetoric. Irish people are known for standing alongside people experiencing oppression.

Which brings me to Palestine - never out of our minds since Israel moved from war to genocide. My heart goes out to all suffering hunger, thirst, bombing, daily grief and abandonment.

Is boycott and protesting at every opportunity the best we can do?



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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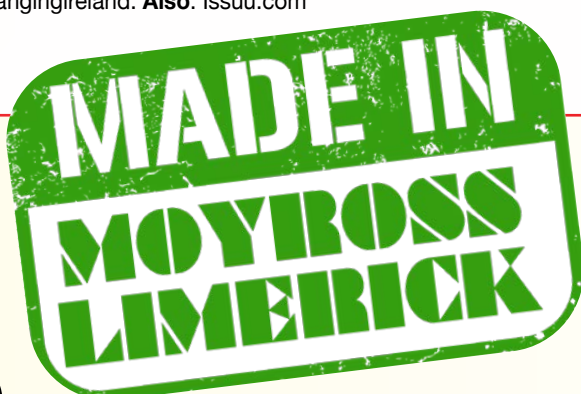
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Front Cover - main photo: Enda, Chloe, Linda, Ian and Eric from Limerick enjoying their boat trip. Photo supplied by Lough Ree Boat Trips. **Lower page photos:** No Barriers gym users. Photos from No Barriers Foundation's Facebook page.



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.

Food poverty volunteers heading to Dáil

BY ALLEN MEAGHER

The Donegal Food Equality Forum (*see p28*) believes there should be a national fund to help groups with food poverty. In collaboration with the 21 members of the Donegal Food Response Network (DFRN), they are preparing to send a delegation to Dáil Éireann to highlight the issue.

Máire Uí Chomhail, manager of Ionad Naomh Pádraig in Gweedore, Co. Donegal - a Gaeltacht region - said politicians seem unaware of the extent of the issue.

She said that where previously, Christmas was a time when families struggled, now it is all year round. And while people on social welfare always struggled, now people in low-paid jobs cannot pay all their bills and keep food on the table.

Around Christmas time, her centre spent close to €5,000 distributing 48 food packages as well as vouchers for food, for toys and for pharmacies. They continued through January and February to provide food to people experiencing hidden poverty. However, the funding is all local and this is common across the network's 21 areas.

"We are not centrally funded to provide food packages. And I may not always have €5,000 worth of vouchers. I may not always have 48 food packages to give out. Imagine if there was another economic crash. I'm worried about the people depending on us," revealed Máire.

NO FUND FOR FOOD RESPONSE WORK

"At present there is no fund out there where I can apply for €10,000 so that I can ensure that people in my area will not be struggling to put food on the table," she added.

On top of that, nobody is paid in Co. Donegal to do food distribution.

"Community centres like this are filling the gaps for state bodies. I see it all the time. We do massive voluntary hours. We'd be rich if we got paid for all the work we do," Máire remarked.

Part of the difficulty is that food poverty work is not publicised.

"What happens in Naomh Pádraig stays in Naomh Pádraig. Nobody really knows why anybody comes through our door. That is crucial in any organisation dealing with people who are struggling. You have to be confidential as well as helpful," explained Máire.

"Community centres are not a secret, but a



• Volunteers with Donegal Food Response Network. Photo courtesy of the Network.

lot of what we do is a best kept secret. Here we have people coming to us for our daily activities, cancer services, counselling, support for people with mental health issues, or who need a hand to pay their bills, put food on the table or just need someone to listen to them.

"We are very much for the bottom up approach. We work closely with the public health nurse, the parish priest and the local community and if we see families struggling we will help in any way we can," she continued.

DÁIL ÉIREANN

"We want to go to Dáil Éireann because I don't think politicians are aware of how difficult things are for people on the ground, how much they're struggling.

"When we had a Food Equality Forum open day in Letterkenny with keynote speakers, not one politician turned up to that. Not one.

"If they're not going to come and meet us, the next thing we want is for a delegation to go Dáil Éireann to meet the politicians," Máire said.

One gets the sense that if the community centre was not there, some people would go hungry, that their plight would not be known.

"Let's not forget there is St Vincent de Paul and they give out vouchers, while we mostly give out food. We work very closely with them. They redirect people to us for food.

"We don't publicise the food aspect of our work, but it is known of by word-of-mouth and we've a massive community behind us, supporting us, but



• Máire Uí Chomhail points to a photo of her cousin, singer Moya Brennan, who has been a staunch supporter of the centre's work. On Máire's right is a photo of her father who was on the hall committee that preceded the centre.

we're relying entirely on the community," she said.

What government department might be responsible for a food poverty fund?

"Part of me would think the Department of Family and Children, but it probably should come from the Department of Rural and Community Development."

NEXT MOVE

"First we want to agree on our terms of reference and our vision on behalf of the people we serve and then we are going to write to Minister Heather Humphreys.

"The vision I have is to be able to help families who are in a difficult situation, most of the time through no fault of their own, to get out of that situation," she said.

NATIONAL ISSUE

"Food poverty is a national issue," noted Máire, who recently visited Brussels with 60 female community leaders from around the country to brief MEPs on issues on the ground. "It was a big learning curve for them," she added.

Now, she and her fellow food poverty campaigners in Donegal want to bring their anti-poverty message to Leinster House.

READ: *Food Poverty Q&A*, page 28.

Donegal Food Response Network

• 21 member organisations •

Food insecurity in Donegal is more pronounced than elsewhere. The county has the second highest levels of deprivation in Ireland and lacks in services and good public transport.

When the pandemic broke, Donegal Local Development Company (DLDC) saw the need to establish what became known as the Donegal Food Response Network (DFRN). It is made up of 21 community and voluntary organisations geographically spread all across the county that support

people experiencing food poverty.

The ever increasing cost of living saw calls for support jump 17% between 2022 and 2023 and the network is currently supporting over 650 families across the county.

Five of the Network's member organisations are in the Gaeltacht and none of them receive any funding from outside to support local families.

Food insecurity is exacerbated in Donegal's Gaeltacht as many families

have to travel up to 35km (each way) to the nearest big supermarket.

The network believes that no-one should ever go hungry and its crucial voluntary work comes under four different UN Sustainable Development Goals.

The members have power together and are working to establish their network as an independent legal entity, to then apply for funding and to set up a permanent food hub in Donegal.

The network receives a range of supports from DLDC through the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme. It has connected the network with others. For example, DLDC now receives three tonnes of root vegetables fortnightly from FoodCloud and distributes these to network members.

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



WELLBEING: THIS CAN BE REPLICATED

31 COUNTIES HAVE NOW USED LOUGH REE'S ACCESSIBLE BOAT

BY KATHY MASTERSON

Since 2021, 5,500 people have enjoyed exploring Lough Ree on Access for All's accessible boat. The County Roscommon social enterprise started this year with two more boats and aims to treble passenger numbers. So far visitors have come from every county in Ireland bar one - Antrim.

The super-accessible reception centre at Lanesborough, on the lake's northern end, has also helped make it a popular stop-off destination for wheelchair users.

Skipper Lisa Fayne looks after the organisation's sales and marketing and she spoke to Changing Ireland about the project and the importance of full accessibility for wheelchair users.

"We offer our boat trip service for people with disabilities primarily, but it's not just for people with disabilities, it's access for all. We do three trips a day, and the trips last for 90 minutes. You don't need to worry about accessibility when you come out here. Families don't need to plan; all they need to do is ring us and see if we're available.

"It's such a personal experience, the boat only takes 10 people. It caters for three to four wheelchair users. Wheelchairs come in different sizes, so when people are booking we will have to ask them 'How large is your wheelchair?' so we can accommodate them as best we can," Lisa explained.

"They're locked down in place when we're going out on the lake, and then you can unhook the wheelchair, go out onto the bow of the boat for your Titanic photos and all that!"

ROLL-ON/ROLL-OFF DESIGN

Lough Ree Access for All CLG's funders include the Department of Rural and Community Development, the HSE, Inland Fisheries Ireland, Roscommon Integrated Development Company under the EU LEADER Programme, and Waterways Ireland, among others.

Access for All's unique wheelchair-friendly vessel was specially designed in Tallinn, Estonia.

"It's like a little car ferry. You just roll on and off; there's no lifting, no hoist. I'm not saying hoists are bad, but my wheelchair-using friends



• Lough Ree visitors enjoying their boat trip. Photo supplied by Lough Ree Boat Trips.

tell me it's mortifying 'when you're hoisted up like a bag of spuds', as one of the lads put it. Here you're treated like everyone else," Lisa noted.

"We have two other open boats that are wheelchair accessible as well. We're hoping to get the numbers up to 30 people per trip because we have the three boats now. So that's where we're starting from this year."

PEOPLE PRAISE THE TOILETS

Access for All are also proud of their Changing Places toilet suite, which opened last year and is one of just 25 such facilities registered in Ireland so far. These differ from standard accessible toilets as they are more spacious and offer additional facilities such as a hoist and adult-sized changing table.

According to Lisa: "It's opened up more travel options for people, even if they don't come on a boat trip, they can stop off here.

"There's a local man only 20 minutes down the road from us, he's a wheelchair user and he said: 'I love coming for my walk, or my roll, but I had to split up my day and go back home to use the toilet and then go back'. And now he doesn't have to

go home, he can stay in the town. So it's bringing lots of people here."

KEEP EDUCATING THE PUBLIC

The importance of accessibility for all cannot be underestimated.

"It is so important; I never realised the barriers before I began working in this job. We're only a snippet of breaking down the barriers to the waterways for people, and society in general. We'd like to keep educating people; we do mental health talks, we have accessibility targets.

"We bring in schoolkids and we say: 'When you start driving a car, don't park on the kerb. Pick up after your dogs - wheelchair users have to put their hands on the wheels', and stuff like that.

"Even the heights of desks and sinks in our building, everything we have is adjustable. That costs more money, but we have great activists and fundraising campaigners here that keep at it.

"Dorothy Coyle, our director of disability, equality and inclusion, designed the building. But she considered that just because she's in a small manual chair doesn't mean that everybody will be at that height," said Lisa.

ACCESSIBLE FISHING RODS

It is not only the boat and the building that are accessible for all, even the fishing rods can be used by people of all abilities.

"We have special motorised reels that you don't need much movement or dexterity in your hands. It's like a little game controller, you put it on your lap, and the fishing line literally casts out and reels in."

Lisa recalled: "I drive the boat as well, so I do the fishing trips, and I can see how therapeutic it is. I look back at them (the passengers) and I see how relaxing it is.

FIRST PIKE CATCH

"Recently a man came to us who was totally paralysed, bar movement in the tip of two fingers. And he brought out his family and a banquet of snacks with them and caught a pike for himself. That was the first pike he ever caught in his life, and that was not for want of trying.

"He had fishing experience years ago on the River Shannon with his son. His son sadly died in a car crash and he got sick himself and ended up being a wheelchair user. He had thought it wasn't even possible to ever fish again. So he came out on

“Some people you'd see their white knuckles at the start, they're holding on and they're so scared. And by the end they don't want to get off at all.”



• ABOVE LEFT: The original boat. ON RIGHT: The two boats purchased newly for 2024. Fishing and pleasure cruising have so far attracted over 5,500 customers. For fishing trips, gear and bait is supplied by Access for All.

(Continued from previous page)

the water with us, and even though his son is not with him anymore, he said it brought back memories of his son.

“We have to pinch ourselves sometimes and say ‘We're getting paid for this. This is brilliant!’ Some people you'd see their white knuckles at the start, they're holding on and they're so scared. And by the end they don't want to get off at all. It's a powerful thing.”

WATER GOOD FOR WELLBEING

The health benefits of being in or near water have been long documented, and many who have travelled on Access for All's boat will strongly agree. Lisa's colleague Mark McClean has an acquired injury following a car accident. He became paralysed from the waist down and is now a wheelchair user.

According to Mark, the worst aspect of his disability is the frequent and uncontrollable muscle spasms he suffers in his legs. However, after he began working at Access for All, he found that the only time the spasms fully stopped was when he was on the boat.

STAFFING / EXPANSION PLANS

As part of the eight-strong staff, Access for All employs two people with disabilities through Employability Midlands. “They say to me on a daily basis: ‘I never

thought I'd have a job in general, never mind this job’. They're the faces of our company now and they love it,” Lisa remarked.

The Irish Wheelchair Association are among the most frequent users of Access for All's boat and facilities. People involved with other organisations like Ability West, Enable Ireland and day and residential services are also regular passengers.

Access for All also receives funding from the Galway Roscommon Education and Training Board to provide boat trips for students of DEIS schools taking health and wellbeing classes.

In addition, Access for All has established an Irish Sailing Association training school to provide powerboat training. The two-day national powerboat certificate course is open to people of all abilities.

The organisation is planning to

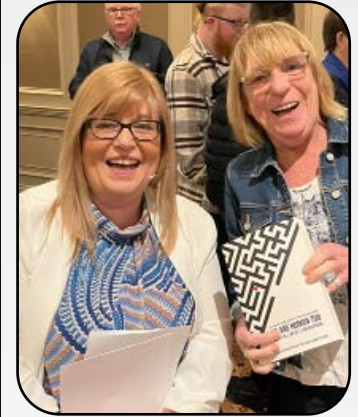
expand its sightseeing and heritage trips with improved access to the islands in Lough Ree.

“We want to get on to the islands that we do our heritage and history talks about,” said Lisa. She and her team have high hopes for one island in particular.

“We are in talks with the owners of the most famous island, Inchcleraun, also known as the Quaker island. It has the monasteries of the seven churches on it from the time of Saint Diarmuid. He was a mentor of St Ciarán, who founded Clonmacnoise. There are no jetty facilities on the island. The owner is supporting us and we just need to get that ball rolling,” she said.

Meanwhile, the organisation hopes to host visitors one day soon from County Antrim. That would truly make the Access for All boating venture an all-island, all-Ireland success.

“WE ARE HUMAN TOO” BOOK CELEBRATES DISABILITY ACTIVISTS



• Anne Marie Flanagan and Jacqui Browne at the launch.

The Clare Leader Forum launched a new book on March 1 that puts the spotlight on the work of disabled activists.

‘We Are Human Too’ is a moving anthology of interviews with disabled activists edited by Ann Marie Flanagan and co-produced by the Clare Leader Forum (CLF) that documents their crusade for equality.

According to CLF: “We have written the first and only socio-political book by disabled activists and researchers for everyone on how the State views our independence in the 100 years of Ireland's. We track 30 years of disabled people's emancipatory activism.

“We decided to write this book to ensure history is written through the lens of disabled people's activism. This book includes 100 voices of disabled activists and allies from Clare and across the country, past and present.”

Speaking at the book launch in Ennis this month, Jacqui Browne complimented the work of Ann Marie Flanagan, alongside the role played by the late Donal Toolan and the Forum of People with Disabilities.

She also spoke of “the need for a paradigm shift based on principles of dignity, autonomy, equality, and inclusion”, and said that disability rights are “fundamental to the fabric of an inclusive society”.

Anyone interested in obtaining a copy of the book can message

@LeaderClare on X or Facebook at Clare Leader Forum, or email the CLF at clareleaderforum@gmail.com.

Financial inclusion training in a Dublin flat is helping people to learn practical skills

BY KATHY MASTERSON

Angela Shafer, community education co-ordinator from Northside Partnership in Dublin wants to alert community workers to work being done in their area through the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP) that may be of help to people in other counties. The Local Development Company has developed a handbook for the sector and a training programme to support people with intellectual disabilities when it comes to financial wellbeing.

On Dublin's northside, they help people in very practical ways to learn how to safely use ATMs, bank cards, and Revolut and how to be wise to scam artists.

"If there's a need for this where I am in Dublin, there's a need in the wider sector," she says. While Angela's team cannot deliver country-wide, she encourages anyone interested in developing services in their area to make contact.

Since 2020, Northside Partnership has been working on projects that are helping people in their catchment area to manage their finances more effectively. As well as providing courses for their core client base, they have created programmes specifically tailored to people with intellectual disabilities.

Angela spoke to Changing Ireland about financial inclusion, how to encourage it, about their handbook, and why we should never go fully cashless.

SICAP SUPPORT FOR MONEY MADE SENSE

In 2020, Northside Partnership created a programme, with funding from JP Morgan, called 'Building Financial Capabilities in Ireland' to address what they saw as an "education gap" around financial products, and limited awareness of the supports available through the Money Advice and Budgeting Service (MABS).

"It was developed as a result of research* undertaken by the Think-tank for Action on Social Change (TASC). A lot of their research was in the areas where Northside Partnership is based.

"So we developed and piloted the Money Made Sense programme



• People taking part in a financial inclusion training session with Northside Partnership. Photo blurred for privacy reasons.

"More and more people are using Revolut, and that's true of people with disabilities as well."

in response to that. The original programme was targeted at low-income groups, unemployed people, unwaged people, and lone parents. Since we've mainstreamed it into our SICAP supports, the net has been cast wider," she said. The SICAP programme also supports Travellers, Roma, refugees, International Protection applicants, people with disabilities, people impacted by educational disadvantage, people with a criminal past, and islanders.

OVERCOMING RISKS AND BAD EXPERIENCES

The Money Made Sense programme places a strong emphasis on identifying risks in regards to technology and digital financial products - such as scams or high interest loans.

Angela says money is more complex than people realise and is

about more than knowledge or skills:

"Your relationship with money often can determine how you handle it on a day-to-day basis. You might have had bad past experiences with money.

"I had a woman whose ex-partner was a gambling addict. She was terrified of using banking apps because she was afraid of what it would lead to. It's often about exploring people's values around money, and looking at what suits you. What are the best ways of managing your money, whether it's using cash or having more access to digital products that can benefit you and make you financially included," she said.

NERVOUS ABOUT BANK CARDS

The training offered to people with intellectual disabilities can be tailored to the learners' individual

capabilities and motivations.

Angela said that, within the intellectual disability sector, people's capabilities and what they can manage varies. The motivation to manage money also varies.

Said Angela: "Particular challenges might be around things like everyday cash-handling, counting. The training is kind of going back to basics a little, understanding where money comes from, understanding where your money gets spent, looking at needs versus wants."

"It could be little things like how to use an ATM. A lot of people feel nervous about using a bank card. It's often a psychological block.

"More and more people are using Revolut, and that's true of people with disabilities as well. It has pros and cons. They don't have to worry about being shortchanged and they can keep track of the spending. It's about teaching people how to use the app, and that every time you tap, your balance goes down.

"Staying safe online - that's a big one. We can never be 100% savvy when it comes to scams, no one is, it's about safeguarding, understanding when a text message or phone call is legit or not.

"A lot of these are topics that we tackle in the mainstream course as well. It's just that we approach it differently."

LEARNING TO LIVE INDEPENDENTLY

Angela works with the Horizons programme, which is run through St Michael's House, an intellectual disability service in Dublin. The programme aims to support people with intellectual disabilities to move towards independent living.

"We deliver the training out of a flat that they have assigned to this project. The financial inclusion training is part of a suite of supports. People practice their shopping skills, and with that comes daily budgeting and understanding the cost of groceries because normally, people will be used to someone else in the family doing the weekly shop. They might stay a few days in the flat to practice living independently.

"Everything we're teaching them goes into practicing those skills.

NORTHSIDE COMMUNITY WORKERS DEVELOP TRAINING FOR PEOPLE WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES TO MANAGE MONEY

(Continued from previous page)

It's a nice example of where our programmes can interact with what other services are trying to achieve and how we can support that," she revealed.

HANDBOOK FOR THE SECTOR

Angela has also worked on the creation of a handbook for the sector, aimed at supporting services, families, and carers of people with intellectual disabilities to assist them with financial inclusion. It was launched in January and includes a money assessment, to determine the person's level of interaction with money. It also has practical tasks and cut-out sheets, and resources such as a bill calendar, budgeting tools, and a meal planner to help with food shopping.

REPLICATING GOOD PRACTISE

Angela and her team at Northside Partnership have also worked on financial inclusion training with Praxis, a national service for young people with intellectual disabilities, and have plans to work with other services in the sector.

"With our SICAP programme, we are limited to working within northeast Dublin, our catchment area, but we're lucky in that some national services exist within our area. We have plans to work with the Central Remedial Clinic to bring this programme to their service users, which is great.

"I feel if there's a need for this where I am in Dublin, there's a need in the wider sector and certainly the services that I've worked with have taken a great interest in this. The challenge for us is it's not something that I can go across the country and deliver. So how do we create those capabilities in other services? I just want to put it out that this work is happening and if you're interested, get in touch."

REWARDING WORK

Angela finds her work very rewarding, particularly when she can see how the training benefits learners in their everyday lives.

"Often as instructors, we might



• The front cover of the 'Financial Capabilities for the Intellectual Disabilities Sector' handbook.

feel that we've only made a small impact, but the people who are used to being around the service users see the difference. It's incredibly rewarding working with this sector, you get an awful lot out of it."

CASHLESS SOCIETY

Asked about the potential impact of a cashless society on people who might already struggle with financial inclusion, Angela says, "It's something that services, families, and carers are aware of and want to leverage to the benefit of people who are vulnerable. Leveraging those products for the better so that it creates financial inclusion rather than leading to financial exclusion."

She believes education about using digital, cashless methods of payments is essential:

"The more technology that you're using, the more risk you have of falling foul of a scam. With cash

handling you don't have those risks.

"Digital transactions are all well and good in terms of safeguarding people from their cash being mishandled, but there's the temptation of tapping (too much) – tap, tap, tap pays for everything. Education around that really needs to be addressed, especially for vulnerable groups."

She concluded: "I don't think cash should ever be removed as an option for anyone, especially vulnerable target groups, older people, people with disabilities, if that's what people are comfortable with."

TO DOWNLOAD THE GUIDE:

W: <https://bit.ly/MoneySenseNP>

COMBINED RESEARCH

* In 2022, TASC, Northside Partnership and North Dublin Region MABS published a 108 page report titled 'Financial Capabilities - A Framework for Integrated Delivery'.

To download that report: <https://bit.ly/TascCashCapable>

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M: 087 925 4095.

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What is financial inclusion?

What is financial inclusion? Angela Shafer explains:

"It's about having the ability to effectively manage everyday money handling and financial matters. It could be as simple as confidence with cash handling, access to a bank account, access to financial products, especially digital financial products, in a way that is financially healthy for you.

"It involves an understanding of financial products, as well as access and leveraging those products for the better. For example, understanding how interest is applied to loans, understanding and shopping around for bank accounts, being able to use a banking app, budgeting. It's a whole set of life skills."

NEW ROSS WINS BIG AT 2024 L.A.M.A. AWARDS



• Cllr Anthony Connick of New Ross celebrates with two awards for his home town.

The 18th Community and Council Awards celebrated the best of Ireland's council and community projects at a ceremony in Dublin on February 17.

The awards were presented by the Local Authorities Members Association (LAMA) in recognition of collaboration between local authorities and the communities they serve.

Award winners for 2024 included:

Most Inclusive Project 2024: A Vision for 'Gold Star' Beach Accessibility, The Masterplan – Donegal.

Best Mental Health Initiative: – 'Here For You' Mental Health Initiative – Sligo.

Community Volunteer of the Year: Anthony O'Donnell – Limerick.

Council of the Year: Wicklow County Council.

Best Irish Language Initiative: Seachtain na Gaeilge Bilingual Walk – Fingal.

Best Town or Village Regeneration: High Hill Norman Garden - New Ross.

Best Housing Regeneration: Churchfields Master Plan – Fingal.

Best Urban Planning: Emigrant Park – New Ross.

Best Trail/Waterway: Blue Pool Trails in Glengarriff, Co. Cork.

FULL LIST ON OUR WEBSITE.



NO BARRIERS FOUNDATION HAS EQUALITY LESSONS FOR EUROPE

Johnny Loughrey explains how social enterprises can do more, how their gym is unique, and why it should be replicated across Europe

BY ALLEN MEAGHER

The No Barriers gym in Letterkenny is spoken of by local community workers as one of the best new social enterprises in the country. It is unique in how it promotes equality. It provides a life-changing service that didn't exist before. The public can support the gym by becoming members and it has grown since 2016 to now employ 22 staff.

For now there is only one, but Johnny Loughrey, founder and CEO of No Barriers Foundation, has proven that a community-based provider can offer a service that for-profit medical companies have not even contemplated.

"We provide specialist neuro-rehab services, with specialist equipment and specialist staff within the community," he explained. "We deliver our services in a non-medical setting – it's a gym where people can come in and exercise along with everyone else."

Johnny is a physio with a private practice and, a decade ago, in response to numerous enquiries from families of people needing rehabilitation that he knew they could not afford, he conceived of a new type of service.

He knew the HSE was not going to fund it, even though it would provide a service for people with spinal injuries, brain injuries, stroke, MS. In 2020, it cost around €120,000 to run the service.

"We have a real problem in Ireland because HSE funding isn't there to develop these types of services. A lot of people have to travel abroad and, for what we are able to offer, they pay anything from €10,000 to €12,000 per week for rehabilitation in the UK or other countries.

"It was unaffordable - only people with lots of money could afford rehabilitation. So we created this social enterprise and we registered as a charity to deliver the services as cheaply as we possibly can. We can operate for about 10% of what it would cost if a private hospital tried to do this from a commercial perspective," he said.

However, no commercial operator is providing this service. It is unique in Ireland and in Europe.

"Our motto is inclusive health. We deliver specialist services and we



• *No Barriers founder Johnny Loughrey.*

want to create equality – to let people with different levels of mobility and circumstances to all exercise side-by-side. And as a social enterprise one of the ways we generate revenue is through our 150 gym members who use our facilities.

"The members without disabilities could be paying their gym membership to any commercial gym in town, but if they join us they also contribute back to society. Their monthly gym membership subsidises the specialist services.

"We try and create an inclusive environment. There are not too many mirrors here and we have some quiet areas if people want more privacy. It is as much if not more important that the gym classes build their confidence and self-esteem. Having the craic and a cup of coffee here after class is a big hit," he said.

No Barriers employs physiotherapists and occupational therapists as gym instructors. It runs 60 exercise classes a week. The front room accommodates 40 to 50 people doing individual rehabilitation at the same time.

Johnny pointed to three exoskeletons, something most people have only seen in science documentaries.

"People who are paralysed from the chest down can walk and rehabilitate while they're in the suit. They're a game-changer, but we wouldn't have been able to afford them without LEADER funding. Donegal Local Development

"People without money can't afford rehabilitation... (Yet) we can operate for about 10% of what it would cost if a private hospital tried to do this."

Company help us not just in applying for grants but they also teach us how to grow and evolve. Through DLDC, LEADER funds helped us get the first suit. It cost €185k.

"They run on lithium batteries and are being used every day. We can control the suits, but also the suits are intuitive and can sense when a person is ready to walk. It calibrates 500 times a second and it quickly picks up information about an individual's movement. We can see in real time how a person is trying to move. The technology is amazing. It gives them the additional support they need to walk," he said.

"People travel here for our specialist services. We recently had a family coming from Mayo and we have a lot of people coming from border counties. The closest accessible exoskeleton suit, specialist services and robotic equipment would be in Dublin," he said.

"We cater for neurological services, intellectual disabilities and also mental health issues. The type of staff and equipment we have in this inclusive fitness setting - this is the only one really in Europe at the minute. There are lots of large private hospitals delivering services and then you have other organisations providing exercise. It's the inclusiveness and merging of those two together that is unique."

There could and should be many more gyms like this and Johnny believes their social enterprise is perfect for replication in other counties and, indeed, countries.

"I just went to an European conference and we'd love to look into meeting other organisations there and spreading knowledge about our model," he said.

For now however his main focus is on Donegal.

BROOKE'S STORY

This is Brooke's entry from March 4 - and you can follow her on Facebook or Instagram:

"Had an amazing physio session today, lots of improvement. Not only have I smashed the 1,000 steps mark, today I felt confident enough to walk with the crutches, unreal feeling of more control.

Each session in the Exoskeleton benefits me now and for the future to help prolong good health and quality of life.

- Improving blood flow.
- Maintaining bone density.
- Keeping muscles and tendons stretched.

- Mental and emotional benefits.

I am so thankful to everyone who supports me, wouldn't be where I am now without you. Movement is medicine."





Steering Young Drivers

Donegal's Garage Project paves the way for safer roads as 130 young people complete LEADER-funded training

to Safety

The Garage Project, which educated over 130 young and future drivers in Co. Donegal about road safety, took place over 18 months with €84,873 of funding from LEADER. It is over now, although groups in other counties might like to run something similar.

The programme trained boys and girls aged 14 and above, providing them with hands-on experience working on real cars, learning mechanical and bodywork skills, and the importance of road safety.

Each five-week session of the programme had ten young participants. Under the expert guidance of instructors Denis Ferry, Leslie O'Donnell, and members of the Donegal Youth Service, these budding mechanics learned about cars in a fully functional garage in Letterkenny. Young people queued up to do the course.

Denis Ferry, trainer on The Garage Project, said, "The Garage Project harnessed the passion young people have for cars. It educated them about safety before they hit the road, reducing the potential risks and ensuring they do not jeopardise lives. The course is designed to instil respect for cars, an understanding of how they function, self-respect, and respect for all road users."



• Leslie O'Donnell and Denis Ferry with students taking part in the Garage Project from Pobalscoil Chloich Cheamfhaola school in Falcarragh, Co. Donegal.

A BIGGER PROGRAMME

The Garage Project is one component of the Pro Social Ireland Driving programme, which was established in Donegal in 2012 at the request of Judge Paul Kelly, Inspector Michael Harrison and Tim Coughlan from the probation services. They had seen too many tragedies, many involving young people, on the county's roads. This publication reported on the programme's progress in 2015 and 2016, since which time it has gone from strength to strength.

The goal of the Pro Social Driving programme is to educate young people by challenging their existing thought patterns and attitudes toward driving. It aims to get them thinking about their behaviour while behind the wheel.

KNOWING THE DANGERS

Mick Quinlivan, chairperson of Pro Social Ireland said, "A major concern is that young people modify cars, cut springs, and lower them, which is extremely dangerous. This programme educates them as to why this practice is wrong and unsafe."

He said the Garage Project channelled the interest young people have in cars in the right direction, educating them before they go driving.

LEADER FUNDING

Aisling McGee, LEADER project officer with DLDC said, "The joy of this project was that all the young people would show up at the drop of a hat. They were really interested."

"Those behind this course are car enthusiasts themselves and they wanted to see this project run successfully. But now it's over."

However, she wished to publicise the project's success as it could be run in other counties.

Aisling's colleague, rural development manager, Sinead McLaughlin, said, "The Garage Project was a great example of how LEADER funding can (pardon the pun) drive positive change in our communities. It empowers our youth with invaluable skills and instils a strong commitment to road safety. We are proud to support initiatives like this that make a difference in the lives of young people in Donegal. If this project can save just one young life on our roads, it will have been worth it."

The Garage Project received support through LEADER, the Department of Rural and Community Development, Donegal Local Community Development Committee, Donegal Local Development Company, and Donegal County Council.

More info: <https://dldc.org/>
Also: <https://www.prosocialireland.ie/>

THE GARAGE PROJECT

Promoter: Pro Social Ireland.

Project Title: The Garage Project.

LEADER Theme: Social Inclusion / Rural Youth.

Participants: 130.

Grant: €84,873 @ 100% funding.

Items Procured:

Supply of youth worker and essential skills tutor / Workspace and mechanics tutor / Materials / Technology / Dry Cleaning.



• Aisling McGee, Donegal Local Development, Leslie O'Donnell and Denis Ferry from the Garage Project, and Megan Rushe from Donegal Youth Service, with project participants



New York look to Donegal Local Development's more welcoming, open plan and cheaper office



• MAIN PHOTO: Laura Mannion, Padraic Fingleton, Margaret Larkin, Aileen Cannon and Denise McHugh. LEFT: Zoom friendly, glass-enclosed spaces. ABOVE: The view from outside DLDC's offices (top floor). PHOTOS: A MEAGHER.

Donegal Local Development Company (DLDC) moved premises one year ago. The organisation has outreach offices across the county, which it retains, but staff in Letterkenny were spread between three buildings, including a two-storey where each team operated from separate rooms.

"We were all in silos," said CEO Padraic Fingleton. "This is much better for members of the public who call on us, for the staff and for productivity, although at first we were blinded by the sun."

The new open plan office is a change from sectioned off working arrangements and teams are collaborating more than before.

"When designing our new offices, we made a conscious effort to incorporate an abundance of glass," said Padraic, "symbolising our commitment to openness, trust, and transparency."

"We eliminated barriers that silos between programmes can create. It ensures a collective understanding of all the supports within our organisation, so we can provide the best possible wrap-around services to those we serve," he said.

Today, 90% of staff would highly recommend DLDC as a place to work and Padraic believes the new office and its open plan layout and staff involvement in its running contributes to the high company satisfaction levels.

DLDC's offices were officially opened last year by Minister for Rural and Community Development, Heather Humphreys.

The rent in the swish, modern office costs less than operating from three smaller premises.

The company kept one small outlet open in Letterkenny town centre and it was a good idea because it's being used, especially by people using its Local Area Employment Service.

Padraic's advice to other large community-based organisations considering a move is: Start looking for an alternative now. Then don't hang about. In DLDC's case the search took two years.

There are always a few hiccups with a big move and expectations don't always match with reality.

The windows do not open and so the office relies on air-con

which can be set to hot or cold - meaning someone is always too hot or someone too cold. At the opening, Padraic remarked that he was "amazed how the dial for the temperature gauge is still intact".

In regards to seating arrangements, operations manager Margaret Larkin had a firm view from the outset that each staff member should be able to choose whatever desk they liked to sit on each day. However, Margaret became one of the outlaws, claiming a desk as hers alone. It does work occasionally, as Laura Mannion, communications officer, explained: "Sometimes people working from home for a day will leave a note so anyone can take it while they're away."

Meanwhile, everyone is enjoying the new canteen, the Zoom-friendly glass boxes and the spectacular views. You can see the hills of Derry on a clear day, apparently.

Outside I met a local man who swore the sun always shone in this part of Letterkenny.

- BY ALLEN MEAGHER

"A FANTASTIC IDEA" SAYS USER OF NEW SHARED SERVICE

You have to be a jack-of-all-trades to manage a grassroots community organisation. While the work can be exciting, managers often wind up doing unpaid extra hours on tasks that specialists would do in a big company.

You'll see them tackling everything from DIY to book-keeping, social media and financial administration, and it can impinge on their ability to focus on the core work.

Donegal Local Development Company (DLDC) is offering a solution to this problem for social enterprise organisations in their area. Since last year they can apply to join a Shared Services Model where three organisations share one employee. (One of the three must agree to be the employer of the person serving the organisations).

Social enterprises must have a minimum of 12.5 hours weekly work and the capacity to pay for their share of the employee's hours.

With the Shared Services Model three organisations share one employee.

As DLDC says, "It is often difficult to justify or cover the cost of employing experienced staff and therefore social enterprises inevitably must manage without this support. Through participation on the shared services initiative, social enterprise managers benefit from an additional support staff member in a specific role which would free up some of their time.

The first such service was launched last year.

"It's a fantastic idea," said Johnny Loughrey whose social enterprise No Barriers Gym expanded in recent years and was struggling to acquire the level of professional services needed to support its growth. Now it shares a book-keeping employee with Bundoran Community Development Group and the Bluestack Centre Hostel in Drimmarone.

"It means we keep on top of our book-keeping and finance," said Johnny.

In a time when it is a challenge to find tradespeople and professional support, is this one answer for community groups across the country?

Contact DLDC if you'd like to know more about their Shared Services Model.

All communities should look into appointing activity co-ordinators, says John McCafferty

BY ALLEN MEAGHER

The Active Arranmore project began in January, 2023, with funding for a coordinator for one year. That has now been extended into 2024 and all involved want the funder to back it for a good decade.

“The project is about being active and healthy, having an active body and mind, using the natural infrastructure here, along with the tennis courts, amphitheatre, our gym and so on. The problem was that there was nobody to pull it all together, to coordinate it,” recalled co-op manager John McCafferty.

Funding for Active Arranmore comes through the Department of Rural and Community Development's Empowering Communities Programme.

John said the project began two years ago when Margaret Larkin - “an absolute angel” - visited from Donegal Local Development Company: “She said they had Empowering Communities Programme funding and what would we like to see in place, what would improve life on the island?”

The islanders knew what they wanted and Active Arranmore was born. Once the coordinator was appointed the project took off.

On a visit to the island in February of this year, it was clear to see from the weekly timetable the range of choices for locals, even in wintertime - including walking, crochet, ping-pong, chess, youth club, early birds gym workouts. Plus there were Zumba classes with Vlad from Ukraine.

“It’s probably the best project I’ve seen here in 20 years,” said John. “It’s gotten people out of their houses.” Much of it is free of charge and in the summertime many more activities will be organised and tourists can join in.

One of the island’s two co-ops - Comharchumann Forbartha & Fostaíocht Arainn Mhór (CFFAM) - offers kayaking classes, sailing and bicycle-rental during the summer. The island also now has the first accredited marine blueway in the country, meaning it is a

“It's the best project I've seen here in 20 years”



tried, tested and safe place to try snorkelling. All these add to the activities the island can offer locals and tourists alike.

Brian Proctor was the first coordinator, employed by DLDC, and he did a fabulous job by all accounts. Fiona Ní Ghloinn, who lives on the island with her family, started in his place in January. We met Fiona but she had to rush away to run a class.

We asked John if other islands are doing this. “No, I don’t think so, but they’ll read about it in Changing Ireland. Other islands, and not alone islands, any community can try this. They are missing a trick by not having coordinated active weekly activities,” he said.

At 6.30am, he and colleagues take turns opening the community-owned gym for the early birds (ladies on

Wednesdays, over-16s girls on Fridays).

“We work together to make things happen,” said John. The project depends on people being willing to do a certain amount of voluntary work.

SUPPORT

The Active Arranmore project is supported by Donegal Local Development Company, Donegal Local Community Development Committee, Donegal County Council, Donegal Sports Partnership, Sláintecare, and the Department of Rural and Community Development.

Arranmore's gym received €50,000 from the Department of Rural and Community Development and Donegal County Council through the CLÁR scheme in 2022.



• Fiona Ní Ghloinn and co-op manager John McCafferty take a tea-break during hailstones. Not that either is afraid of the weather - Johnny volunteers with the RNLI and Fiona's job is to get people outdoors and active.

Department to spend €2 million to develop outdoor recreation at county level

In January, the Department of Rural and Community Development announced details of a €2 million plan to develop outdoor recreation at county level.

€780,000 will support the development of ‘County Outdoor Recreation Plans’ which will help guide and facilitate the development of outdoor recreation and will support future applications for funding for outdoor amenities.

Every county will also receive funding of up to €30,000 to develop a short, focused plan to underpin the effective development of their outdoor recreation amenities.

€1.28 million over three years has also been approved for a pilot programme in partnership with Sport Ireland which will see the appointment of outdoor recreation officers in six local sport partnerships – in Clare, Longford, Sligo, Waterford, Mayo, and Meath.

The funding is part of a commitment in Embracing Ireland’s Outdoors, the National Outdoor Recreation Strategy 2023-2027, which aims to strengthen and support the sustainable development of the outdoor recreation sector in Ireland.



• Revenue raised from cycle hire helps CCFAM, a co-op on Árainn Mhór, to fund other activities during the year.

“It’s crazy burning buildings - we’d take another 100 or more people”
- John McCafferty

BY ALLEN MEAGHER

John McCafferty says that Árainn Mhór island in Co. Donegal would welcome another 100 or more people fleeing war and strife. He objects as an Irish person, proud of our history, to arson as a form of protest and does not understand why anyone would engage in such acts.

“Burning down places that might be used. I don’t understand that. It’s crazy stuff. You don’t know where we come from. I just don’t get it,” he remarked. “My mum and dad worked away. It was an Irish thing back then – when we didn’t have work, when you couldn’t go fishing anymore.”

He suggests people thinking of arson “should be using their time to add to their community, trying to improve things, and if there’s an issue there, sit down and sort it out. Don’t be burning buildings, throwing

stones, burning buses. It’s getting like famine time evictions,” said John.

“Who knows, in ten or twenty years down the road, we may be in that same boat. We may have to go somewhere. My kids might have to go somewhere.

“At the moment West Donegal is cleared out with kids who have gone for a while. My two nephews are in Australia. I’d love my two kids to stay local, but they might go. If I thought Australians were going to burn accommodation for them...”

His island has welcomed dozens of refugees.

“Those people who have come here and are actively taking part are adding to communities,” he revealed.

John was dismayed at the way Irish identity may be changing.

“The Irish have always been

known for being welcoming and open and willing to help people. I’d hate to see Ireland change so much that we lose that. That’s our identity.

“People from Ireland have gone to far-flung places trying to help others. I would hate Ireland to lose that identity,” he added.

Árainn Mhór has a permanent population of just under 500 people, including 30 or so Ukrainians. The summertime population rises to between 1,500 and 2,000 people.

“If we had the housing and the infrastructure here, I’d happily welcome another 100 or more Ukrainians, Syrians or whatever. They’re in desperate need. They’re not leaving their country for a jolly, they need help. The people already here are actively involved in the community, they’re trusted.



• The view south towards the mainland from Árainn Mhór.

“I’d love to think that if the shoe was on the other foot the option to leave was available to me and my family,” said John.

Driving two of us around the island, we passed a 16-bed hotel the government could consider purchasing which has been up for sale for the past four years.

Islanders astounded as Marvin is first child born on Árainn Mhór since the 1970s

I was hoping to meet one Ukrainian in particular on Árainn Mhór - Alexander, a father of five children, one born just a year ago.

“The baby’s called Marvin. If it was a girl we were going to call him Maire,” said Alex.

Marvin’s birth astounded the locals.

“Everyone asked did we go by helicopter or by boat (as expectant mothers normally do).

“I said, ‘Neither’. They said ‘How then?’ and I told them. I was sleeping and Slava gave birth to the baby in the next room. I was asleep with two of our children and I woke up to the sound of crying, so I looked at the children in the bed and neither was crying. It was then my sleepy brain told me that our baby was born.”

Marvin is the first baby born on Árainn Mhór since the 1970s.

“For the baby it’s very good here, quiet and peaceful,” said Alex. “When he was a newborn we used to walk to a beach with him while he was sleeping, enjoying the quiet. We used to live in a city and it was so loud, there were so many people. It’s a huge contrast to be here. It’s perfect for the children.

“I used to work as a graphic designer and we had an e-commerce store,” he said.



• Proud father - Alex shows a picture of his youngest child, Marvin, who was born on the island and celebrated his first birthday recently.

PHOTO: A MEAGHER.

Could he find work here?

“Right now I am too busy home-parenting. I do some part-time jobs for my Ukrainian friends (abroad), but we don’t have many friends here yet so it’s hard to find a babysitter,” he said.

When his family first came to Ireland, they were allocated accommodation in a village in Co. Sligo. Then they were brought to Árainn Mhór and Alex says there is no comparison: “I think Arranmore’s

community is just perfect.”

He pointed, for example, to the activities on the island for all ages.

“I met Alex (another Alex, also Ukrainian) through the chess tournament. Then our sons met.”

- BY ALLEN MEAGHER



Vlad, Oleg, Julia and Alex describe life on Árainn Mhór

Árainn Mhór's population is concentrated on the sheltered eastern side of the island and is not as exposed or as isolated from the mainland as some of Ireland's other offshore islands. Teenagers from the mainland even take the ferry to Árainn Mhór to attend secondary school.

For Ukrainians, they do not mind the weather so much. Vlad (who now runs Zumba classes on the island) arrived in a t-shirt during an August heatwave and was relieved when he found the winter not as cold as back home.

The only downside is the hour-long walk often in the dark from his house to the community centre. In fact, the Ukrainians are spread out in different houses on the island and have taken time to get to know each other.

The biggest change for him was moving from a city to a rural part of Ireland.

Oleg said, "It's so safe and calm here. The people are good."

Alex said, "When we first



• Vlad, Oleg, Yulia and Alex.

looked at the map of Ireland and found Arranmore, it was a rock. That was a shock."

He deeply appreciates the quality of education available on the island for his children aged 16 and four.

As an engineer, he has many ideas for community development - "every day" says his wife Yulia, who lost her job as a civil servant when her city was invaded. She likes the wild weather here, enjoys walking and she is now employed in the Day Care Centre on Árainn Mhór. Alex wants to join the RNLI as a volunteer.

"It is a very, very friendly and welcoming community. They stop us and have chats," said Yulia. "100%," agreed Alex.

Since our meeting, Yulia's mum Natalia had a mishap. The Arranmore community, having warmly welcomed the family, launched a fundraising campaign and asked Changing Ireland to share the link. It is a testament to the bonds formed between islanders and newcomers that they have raised over €4,000 in a short space of time. More info: <https://www.idonate.ie/crowdfunder/nataliasupport>

Ukrainian men - these are the facts

Ukrainian men are allowed to leave their country, despite the war, when they meet certain criteria. These include:

1. Men who support three or more children under the age of 18;
2. Men who are single-handedly raising a child (or children) under the age of 18;
3. Men who are caregivers, guardians, foster parents, or educator-parents raising a child with a disability;
4. Men supporting an adult with a disability;
5. Adoptive parents, caregivers, foster parents, and educator-parents supporting orphaned children;
6. Men providing continuous care for a sick spouse, child, or their own parents or their spouse's parents, as determined by a medical commission or a health care institution.

Community worker sees unmet needs and untapped potential

Active Arranmore co-ordinator Fiona Ni Ghloinn believes the Government could be doing more to help Ukrainians in their late teens and twenties to integrate. With rural transport in remote areas still "terrible", the driving test is a challenge for non-English or Irish speakers and third level choices perplexing. If they received more help on these and other issues, it would help them to integrate and be of wider benefit to society and to the economy.

She said, "Apart from the energy they bring and their different viewpoints on the world, the Ukrainians who've come here to Arranmore are very skilled – in communications, engineering, graphic design.

"I don't think the government recognises the huge potential they have in Ukrainians who want to give back to the community. They would raise the standards of things in Ireland.



• Fiona Ni Ghloinn sees potential going untapped.

"A lot of the young people doing the Leaving Cert now are also doing their Ukrainian exams because they don't know if they are going to stay in Ireland or return to Ukraine. I think they need a lot more support before they make their university choices. That whole age group needs to be better looked after," she said.

"The Government and people like me need to do more because Ukrainians need better access to information and advice," she added.

Collective action through county networks



• A men's sheds networking meeting facilitated by Donegal Local Development Company.

Donegal Local Development Company (DLDC) has established a number of networks to support community initiatives.

"They have played a crucial role in strengthening connections, shared learning and mutual support amongst community and voluntary groups across Donegal," said CEO Padraic Fingleton.

They include the Donegal Food Response Network, the Donegal Network of Men's Sheds, the Day Care Centres Network and the Social Enterprise Network Donegal (SEND).

The Donegal Food Response Network engages in crucial work and by working together the network has more power than groups working in silos.

The Men's Sheds Network holds monthly meetings and events such as welding and horticulture demonstrations, a countywide summer engagement event, and a regional Irish Men Sheds Network gathering.

The Donegal Day Care Centre Network allocates resources in terms of staff and funding to address the needs of volunteer committee members in these centres.

The Social Enterprise Network Donegal (SEND) has a membership of 59 social enterprises and it serves as a platform for knowledge sharing and collaboration.

Social Enterprise Incubator Hub

DLDC is also developing support hubs – physical space with additional supports – for emerging social entrepreneurs as they grow into independent social enterprises.

The Social Enterprise Incubator Hub model offers workshops, one-to-one mentoring, desk space and general office support. DLDC has collaborated with educational partners to deliver the mentoring in marketing, HR and finance.

The aim is to work with anyone with an idea through to operating as a fully-fledged social enterprise. Timeframes will be tailored to the specific social enterprise, typically spanning 12 to 18 months.

The first Social Enterprise Incubator Hub began operating in January and it will be replicated in May and September.

RECOGNITION

€50m more going to communities that welcomed people from Ukraine and other countries

- Brings total investment under the Community Recognition Fund to €100m

A further €50m is going to communities that have welcomed people from Ukraine and other countries. Local authorities, in collaboration with communities, will be funded to develop projects that will deliver long-term benefits to those living in the areas selected.

The Community Recognition Fund was first introduced last year to recognise the efforts made by communities in welcoming and supporting people coming to Ireland and €50 million was allocated to some 900 projects in cities, towns and villages across the country.

The announcement on March 15 of a further €50m was made by Minister for Rural and Community Development, Heather Humphreys, and her colleague Minister of State Joe O'Brien. It will support the development of projects over this and next year. The funding has been allocated across local authority areas based on the number of new arrivals located there.

Minister Humphreys said, "Communities the length and breadth of the country have really stepped up to the plate in recent months in terms of welcoming families from Ukraine or those seeking asylum from other countries."

Minister O'Brien encouraged communities "to use this funding opportunity to consider projects that will add benefit and help meet local needs in their area."

The fund is being administered at a local level by local authorities.

Projects eligible for funded include:

- Development or refurbishment of community or cultural facilities including play areas, walkways, parks, community/sensory gardens, allotments, and recreational areas.
- Development or refurbishment of local club and sports facilities.
- Enhancement to school/parish facilities which are open to use by all of the community after school hours.
- Purchase of equipment for local clubs, festivals, community events and organisations.
- Transport infrastructure such as community vehicles.



• The Mums' Team competing in a tug of war as part of the community sports day organised by Togher Family Centre - a recipient of funding under the 2023 Community Recognition Fund.

Photo courtesy of Togher Family Centre - follow them on Facebook.

CHANGING DONEGAL

ONE MILLION STARS FOR SOLIDARITY

BY ALLEN MEAGHER

Last year, Donegal Volunteer Centre (DVC) put out calls for volunteers to join workshops to weave thousands of coloured ribbon into stars. They have now shot out in front of every other county when it comes to star-making.

"We make eight-point stars that represent light, hope and solidarity against violence," said Roksana Oliinyk, volunteer support worker with DVC. The goal is to weave One Million Stars in Ireland by 2032.

During star-weaving sessions, participants often sing. They also discuss healthy relationships and how to recognise abuse.

"The idea of the project is to support people who are abused, to show them they are not alone," said Roksana. "It is an inclusive community arts project that promotes healthy relationships through creativity. When we make stars we are campaigning against violence."

In November/December, DVC hosted 19 star-making workshops as part of its contribution to the international 16 Days Against Violence campaign. The initiative resonated, particularly in rural areas where volunteer opportunities are limited. Star-weaving hubs sprung up in Bunbeg, Buncrana, Ballyliffin and beyond.

Nationally, the initiative now has support in 26 counties, and while it's not a race, somebody has to keep tabs, and we can reveal that Donegal is in the lead. Last year, across the country, volunteers weaved 45,764 stars and nearly 7,000 of them came through Donegal Volunteer Centre.

Cumulatively, Ireland has woven around 300,000 stars in four years. There are just eight years left to weave 700,000 stars and make the million. While the target is ridiculously high, nobody's rushing, nobody's getting stressed.

Back in Australia where it all began they have set a global target of one billion stars. The material is recyclable, we are assured.

In Letterkenny, we visited a Friday morning star class to see star-making in action. Eight weavers were present, seven women and one man.

Within minutes of arriving, I had to surrender my camera, start taking instructions and start weaving. My guide was Kateryna and she was a good teacher. In fact, three new starmakers were born that morning:



• Donegal's star weavers marched in spangled umbrellas, one of which is worker Roksana



• Communications officer, Laura Mannion, holds aloft her first star.

While Roksana loves the project she manages, that morning she weaved her first star. She was delighted with herself, as was her colleague, DLDC communications officer Laura Mannion. I was relieved they allowed us keep our stars. Proof!

"It is relaxing," said Yana, who has weaved around 200 stars so far. "And everyone must keep their first star."

Find out more about the One Million Stars initiative at: <https://onemillionstarsireland.ie/>

FOR HOPE, LIGHT AND



People across Ireland weaved 45,764 stars in 2023, with nearly 7,000 of those coming through Donegal Volunteer Centre.

St Patrick's Day Parade with stars shown here by volunteer support na Olínyk.



• It takes a professional about five minutes to make one star. For a newcomer, it takes 20 minutes. If you didn't have someone to show you the way, it would take all day.



• Volunteers, most from Ukraine, taking part in a star-weaving session in Donegal Volunteer Centre in Letterkenny.

Opening of community hub in Creeslough is “another step on our journey of healing”



• Speaking at the opening of the new hub, Minister of State Joe O'Brien said, "I have witnessed first-hand, the spirit, the resilience and the unity that exists in your community, I hope together you can rebuild a community that thrives on love, compassion and shared memories."

A new community centre in Creeslough, Co. Donegal, was officially opened on January 12 by Minister of State for Community Development, Joe O'Brien. The Government had promised support to the devastated community after a suspected gas explosion on October 7, 2022, killed ten people and left eight in hospital.

A petrol station, shop and apartments above the shop were destroyed in the explosion and the site remains cordoned off to this day, with high fencing obscuring the view and flowers placed at a memorial by the roadside.

In January, the community came together to remember their neighbours who were victims of the tragedy and to look to the future with the opening of the new Creeslough Community Links Hub.

Speaking in Creeslough, Minister O'Brien said, "My focus is on strengthening community resilience and supporting the continued sense of unity that is evident here in this community. It is important that the community itself work together and decide on the way forward.

"You have transformed a derelict building into a place of shared aspirations and collective efforts. I have no doubt this community hub will continue to serve as a sanctuary for healing, a hub for support and a symbol of your collective strength for many years to come. I am confident that the community spirit here in Creeslough will allow you to continue your journey, all the time

remembering those families that have lost ten precious loved ones and the injured, whose lives were altered forever."

In a statement, Creeslough Community Association thanked all involved in the project and said: "In November of 2022, Minister O'Brien visited Creeslough, listened to our community and committed to help us rebuild. The Creeslough Community Links Hub is a result of that commitment, and we are forever grateful. The opening of this facility is another step on our journey of healing.

"This building has brought a positive vibe to the Main Street of Creeslough and our aim is to promote community engagement by providing a hub of information and support. To promote skills and development through programmes and workshops, to continue with small key community development, and to enhance the overall community wellbeing by addressing local needs."

In March 2023, the Creeslough Together Initiative (CTI) was awarded almost €500,000 by the Department of Rural and Community Development. CTI now employs a number of key staff including a full time community links worker and a part-time administrator, and its work is rooted in the principles of both community development and trauma informed community work. This twin-track approach is designed to support the local community responses.

One of over 24,000: Tania's story

TANIA'S WORK IN IRELAND FUELS DREAM OF REBUILDING UKRAINE

- A decade climbing today bonds Tania with friends on the front line at home
- Tania hosted by family able to provide transport to work

BY ALLEN MEAGHER

Tetiana (Tania) Kovalova has been working since the first week she landed in Shannon Airport in May 2022. She came here devastated over what she left behind, nervous of what lay ahead, carrying a small bag, her passport and €300 in savings. She came alone, speaking no English.

Back home, as Russia's war on Ukraine enters a third year, some of Tania's close friends serving on the front line have been killed or injured. She remains in daily contact with friends and family, and since her Irish hosts and employers made her feel safe here – and productive – she channels her earnings and spirit into the war effort.

Government figures show that Tania is one of 24,000 Ukrainians employed in Ireland, 17,000 of whom are full-time like her. There are 1,000 employed in construction. Separate figures from a survey conducted by Ukrainian Action in Ireland suggest the numbers in work may be much higher.

In Tania's case, her hosts provided transport that enabled her to find paid employment quickly. She has never missed a day.

Asked why she took on work so soon after landing in Ireland, she said: "Because I no like sitting in house. I have respect for myself and my host family and if people ask, 'Are you working?' I then say 'Yes, in a restaurant, as dish wash manager!'"

"I want to work. I don't want sit in one place. I like growing. Work connects people. It is good meeting people. Good for social stability. For me it's very important to have work and have work colleagues. I no understand people who don't work," Tania said.

She is grateful to her Irish employer, not least because she now speaks better English which she learned in the workplace. Sometimes she reads children's books about Irish legends, because the text is easy to follow. If she time she would go to classes, but work, commuting and cooking fill her days.

KREMENCHUK

In Ukraine, Tania grew up in a quiet village – still quiet thankfully -



• Tania Kovalova was in shock when she first arrived in June, 2022, but kinds hosts and finding work helped. Above - on the train to work in 2024.

"I have to cook for big meetings and I don't understand English. One man had a watch that I think was more valuable than my apartment in Kremenchuk."

and her parents and younger sister live there to this day. She had moved as an adult to the city of Kremenchuk in central Ukraine, where she bought a sixth floor apartment facing, unfortunately, a large, city-centre, military installation.

The first bombs fell on the city on April 2, and Tania made tentative enquiries about leaving. She heard through word of mouth about someone in Ireland offering accommodation, and they were vouched for through a network of friends, so she contacted Patrick Morrissey who had a farmhouse with spare rooms outside Thurles, Co. Tipperary.

However, Tania was nervous - who was this man? Also, she was still unsure about leaving her country, her family and friends behind.

Then, on May 12, her entire apartment block shook from missile attacks. The next day, she fled.

She reminded me about an

attack on a shopping mall in June 2022 when more than 20 people were killed and 59 injured.

"That was Kremenchuk," she said.

Ukraine's largest oil refinery is located on the city's outskirts and is a key Russian target. (It is 10km from the bombed shopping mall).

She said, "My parents live in village – it is safer. My younger sister also. She has two children, 13 and 8. Her husband now soldier in front line. Most of my friends also now on front line."

5AM START

Tania's first job was washing dishes in a local restaurant. After three weeks, through her hosts, she heard about a job in a canteen with a construction company headquartered in Dublin. She got the job and for eight months she rose at 5am to catch the early morning train from Thurles to Dublin - her host family kindly



• Climbing used to be Tania's favourite pursuit and she made lifelong friends in the mountains. All are now supporting the war effort in one way or another.

provided a lift to the station.

Tania was nervous joining a big company. "I no understand nothing. No English, only with phone and pen and paper. Not even very good now.

"I go to Dublin – it's very big office. Big bosses with lots of money, and I'm a temporary protection lady," she said. She recalls the receptionist calming her down, saying 'Don't worry'.

When the canteen manager went on holidays, Tania found herself in charge. "I have to cook for big meetings and I don't understand English. One man had a watch that I think is more valuable than my apartment in Kremenchuk. 'Hello Tania', they say. 'Thanks you Tania', they say. After day one, other days easy."

She was working for seven months in the canteen when, cycling through Thurles one day, she spotted a Sisk flag on a building site. She worked for Sisk.

"Next day I say to Nick Morrissey - I'm ready for working with a shovel."

Tania had qualified in Ukraine as a land surveyor. She was called for interview and taken on to help on the Thurles project – building 64

(Continued from previous page)

modular homes for fellow refugees from Ukraine.

On completion, she moved with Sisk to Rathdowney where they were midway through building 44 modular houses. She rented a room from an Irish woman called Mary Hennessy "an amazing lady, perfect - she's my Irish mammy now".

Currently she lives a 15-minute walk from a Sisk site in Lucan, renting a room in a family house: "They're from South Africa. Good family. Nice house."

SALARY SUPPORTS WAR EFFORT

Asked how she spends her salary, she replied:

"I help my parents in Ukraine. They have only €100 a month pension. I help my army every month because lots of my friends are now in zero line (frontline) in the war. I send money to girls who make camouflage for technicians and sometimes it helps them to buy car or jeep for war. I don't make big money in Ireland."

Tania is saddened by what she calls a lost generation of men from Ukraine - killed on the battlefield.

FRIENDSHIPS FORGED IN MOUNTAINS

Asked about corruption in the Ukrainian military, she said: "I can't change that, but money I send is safe from corruption. It's between friends. I trust them. I climbed many mountains with them. A few guys now died, some lose legs and no climb no more. One guy no more have eyes, very nice guy. We climbed to base camp in Mount Everest.

"Ten years I climbing. Crimea was my first hike. I said I'm never going again because it's so hard. Next thing, I see it's very beautiful. Next, I climb Carpathian mountains - 2,048 metres. More hard. Next Mount Elbrus in the Caucasus Mountains in Russia. Caucasus people have very hot blood. They say they're not Russian," said Tania.

FEW FRIENDS IN IRELAND

"I not have too much friends in Ireland. Morrisseys and my job friends. I'm not too much meeting Ukrainian people in Ireland - I don't have time," she added.

Ukrainian Independence Day is an opportunity each year to meet compatriots, but Tania has not taken part. "For me it's very sad," she said.



• Tania at work in Thurles, Co. Tipperary, on the site of modular housing for fellow Ukrainian refugees.

"The racists see only bad people. I see nobody because I'm working."

RACISM IN DUBLIN

Racism is on the rise in Ireland and Tania has experienced it.

"I know a very big racist. Sometimes I'm afraid in Dublin. I have little Ukrainian flag on my bag. A man in Dublin, he sees it and he doesn't like me - he say bad things. Sometimes I'm afraid to have this flag because somebody might throw stones at me, but still I keep it," she explained.

Tania tries to understand the racism through the lens of a popular Ukrainian folklore story.

"With all people, whether Irish, French, Ukrainian, Gypsy - there are some good, some not. In Ukrainian folklore - if you put just one spoon of oil into a pot of honey, it makes the honey taste bad, but the honey is still there."

She believes narrow-minded Irish people see what they see, and they do not see the Ukrainian people who are working.

"The racists see only bad people. I see nobody because I'm working," she said.

Tania laughed when asked was she fearful of being attacked in Rathdowney or in Thurles: "In the countryside everybody is friendly."

DREAMS FOR FUTURE

Tania baked a cake when she was leaving the canteen job to start on the modular homes in Thurles.

"I make big cake for the bosses to say thanks for the job and for trusting me for future. My first and

last dream is helping to rebuild Ukraine, so this experience is very important for myself."

She said of Sisk: "It's a perfect company, everybody nice." They better understand her situation now and her dreams for the future and how her experience building in Ireland serves a purpose.

After our interview she texted me to add that at work she feels "completely safe, from the safety of construction and the preservation of my health and life, to my personal mental health and comfort.

"The company always takes care of its employees regardless of their status on the career ladder," she added.

Last year, Tania returned to Ukraine for the first time, visiting family and friends in her home village. Her apartment block in the city still stands, but sirens wailed every day she was there - she showed me videos and the many bombing alerts on her phone from that visit.

Her older sister, who lives in Czechia, has visited her in Ireland and she hopes her younger sister will visit this year. Their parents, now elderly, do not want to leave their village and so Tania looks forward to taking annual leave in October and returning to see them for a fortnight.

She will tell them good things about Ireland and her Irish family, her Irish mammy and Sisk.

"I have little and maybe big dreams for after the war. Maybe Sisk come to Ukraine to help rebuild," Tania said hopefully.

"TANIA, WHERE'S YOUR PASSPORT?"

- How good humour can help refugees relax

Tania was afraid of losing her passport and being killed before she left Ukraine - then nobody would be able to identify her body and inform her family. That need to have her passport within reach at all times stayed with her for a long time.

Her paranoia is something she can now see a darkly funny side to, helped on by her Irish hosts. Overhearing us talk, Patrick Morrissey piped up, asking: "Hey Tania, where's your passport?"

He coaches football and hurling teams and is used to helping people overcome defeat. While hosting refugees is on a whole other level, four Ukrainians have so far stayed for extended periods with Patrick, Nicholas and Tim Morrissey and it has gone well for them. All are working or studying now and have integrated into Irish society, but Tania stands out as the one who went to work one week after arriving.

Last year, nearly 26,000 people in the Premier County volunteered, according to the latest census data.

As a Tipperary household, the Morrisseys are in good company when it comes to volunteering. Last year, nearly 26,000 people in the Premier County volunteered, according to the latest census data. That's 15% of the people living in Tipperary. A fifth of volunteers were involved, in 2022, in more than one voluntary activity. The average age of a Tipperary volunteer is 48, with the 45-64 age group the most active volunteering, possibly because that age cohort has more free time.

The data was contained in data released on February 1 by the Central Statistics Office.

The Census of Population 2022 Spotlight Series: Volunteering in Ireland showed that, nationally, 711,379 people volunteered in 2022 representing 14% of the total population.

Social Impact Measurement Awards

Trustworthy social enterprises have never been more important

BY ALLEN MEAGHER

The national Social Enterprise IMPACT Awards ceremony, held on February 20, in Tullamore, Co. Offaly, took place amidst a rise globally in greenwashing and pinkwashing, where the public need reassurance and social enterprises need to show they are hitting their targets.

Changing Ireland spoke to Philip O'Donnell from the Irish Local Development Network (ILDN) at the awards. He said the overall aim was to promote and reward good practice in the monitoring and measurement of social impact.

4 REASONS TO MEASURE

Philip works as the ILDN's research, policy, and rural affairs officer, and he explained why monitoring and measuring impact has become so important:

"Firstly, social enterprises operate in an increasingly competitive environment. Whether they rely predominantly on grant funding or on traded income, invariably there isn't enough money to go around, and they need to be able to illustrate the organisation's social impact," he said.

"Secondly, in a world of greenwashing, pinkwashing, etc., the public need to know that they're not being hoodwinked by hollow claims. The level of trust in individual social enterprises is generally strong, because these social enterprises tend to be firmly grounded in their communities. However, it is important for the image of the sector as a whole that there is an evidence base to show they are achieving real results.

"Thirdly, social enterprises themselves need to know whether their strategies are working or not.

"Lastly, measuring social impact is a challenge for social enterprises. A survey in Scotland showed it to be the issue of single greatest concern for social enterprises there, and we regularly hear Irish social enterprises voice similar concerns. We hope that this competition will help to demystify measuring social impact, and show that there is no single 'right' way to measure or monitor impact," he added.

"12 O'CLOCK"

Martina Earley, chair of the ILDN, told awardees in Tullamore: "We are fortunate to have so many social enterprises in Ireland and we must support you in every way we can."

She said that social enterprises rely on "vital" support from each of the 49 Local Development Companies (LDCs) that the ILDN represents.

"LDCs are the ones who will be with you coming up to 12 o'clock when you're trying to get a funding application in," she remarked.

Martina congratulated the winners: "They provided a compelling account of the collective impact of our social enterprise sector."

Una Lowry, CEO of Dublin South City Partnership, also spoke.

"Measuring is a luxury for most social enterprises, as they're sometimes just so busy keeping the doors open. You've to be an expert in HR, management, all while running a business, and a lot of them can't afford the time for measuring social impact," she explained.



• *The Football Cooperative places recreational football as a vehicle to promote physical activity and healthy ageing and positive mental health among men.*

The Football Cooperative was one of the top social impact award winners, and it unveiled research undertaken with academic partners that showed their social enterprise represented incredible value for money.

After 18 months research as part of a PhD, Waterford-based Dr Steve Daly from the South East Technological University concluded that the Football Cooperative generated a Social Return on Investment (SROI) of

€17.60 for each euro invested. He said this is about double what most social interventions are valued at.

The next obvious question was how to scale up and the plan is to expand beyond the two sites the project currently has to many more. They also wish to expand beyond holding cooperative football just one evening a week, as well as scaling outwards to hard-to-reach men to get them to tog out for games.

Steven O'Connell, founder of the Football Cooperative, said, "We can help people feel part of a place. Last year, we had 608 participants and now we can prove that this model works. Our early intervention and health promotion programme takes a gendered approach, targeting men, and has a co-operative ethos. Volunteer co-ordinators arrange pitches, bibs, times and so on. Ultimately there is no substitute for exercise," he said.

Una was delighted therefore with the level of interest in the awards – there were 62 applications.

"Dormant Accounts Funding from the Department of Rural and Community Development (DRCD) enabled us to run the competition and publish the toolkit," she added.

The toolkit is available on the ILDN's website: www.ildn.ie

PUBLIC CONSULTATION

Rob Nicholson works as a principal officer in DRCD with responsibility for the development and implementation of Ireland's National Social Enterprise Policy - and he gave "a heads-up" on what to expect in the second iteration of that policy.

He firstly thanked the ILDN for running the competition and adjudicating on the entries.

A public consultation on social enterprise policy was held late last year and the draft new national social enterprise policy will be published shortly.

"It's still a nascent sector," said Rob, noting that change will come quickly in the years ahead as EU law comes into force: "We've been flagging that inside government and across all the aspects of

government."

There will be five themes under the new policy which will run until 2027.

They will include an awareness-raising strand, a strand on access to finance, support for social enterprises with capacity go grow, and sustaining support for those who cannot scale up.

"Also for first time we'll have a dedicated section on the green transition, taking a lead from the UN Sustainable Development Goals," he said.

"We are looking at national and international engagement. How do we make sure policy is implemented? And it's a rapidly changing environment. We anticipate much more engagement with the EU in the future regarding social enterprise," he added.

Rob said the Department's policies have to be informed by evidence – which was one of the reasons he was present in Tullamore for the awards. Congratulating all who took part, he said measuring quantitative versus qualitative data is always a challenge.

And the winners are...

- **The Shona Project**, which supports girls aged 11-plus as they navigate the bullying, low self-esteem, and anxiety that have become far too prevalent a feature of the adolescent experience.
- **The Football Cooperative**, whose recreational football brings adults together while promoting healthy ageing, positive mental health and community belonging.
- **Sensational Kids**, which provides timely and affordable therapeutic supports for children with additional needs.
- **ClareCare** co-ordinates and provides services for elderly people in Co. Clare.
- **The Together Academy** runs culinary training as part of a two-year employability programme.
- **Saoirse - Ethnic Hands on Deck** is committed to the economic empowerment of migrant women in Cork.



• Martina Earley, ILDN chair, Ellen Conway from the Shona Project, and Rob Nicholson from the Department of Rural and Community Development.



• Steve Daly, PhD researcher and Steven O'Connell, founder of the Football Cooperative, celebrate winning €10,000.



• Rob Nicholson congratulates Dana Katz Murphy from Sensational Kids.



• Martina Minogue accepted an award on behalf of Clarecare.



• Edel Lynch accepted an award on behalf of the Together Academy.



• Vera Stojanović accepted an award on behalf of Saoirse Ethnic Hands on Deck Co-Operative.

Social Impact Measurement Awards

LEARN FROM THOSE WHO KNOW BEST

Social enterprises need guidance. According to a recent OECD policy review on social enterprise in Ireland: “Most social enterprises lack the necessary technical and financial resources to conduct impact measurement, thereby demonstrating their positive contributions to society.”

One of the aims of the Social Enterprise IMPACT Awards competition was to capture key learnings from those that do it best.

Here is some advice from the winners:

Empowering to measure your impact

Tammy Darcy, Founder at The Shona Project, said groups need to dedicate time to measuring social impact. Then they can be sure that they work they do is as relevant and empowering as possible.

“We don't just measure impact, we have created an ambassador programme so we can put the voices of our girls front and centre when it comes to decision-making. It is so important to us that we hear their voices, value their opinions and use this information to help us shape our impact projects, because they are the experts in what is best for the young women of Ireland.”



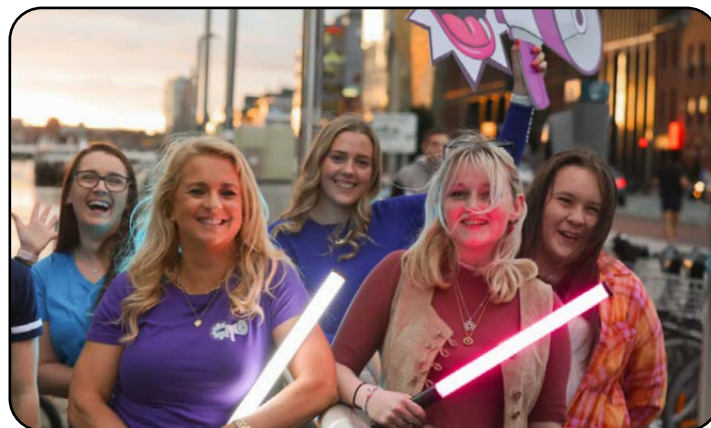
• Vera Stojanović speaking at the ILDN awards event

Listening to women helped in Cork

Vera Stojanović, Programme Coordinator at Saoirse EHD, said: “To fellow social enterprises, our advice is to establish robust feedback mechanisms, incorporating the authentic experiences of those we serve to guide and enhance the impact of our collective efforts.”

“As a team run by, and dedicated to supporting, migrant women, we invest substantial time in measuring and monitoring our social impact to ensure our initiatives genuinely meet the needs of our members.

“Through this ongoing process, we've learned the importance of adapting our approach based on the evolving challenges faced by migrant women. We believe in the power of actively listening to their voices to drive meaningful change.”



• The Shona Project was founded in 2016 by Tammy Darcy.

Invest time to measure outcomes

Karen Leigh, Founder and CEO at Sensational Kids said it's easy to report on numbers of children supported, but it's a real challenge to prove your service is making a real difference.

“We are so happy that we can now report our proven outcomes. It takes time and investment, but it's proven to be invaluable to know that our service is not only making a big impact but is also reaching clinical standards of change above and beyond the norms. Measuring our impact has been a very positive and valuable experience for us.”



• Sensational Kids provides timely and affordable therapeutic supports for children with additional needs.



More tips on why to measure your social impact



Edel Lynch, finance manager at Together Academy, said, “We try to adopt an approach of ‘measuring what matters’ and being open to continuous improvement as we cycle through new pilots and programmes.”

“Being able to communicate the outcomes of our programmes in a clear and evidence-based way has been critical for us in both securing funding and understanding the effectiveness of our programmes,” she added.

Martina Minogue, Social Enterprise Development Officer at Clarecare, said:

“The essential process of tracking, measuring, and monitoring social impact at Clarecare is not just about numbers for each of our service areas, it's about learning, adapting, and continuously improving.

“By continuously refining your approach based on data and insights, your social enterprise can maximise its positive influence on the communities it serves.”

Steven O'Connell, founder of the Football Cooperative, said they aim to “do it once and do it right” and measuring social impact is central to that.

Download the tips toolkit from: <https://ildn.ie/resources/>

Community media battling a democratic deficit

BY COLM CROFFY



Losing local media outlets deprives citizens of their most important source of local news, and any reader of local newspapers can attest to the decline in local content.

This is dangerous because people need access to accurate and substantive information about their local communities to participate as citizens.

Local newspapers cover all the “boring bits” of weekly fodder – district courts, local authority meetings, coroners’ courts, planning appeals, public consultations, regional assemblies, hospital reports, policing and so on.

When I started my reporting career in a local Limerick newspaper in 1989, we left out more material from local institutional activity than we could publish weekly – there was so much of it.

Back in the closing stages of the last century, official minutes and reports had to be posted or hand-delivered five days in advance of council meetings. Intrepid reporters tracked down a favourite councillor to get a sneak preview. It was a different world.

For the past 14 years, I have been a very busy founding editor of a local community bi-monthly, 64-page magazine – ‘Ballinasloe LIFE’. It goes out to a print readership of over 12,500 and an online community of 10,000. It is made possible through the support of a gracious business community, and with no public funding, we deliver 6,000 copies to our community six times a year for FREE.

During that time I have witnessed a growing intolerance, disdain or indifference (I can’t quite fathom) for allowing the local community access to their public business-making.

After we lost our Town Council, it took about three years of huffing and puffing to get a seat on the press bench to attend the new Municipal District Council (MDC) meetings. We are circularised the call to meetings and the agendas, but have no access to the draft minutes or any of the reports that are formally issued and approved by the council members. The preparatory meetings held in camera (in private) take twice as long as the formal public

meetings.

I thought it was just our particular swamp in East Galway, but no, across the River Suck in Roscommon and Westmeath it is similar. There is more information in the votes of sympathies lists from official minutes than on the substantive elements on the agenda. GDPR is the brave shield that most officials hide behind.

I would like to cover aspects of my community’s involvement with the HSE, but as we are not official media we have no access to the minutes and agendas of the Area Health Representative Committee. Ditto the Border, Midland and Western Regional Assembly, and the joint policing committee.

From time to time I have to check facts with these public democratic bodies – most are two-to-three years behind in their annual reports. It’s the same with qualitative data; there are three sets of figures for the housing list in my MDC area alone – according to officials.

No one in my community knows how much it costs run a MDC because the estimates (budget) meetings are held in private, separate

from the main meetings of the council and no-one, not even some of the elected reps (I am learning now) fully understand how this occurs.

Given all that, I welcomed a sobering report published by Maynooth University in December of last year titled ‘The 21st Century Councillor in Irish Local Government’. However, while it rightly savaged public discourse on social media, it was noticeably quiet on the role of community media.

I was more encouraged with our New Media Development Commissioner Ronan Domhnaill’s remarks to the CRAOL gathering in Athlone at year end (Changing Ireland, Winter 2023) where he bravely articulated the new emerging Vision for Cumman na Mean and how they would be prioritising the “Local Democracy Reporting Scheme”.

I very much hope he and his colleagues and the members of Association of Irish Local Government will reach out to community-owned, resourced media in delivering on this much-needed approach.

Libraries recognised for Age Friendly initiatives

Public libraries nationwide have been awarded “charters” for their progress in developing better services for older people.

The Minister for Rural and Community Development, Heather Humphreys, awarded “Age Friendly Recognition Charters” to every public library in the country in January.

Our libraries earned this recognition after reviewing their collections and programmes of events and looking at their facilities and services anew to identify better ways to meet older people’s needs.

Minister Humphreys said: “Libraries are a core service within our neighbourhoods, and they are particularly invaluable to older people as a source of information,

and as community hubs, learning centres and cultural facilities.

She announced the awards at an event in one of Ireland’s newest public libraries - Edgeworthstown Library, Co Longford.

“The Age Friendly Library Recognition Programme supports libraries to examine their facilities and services and to listen to older customers. Library staff across the country go above and beyond to create welcoming, accessible, and relevant services for older people and people who have diverse and changing needs,” she said.

Catherine McGuigan from Age Friendly Ireland said our libraries have an array of supports and services that “enable older people to visit, learn and be part of the fabric

of their communities.”

Measures covered by Age Friendly public libraries include: meeting spaces for older people’s groups, an outreach service to library members’ homes, trolleys for moving heavy books, digital training, age friendly parking and walkability* audits of library buildings.

* If you’re curious about what a walkability audit is, the National Transport Authority has a 16-page practical guide on its website for groups wishing to audit streets and footpaths in their areas:

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

Details of Age Friendly Ireland initiatives can be found at:

<https://agefriendlyireland.ie>



• Minister Humphreys in Edgeworthstown, Co. Longford.

Ex-prisoners switch from serving sentences to serving cappuccinos

BY KATHY MASTERSON

PACE (Prisoners Aid through Community Effort) was first established in 1969 by Coolock residents who realised that former prisoners were in need of support after returning to live in the community.

Now, the organisation offers a residential facility, Priorswood House, for men who are homeless after leaving prison. PACE operates a workshop in Santry where former inmates can learn metalwork and woodwork skills, and sell their wares through an online shop.

It also supports them to gain training and certification required for work in the construction industry, or as drivers.

Since 2018, PACE began offering barista training and opened a coffee kiosk, aptly named The Mug Shot, outside the Four Courts in Dublin. That kiosk is still doing a brisk trade, and last summer, the business expanded to include a café in the newly-refurbished Bridgefoot Street Park in Dublin 8.

Maggie Clune, Acting CEO at PACE spoke to Changing Ireland about the organisation, and the challenges facing people with criminal convictions.

“Up until about 2014, it (PACE) was very much focused on training. From talking to the participants and asking what could be improved, a lot of the feedback was: ‘We do our training in prison, what we need now is jobs’.

“So I said, ‘Okay, I’ll go out and ask employers to take you on’. I was quite naive and thought that would be easy. I discovered very quickly that the people we work with have huge barriers with trying to get back into the workforce, in terms of employers just being really fearful of taking on people with criminal records.

“But also the people that we’re working with who have done long stints in prison, they’re completely out of the loop when it comes to what’s expected from an employment point of view.”

In 2018 Maggie and the team decided to move into the world of hospitality, after feedback from service users revealed that there was a lot of interest in the sector.

“We looked at the coffee business, which was really booming



• Tasty! The Bridge Project's Mug Shot Cafe.



• The Bridge Project-Mug Shot Cafe.

in Ireland. We were going to originally open a coffee shop, but it was just too risky. We're a charity and we're government funded so we don't get to take risks with money. It was logical then to start with a coffee cart. And that's how the first Mug Shot came about,” Maggie explained.

“Then we expanded into Bridgefoot Street Park in partnership with Dublin City Council. We opened in a container in the park there in June. We're open seven days a week.

“At the moment, we have about five or six (staff) on our books. It's a quiet time of year; we will take on more people as the summer progresses. We do have male baristas, but a lot of women tend to like The Mug Shot and working with the public.”

TRANSFORMATIVE

Maggie has seen former prisoners transform through working at The Mug Shot. Having steady employment, and the responsibility of running a café, has done wonders for some of the staff members' self-confidence, which can often be at rock bottom after a stint in prison.

“The knock-on effect is just huge for somebody who hasn't worked in a long time, or who had many years of being completely blindsided by addiction,” she said.

“This job, this sense of purpose, dealing with the public, this feeling of being relied on: ‘Somebody's given me the keys to open up. Somebody's trusting me to cash up at the end of the day’. The impact of that on somebody who in other times of their lives may have been pushed to the fringes of society and told that they're a bad person, it's priceless.

“It's a real privilege to see it happening. It blows my mind actually, what some people overcome in their lives.”

Maggie continued: “We have a fantastic team in The Mug Shot. It's real team spirit, and they're all so capable. They're running the business themselves. They're responsible for opening up, cashing up, making orders, stocktaking. If something's not selling, letting us know, coming up with ideas.

“For some people, they had no idea that they had these skills until they got this opportunity. For other people, it's a case of ‘I never thought anybody would ever trust me again,

(Continued from previous page)

and you've given me the keys to the shop'. And that's a big deal. That builds confidence and gives people hope that mainstream employers will take them on. It gives the workers a CV again."

Do attitudes towards employing people with criminal convictions need to change? According to Maggie, that's a definite yes.

"In Ireland, we are a little bit behind. In the UK there's a lot more promotion from the government around encouraging employers to take on people with criminal records, and you have some employers going into the prisons to recruit people.

"Right now social enterprises that work with people with criminal records in Ireland are the stopgap between prison and mainstream employment. But people should be able to come out of prison and go directly into employment. We shouldn't exist really. On average, there are only about 4,000 people in prison at any one time, so it would be quite manageable.

HARD SLOG

"It's still a really hard slog for people even after all of that support and training. The people that we work with are really demonstrating that they have changed their lives, they have no intentions of going back to crime, and all they need is a job to secure that. It's such an apprehension for them: 'Should I talk about the criminal record or not'. There's no right answer to that because it really depends on the employer.

"It needs to be in employment law that you cannot discriminate

against somebody because they have a criminal record. And that's not there yet. But it's really about employers giving people a chance, so that's something we would try and promote."

When asked what changes could be made to the current prison system, Maggie replied: "We need to be better informed about options for people who commit crimes. Prison really should be the last option. I think the judiciary, if they were better informed about options like PACE, instead of sending somebody to prison, maybe send them to PACE where they can do something positive in the community with their lives. Give them the opportunity to invest in themselves.

"Let's not focus on people's weaknesses, let's focus on their strengths and build on them. What is it they're good at?

"A lot of people who are in prison shouldn't be in prison, in my opinion. Addiction is a huge, huge factor. Many people that are working in prisons will say there has to be another way of dealing with this. We're locking up people for having health issues."

She added: "A lot of women that are going into prison, it is a revolving door. They're coming out and the addiction gets a hold of them again, then they're committing crimes to feed the addiction. I've heard women say 'I'd rather be in prison. I know I'm going to get fed. I've got somewhere to sleep'. It's a break from the harsh realities of being outside, and that's really sad as a society that that's where we're at now."

difference. The fact that they believe in giving second chances to people like me coming out of prison is a huge thing. And they never judge you, they say: 'Everybody makes mistakes. Everybody deserves a second chance'.

I have no plans to move on (from The Mug Shot), I'd be glad to stay here. My boss is more of a friend to me than a boss. If there's anything wrong you can pick up the phone and he'll always answer, same with Maggie, same with them all.

I got five years, but I only did one. The one and only thank God, no looking back.

You're a bit lost when you come out. Because you've been in there behind the door for a year and then you get out and go 'Oh God, I have to look after myself again!'

You have to sign on the dole, you

TAKE THREE

As well The Mug Shot, PACE also operates an online shop (www.shopatpace.ie) offering wood and metal products made by people with criminal convictions at the PACE workshop in Santry. Products include garden and street planters, garden gates, outdoor seating, and other furniture.



In Limerick, a similar organisation called Cairde Enterprises (www.cairdeonline.ie) sells furniture and other wood products made by ex-offenders.

In Dublin, New Creation Cleaning Services (www.newcreationcleaningservices.ie) is a social enterprise that offers cleaning services for commercial buildings and private homes. The business was developed by release.ie, a charity that supports ex-offenders. It provides training and employment for people coming from social disadvantage, addiction and offending

have to get a medical card, you have to get housing. And you don't get that kind of training in there. They just don't care. You're a number to them, not a person.

I didn't know what was going to happen (when I left prison). I had nothing in mind, because prisoners are judged, and you never think you're going to get a job. People judge you. They judge the crime; they don't actually know the person. With me it was circumstances, it was just a bad situation.

Some of the girls break the law to go in there for a roof over their head. They're homeless, and in there you get your bed, you get your shower, you get your meals. We called it the revolving door, of girls that had no houses and no other way of life. It's very sad. They need to be given a second chance, like I'm after getting.

CALLS FOR LEGAL REFORM TO HELP PEOPLE FIND JOBS AFTER PRISON

Almost nine out of ten Irish employers who took part in research commissioned by Irish Penal Reform Trust (IPRT) would consider hiring someone with a criminal history. The Maynooth University study is the first time research on employer attitudes to people with convictions has been published in Ireland. The research included a symposium, 23 interviews



and a survey of 55 participants.

What emerged was that employers want more guidance, as Galway Rural Development community worker Damien Quinn (pictured above) stressed on the day of the report's launch.

Damien was one of the guest speakers when 'The Secondary Punishment' was unveiled. As he previously told Changing Ireland readers, he found it very difficult to find work after being released from prison. When he did finally land on his two feet, he set up a campaign and support group for former prisoners called Spéire Nua.

The research echoes his concerns, but there was hope in the respondents' replies with employers broadly willing to hire people with convictions (PWCs) once they had guidance, information, and support in order to do so.

The report recommends that the Government bring in legislative reform to promote inclusivity and anti-discrimination for PWCs.

IPRT executive director, Saoirse Brady, said at the launch, "The Criminal Justice (Rehabilitative Periods) Bill 2018 should be enacted as a matter of priority given that it has cross-party support and would deliver on a key Programme for Government commitment to expand the range of convictions that can be considered 'spent'."

Download the report from:
<https://iprt.ie/>

Read our interview with Damien:
<https://www.changingireland.ie/i-say-it-all-the-time-prison-was-the-easy-part/>

Ann on working life after prison

Ann is a former prisoner who has been working at The Mug Shot café since May 2021. She spoke to Changing Ireland about life after prison.

When you're lying in a prison cell, you think you're not going to get work ever again. I was an industrial cleaner first, and I was in a college called Pathways for ex-prisoners. One of the tutors said Maggie was looking for somebody. He said: 'I think you'll be good at it', I said, 'Why'? And he said: 'You like to talk!'. So I sent my CV off to Maggie, and she got in contact with me within a day.

I make coffees, I do a bit of ordering, I do a bit of cleaning, a bit of everything. I absolutely love it, and they look after you so well here.

PACE is after making a huge

ACCOMMODATION CARAVAN LOAN SCHEME IN 4TH YEAR

Local authorities may provide loans to Travellers to buy caravans under a pilot scheme launched in 2021.

The pilot was launched amidst high homeless rates among the Traveller community and a failure on the part of most local authorities to spend funds allocated to them by central government for Traveller accommodation.

Last year, the Caravan Loan Scheme provided for spending of €3.2m nationally on 80 caravans.

Following an evaluation of the first year of the scheme, the 2023 scheme included some changes:

- A deposit of €500 was deemed sufficient from the applicant.
- Local authorities were to ensure there was an appeals process in place for refusals and to notify applicants of the outcome of their application appeal.
- A review of approved loans to buy caravans, looking at repayments data, was scheduled for completion by the end of March this year.
- Local authorities were to commit to minimum repayment rates of €20/week.

The maximum amount borrowers can receive is €40,000.

While Sligo County Council is participating in the Caravan Loan Scheme, €40,000 is unlikely to be enough to fund the sustainable models (*see main feature*) that Jamie Murphy and Cheryl McGinley speak about.

The National Traveller Money Advice and Budgeting Service has been to the fore calling for the Caravan Loan Scheme and helping to review and evaluate its impact.

Other Traveller accommodation supports provided by local authorities include:

- Standard accommodation in local authority houses.
- Group housing.
- Serviced halting sites - where Travellers' caravans/mobile homes can be accommodated on bays which have serviced units.
- Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) and the Rental Accommodation Scheme (RAS).
- Approved housing bodies.

TRAVELLERS AND CLIMATE CHANGE - AN OVERLOOKED MINORITY

BY KATHY MASTERSON

A Traveller group in Sligo is working to raise awareness of how climate action is affecting their community, and the resources they need to be able to contribute.

Jamie Murphy, who works with the organisation as a men's development worker, told Changing Ireland: "Often, Travellers' voices and experiences are excluded - not deliberately - but they're sometimes not prioritised within different issues.

"For any just transition away from fossil fuels and a carbon-based economy, marginalised and excluded groups have to be at the centre, or it's not a just transition.

"The Traveller community is one of the most marginalised and excluded groups in Irish society, if not the most excluded, and that's reflected in a wide range of different indicators: overcrowding, homelessness, poverty, unemployment, racism."

He explains that fuel poverty is a major issue for the community, noting that Travellers are "far more dependent on fossil fuels than the general population".

"The option to switch to alternatives isn't as open to the community as it would be to the general population. And then that feeds into fuel poverty. In the National Traveller MABS study, three in four households that were in mobile homes were experiencing energy poverty.

"People in mobile homes and trailers were nine times more likely to go without heat than the general population. They were 14 times more likely to find it difficult to heat their homes, and over 80 per cent experience condensation and damp on a regular basis. In terms of money, the average amount spent on heat is about 28 per cent of household income.

"That's a huge challenge for the community. The transition away from fossil fuels should be a great opportunity for the government, locally and nationally, to make headway in changing those statistics."

How could this be achieved? "By providing high spec, retrofitted or up to the highest quality standard (accommodation) for those that want to live in trailers or mobile homes. Those units have to be at the highest



• Cheryl McGinley and Jamie Murphy, Sligo Travellers Support Group, attending a Climate Camp in Leitrim last year.

Photo Róisín Loughrey

People in mobile homes and trailers were nine times more likely to go without heat than the general population.

standard possible, because at the minute they're not, and you can see that in the statistics, and we see it on a daily basis here in terms of leaks and repairs, the cold and damp - the units aren't up to scratch.

"This should be a great opportunity for the government to make that transition and provide proper quality accommodation for those living in trailers and units. We don't think that that is up to standard," replied Jamie.

His colleague, Cheryl McGinley, a member of the Traveller community, added: "I just think that if the government has a climate action target that they want to reach, when Travellers are using three to four times more fossil fuels than the general population, that that area should be targeted first.

"Travellers can't contribute to climate action when they live in mobile homes and caravans, there's no other option for them but to use fossil fuels, and they use them a lot,

we're highly dependent on it. Basic needs need to be met first so that Travellers can contribute to climate action.

"Any new accommodation for Travellers is still the same basic thing that has been rolled out over the years everywhere. There has been no upgrade in energy efficiency there. It's still the same substandard accommodation that is being rolled out for Travellers, yet new houses are all high energy efficiency A+ rated."

Jamie pointed out that sustainable accommodation alternatives for Travellers are available.

"Cheryl has done research on this side of the country in terms of what's out there and there are companies that provide it."

The Traveller community is not the only group left out of the climate justice conversation.

"Often the discussion around climate justice, climate change and the just transition is aimed at



(Continued from previous page)

people that are really coming at it from a different level than other communities. A lot of people are talking about getting thousands of Euro in grants to put solar panels on their house, or heat pumps and water pumps.

“Because of the higher levels of exclusion and poverty in the Traveller community, many are coming at that from a much lower base. The basic needs haven’t been met, never mind the transition to more sustainable fuels and energy. Sometimes we’re working with people that don’t have water. If you go to some people and start talking about alternative energies or cleaner energies and cheaper energies, they don’t even have a working toilet. The base is different and that needs to be factored in,” Jamie suggested.

“It’s not just for the Traveller community. Anyone that can’t meet their basic needs first, they’re not going to be thinking long term about sustainable energy. People that are living in poverty, or just on the margins for whatever reason, will focus on their basic needs first. That’s a natural reaction.”

He continued: “The key message for us is the Traveller community, and all marginalised communities – whether you’re an asylum seeker living in the direct provision system, someone experiencing poverty – they need to be part of and planned for in the transition. Because it’s the marginalised, excluded communities that are going to be most impacted by the climate crisis.”

Jamie says that Travellers and others who are reliant on fossil fuels are then “punished” by the higher costs of those fuels.

Cheryl and Jamie agree that accommodation is the biggest issue “bar none” that Sligo Traveller Support Group deals with on a daily basis.

“The secondary impact of that in terms of mental health and physical health, it’s catastrophic,” Jamie remarked.

Cheryl added: “In all the health statistics, the fatality rate in Travellers is a lot higher (than the

general population). So, if they can see that fatality is sometimes directly linked to the living conditions, and the infant mortality rate can be linked to their living conditions, why is that not being pushed?”

Have things improved at all for Travellers in the last 20 years? “My own experience hasn’t changed much. But I have electric now, where I didn’t before. I have electric the last five years, so that was a very big change, it was a godsend for me,” revealed Cheryl.

Jamie replied: “I’m working here about eight years, but I have not seen any drastic improvements, to be honest. I suppose you don’t see improvements, it’s over time you see them.

“I feel in the short time I’ve been here that you’re still having the same conversations in relation to the same issues. Despite report after report and studies being launched, they don’t really impact or affect real change. And I think people are probably very disillusioned by that.”

However, Jamie says he is optimistic about the future, “because there’s a fantastic generation of people that are working within the community”.

“They are standing on the shoulders of the work done by people before them. While the change hasn’t happened quickly enough, I’d be optimistic in the sense that the people I see here in this office and nationally, I think, will bring that change.”

Cheryl agreed: “Travellers’ voices are getting louder. I’ve seen it more so this last couple of years. There’s more being said in the news about Travellers’ conditions. But it’s still not enough to make any change, to be accepted as a minority, to be living as equals.”

CHERYL MCGINLEY:

“Travellers’ voices are getting louder. There’s more being said in the news about Travellers’ conditions. But it’s still not enough to make any change, to be accepted as a minority, to be living as equals.”

Traveller recycling company providing sustainable jobs for the community



• Minister of State for Community Development, Joe O’Brien, visits Bounceback.

Galway-based mattress recycling service Bounce Back Recycling shows the contribution Travellers can make to climate action when provided with the necessary resources.

Bounce Back Recycling was established in 2017 by Martin Ward, having originated from a project started by the Galway Traveller Movement in 1994.

It is a social enterprise that recycles some 20,000 mattresses, bed bases and couches each year and provides a mattress collection service to 12 counties. According to Bounce Back Recycling, approximately 600,000 mattresses are disposed of annually in Ireland.

Part of the company’s mission is to increase employment opportunities for Traveller men and women, and it has grown from three staff members to 16 since 2017.

The organisation also aims to ‘reclaim the community’s role in environmental and economic sustainability’ and ‘promote the visibility of our work in order to challenge racism and discrimination’.

“We were inspired by our

community’s long history in the circular economy which links to the tinsmith,” Martin revealed.

Bounce Back Recycling aims to expand its services into all 26 counties in the near future, and hopes to install the first automated mattress recycling machine in Ireland.

Recycled materials from the mattresses and other items are reused in industries such as steel, textile, and carpet manufacturing.

The social enterprise currently works with a number of local authorities and retail outlets to help them improve their recycling rates.

Mattresses are collected from the retailers, or from local authority-operated civic amenity sites. They are then disassembled and sorted into their various components by Bounce Back Recycling staff at their site. The components are then transported for reuse, recycling, recovery, or disposal “as a last option”.

“Via recycling we keep at least 50% within the economy to serve as raw material feedstock to make new products by manufacturers. This is circular economy and sustainable use in practice,” explained Martin.

• Ionad Naomh Pádraig community centre in Gweedore, Co. Donegal.

PHOTO: A MEAGHER



FOOD POVERTY Q&A

WITH MÁIRE UÍ CHOMHAIL, IONAD NAOMH PÁDRAIG, GAOTH DOBHAIR, CONTAE DHÚN NA NGALL

1 Tell us about Donegal's Food Equality Forum and the Donegal Food Network. And what's the difference?

I'm the chair of the Food Equality Forum. It's a mixture of state agencies, people on the ground, the HSE and Donegal County Council. I'm there as the person on the ground. And I'm the connection between that and the Donegal Food Network which is mainly made up of people like me who distribute food.

2 How many families have you provided food to?

I have a very long list. Have I sat down and counted every name on the list? No.

Figures and statistics are what you need when you're looking for a grant. But there is no grant at this moment. If you told me that that there was a grant out there for €10,000, I'd have every figure you need right down to the last cent by morning.

If you asked me how many people are flying to Dublin for cancer services, I can tell you it's just over 400 people, because the service is partially funded. How many people are using our new community car – I can tell you at this point it's 32. How do I know those figures? Because we get grants for those projects.

The food poverty is different because you don't know when somebody is going to call. But if somebody came through the door today, and I didn't have food, I would go to the kitchen and pull something together so that family would not go out the door without anything. There is nobody out there at the moment giving us funding to give food, to look after families in that way.

3 How important is confidentiality?

It's critical. When there are food or vouchers to go out - of the 24 staff in this building there are only three staff who know where the food is going and who is driving. Me, the local social prescriber and the public health nurse. (The vouchers cannot be used to buy alcohol or cigarettes).



4 Can poor countries teach us about dealing with hunger?

No, it's totally different here because a lot of people struggling to put food on the table are working class, they're not jobless. And they really are trying to manage, but with the cost of living – the cost of rent, mortgages, utilities. The electricity bills were a killer even for us here. They were massive for people on a minimum wage.

5 Were people less hungry in Ireland in the past?

More people grew their own food, they worked the fields and there was fishing. I don't remember ever being hungry growing up or seeing someone struggling with food poverty. This is something that has emerged over the past few years. It's crept in and it's escalating. It's not just people looking for food at Christmas time. It's happening all year round now. We give out food packages on a weekly basis.

6 No volunteer should be ever out of pocket. Who pays for the petrol when a volunteer is dropping food off?

We pay out of the goodness of our hearts.

7 Is food poverty work hard on volunteers and development workers?

Absolutely. You have to learn to leave a lot behind you at work, because you're going home to your own family. The work is heavy on the heart. It's not just food poverty. We have families struggling with cancer and children with life-limiting illnesses who use our services to go to Dublin.

There are days that are very tough when you sit and listen to someone's story and you just want to fix that problem there and then. But you know you can't because you know you will have to pull on resources from everywhere to help this family with whatever they're going through.

8 Do you sometimes call for support from staff employed by the Department of Social Protection?

Yes, we do. And what we offer is that we will go with people to the DSP if they want us to and we'll help them fill in the forms. We're like a citizens information centre in the area.

9 Do you advise community leaders to keep their heads down and focus on project work or to

make a bit of noise?

Oh, make a bit of noise. I like to be heard if I have something important to say.

Minister Frank Feighan was here for the opening of Sláintecare and I was the perfect host - until the very end. It was really a chance to tell him - "This is what we do here and you don't really recognise what we do and we don't really get the funding for what we do. But I wanted to let you know that we are filling the gaps."

It was beneficial to us because then we did receive more funding.

10 How has the project evolved since it began?

Our new approach is to try and get to the root of the problem – why families are struggling and need our help. We want to help families manage as best they can.

We talk to the mum or dad and try to get to the root of the problem. There could be addiction or an abusive situation. People on social welfare payments always struggled, but now we see a lot of working families struggling with rent, mortgages, petrol, endless utility bills.

- BY ALLEN MEAGHER

Féach ar fhíseán 2 nóiméad le Máire Uí Chomhail anseo



CHANGING DONEGAL

Solidarity for the sake of humanity

BY NOREEN BYRNE

Talking to a student recently, she was discussing her home country and how modernisation, while it has brought material benefits, is crushing the innate wisdom and solidarity of its people. She described how people work long hours, living lonely lives in large cities, residing miles away from their original communities and feeling disconnected from their culture and history.

As I was listening to her recount her sadness for her homeland and people, I realised she was not just talking about her homeland, but also about the very spirit of humanity itself. She was making a plea to save humanity, somehow.

As she talked, I realised all the forces that suppress the human spirit - from state violence to grinding poverty, endless hours of work, addictions, powerlessness, crushing bureaucracy and administration, endless noise, colonialisation in all its forms, and on and on. All these forces prevent us connecting with our own innate wisdom and inhibit us also from connecting with others.

In the days following my meeting with this student, I wondered - if these forces suppress the human spirit, what forces enable its emergence? Crisis seems to be one such mechanism, but what would enable its emergence in everyday ordinary life?

Approach people and nature with an empty head.

Philosophers Martin Buber, Emmanuel Levinas and Mikhail Bakhtin argue for the importance of being open to one another's presences without intention, or as our own philosopher the late John Moriarty put it - approach people and nature with an empty head.

Normally, we communicate with each other through the lens of our political views, our interests, our opinions, our class and so on. It is no surprise, that when we communicate like this, with our treasured positions, we remain disconnected.

American folk singer Dar Williams has toured a thousand US towns and she wrote a book on what makes for a thriving town. She said it is not any particular value system, but proximity between people that matters and when they start doing simple things together in their community. At this level differences dissolve and true solidarity develops.

However, we don't often tap into that commonality, as our world is designed to keep us busy and distracted fighting with each other about this and that. And when we tire of the way things are we are directed towards paying for a retreat, doing a yoga session, going on a holiday, getting counselling or buying ourselves something and so on. Apart from this commodification, this neatly boxed off approach ensures that delving into this space does not disrupt business as usual. We also approach this work as an individual exercise whereas it is really a relational and communal one. Perhaps the true work of humanity is building solidarity.

When a group in another part of the globe wins a battle against the forces that undermine the human spirit, we all win.



• Singer Dar Williams.

Locally, building solidarity is reaching out to people in our communities, all sorts of people, approaching them with an empty head and without any intent of changing them. See what happens and keep on doing that. If we do, it may no longer be business as usual where we are easily distracted and maybe a new world of solidarity among people and between people and nature will start to emerge.

And to my student I say - thank you for allowing me a glimpse into your world and reminding me of all the things I had somehow forgotten.

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT SEEKS:

- SOCIAL CHANGE
- SOCIAL INCLUSION
- EQUALITY, SOCIAL JUSTICE AND HUMAN RIGHTS
- PARTICIPATION
- EMPOWERMENT
- COLLECTIVE ACTION
- ACCOUNTABILITY

OVER €6M IN FUNDING FOR 152 PROJECTS

This year, across the State, 152 community projects, schools and sports projects will share over €6.2 million in CLÁR Programme funding. The grants - of up to €50,000 (under Measure 1) - will help fund projects such as astro-turf pitches, playgrounds, sensory gardens, walking tracks, nature trails, outdoor performance spaces and community cafés.

There is a particular emphasis on offshore islands with four projects in counties Galway and Mayo sharing €174,934. Among the recipients are Comharchumann Forbartha Árann on Inis Mór which receives €45,000 for a beach seating area, along with €28,000 for a reference library, and Clare Island Development Company in Co. Mayo, which was awarded €50,000 for solar panels.

Projects on the mainland include the repair and refurbishment of Louisburgh Town Hall in Co Mayo, for which Louisburgh Community Futures received €49,500. In Co Offaly, Dunkerrin Community Centre received funding of €31,500.

The funding under CLÁR is being provided as part of Our Rural Future, the Government's five-year strategic plan to revitalise rural towns and villages across the State.

VACANT BUILDINGS TO BECOME COMMUNITY FACILITIES

A former bakery, a vacant garda station and a disused schoolhouse are among 24 derelict and vacant sites countrywide that will be given a new lease of life thanks to a €4.5 million funding boost.

The investment under the Town and Village Renewal Scheme's Building Acquisition Measure aims to tackle the issue of dereliction and vacancy in rural towns and villages.

The 24 old and derelict buildings chosen as part of the scheme will be purchased and repurposed into new, modern facilities to benefit the local communities.



Rerun the Community Volunteers Programme, say supporters

BY KATHY MASTERSON



Community Volunteers is a pilot programme administered by Volunteer Ireland. The idea for the initiative emerged during the Covid pandemic, when the organisation experienced a massive increase in the number of people enquiring about volunteering.

The programme makes it easier for people to volunteer as many of the volunteering opportunities are one-off events, meaning people don't have to make a long-term commitment.

The community-based element of Community Volunteers also makes it attractive for those new to Ireland, or new to an area, to get involved in their community and meet new people. Currently there are 3,623 people on the Community Volunteers national database.

The pilot is operating in 18 local authority areas. Volunteer Centres in these areas interview and train prospective volunteers, after which they are added to the volunteer database. Organisations and local authorities can request the support of Community Volunteers at events, or when urgent needs arise in the community.

Vicki O'Connell, Community Volunteers programme manager with Volunteer Ireland told Changing Ireland:

"Community Volunteers was sort of born through Covid when the call for volunteers went out and everybody put up their hand. Our database went crazy overnight with the amount of people that wanted to volunteer.

"The National Volunteering



• People on the Community Volunteers programme have engaged in many river clean-ups.

- *This makes it much easier for people to volunteer.*
- *Volunteering is a way for people to integrate.*
- *Increase in climate action volunteering.*

Strategy, which runs from 2021 to 2025, was being created at the time. So in the middle of Covid they decided that they should have a pool of volunteers in each county, facilitated by the volunteer centres, that were trained and ready to go if another national crisis ever happened, or if there were any urgent needs within the local community."

Urgent supports include providing "a third tier" of support for first responders, and other organisations such as the Civil Defence, during weather-related disasters such as flooding or storm clear-ups.

As Vicki said, "Because urgent responses aren't that frequent, the Community Volunteers programme also involves local events and festivals. For example, the Flavours of Fingal, Pride parades, St Patrick's Day parades, any small local event."

"The theory behind having the

events and festivals was to keep the volunteers engaged and knowing each other so that when or if that call for urgent community support came, people are experienced, they know each other, and they're ready to go. They're fully trained; they go through a four-step training process to become Community Volunteers," she explained.

According to Vicki, the programme is "really supporting integration for displaced people in their communities".

"From Covid, we went straight into the Ukraine crisis. A lot of our Community Volunteers have also supported displaced people in the community. When we started the programme, we were very keen to have a diverse volunteer base. We have 124 different nationalities, and about 44 per cent of volunteers count themselves as non-Irish.

"We also have quite a young base, which is unusual.

Volunteering can often be seen as for retired or middle-aged people, but 74 per cent of our volunteers are aged between 18 and 49. This is because the roles are episodic; they go up on a portal, people can just click a button," she continued.

"They can say: 'That suits me this weekend', rather than committing to volunteering three hours a week every week for two years. This particularly encourages displaced people to volunteer. We have translated our training into Ukrainian because people want to do something, they want to get out into their communities, and they want to integrate. We found that the programme really supports these people."

Climate action also falls under the Community Volunteers' remit. Says Vicki: "We've found that there are more and more climate awareness, environmental, and climate action events around. We have numerous river clean-ups,



Ahmed Mohamed volunteers in Dublin



• Volunteer Ireland made sure the volunteers were visible in their localities by providing them with branded clothing and high-viz vests.

(Continued from previous page)

walking trail inspections, World Beach Day, Tidy Towns, forest preparation days, tree plantings, and the Baldoye Bay Biosphere Festival.”

The pilot programme is approaching its end; however, Vicki reveals that the Department of Rural and Community Development “is keen to see it extended”.

She concluded: “It’s all been positive feedback. The volunteers obviously love it, otherwise they wouldn’t be doing it. They love the fact that they can just pick and choose, the flexibility of it. They also do feel that although it’s a national programme, there is that emphasis on the local county, so they feel a part of that local county team, which is nice.”



• South Dublin community volunteer Ahmed Mohamed at an event in Citywest.

Ahmed Mohamed came to Ireland last year from Somalia. He lives in a direct provision centre in Clondalkin and volunteers with the South Dublin Volunteer Centre:

I met the Community Volunteers when I was living in Citywest. Fiona (Sweeney, Community Volunteers manager) gave me the opportunity to do volunteer work. Fiona and the other members always encourage me. It helps me to meet people, integrate with people in Ireland and develop my language skills.

We work in Citywest helping the Ukrainian people and other International Protection applicants who are living there. We organise games for them, and we help people like us who are new to the country to adapt to their new life and situation. I also volunteer at outside events: community events, Christmas events, gardening.

I haven’t got my work permit yet and it’s hard to be at home doing nothing, so I have been volunteering every day. The Community Volunteers provide a bus to avoid travel costs for us, they come to our accommodation to take us to the event and the bus returns us to the accommodation centre.

I have met a lot of people. We met the South Dublin Mayor (Cllr Alan Edge), he is a great guy and does everything he can to support us. He came to our accommodation because there were protestors coming there and he came to visit us. All the people I have met have been nice to me, and to the other people who are new to the country.

Meeting new people helps me to learn more about the country, and to see how friendly most Irish people are. We want to show Irish people that we want to be part of the community and to give back to the community. We had to flee our countries, and they gave us safe accommodation; we have to give back.



• Ahmed Mohamed with South Dublin Mayor Alan Edge.

Jacqueline Conlon, Drogheda volunteer

Jacqueline Conlon from Drogheda is a community volunteer with Louth Volunteer Centre:

I used to volunteer in the local church shop, and in the library in my son’s school one day a week. My daughter Olivia asked me if I’d like to join the Louth Community Volunteers, so I said I’d give it a go. I just love it. You’re mixing with everyone; you have great craic and you get to meet new friends.

I volunteered for Festive Friends at Christmas, where we visited people who would have had nobody coming to visit them on Christmas Day. We brought them a dinner and stayed and chatted with them for a while.

I did the Lú Festival of Light in Drogheda, which was fantastic - all the old buildings around Drogheda are lit up.

I also did the St Patrick’s Day Parade, the Youth Conference, and the Louth Community Sharing Project. That’s a community integration project for people who are new to Ireland. It’s great for integration and meeting new people; there are some lovely people around Drogheda.

Particularly after Covid it was great to get out and have something to do, and I really enjoy it. With the Community Volunteers, you can fit it around your own life as well, rather than having to commit to something every week.



• Louth community volunteers Jacqueline Conlon and Michael Butler at the Lú Festival in Drogheda.

LOCAL AUTHORITIES IN THE COMMUNITY

DIVERSITY IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT

A programme was delivered by the Galway County and City Women’s Caucus to highlight the need for greater diversity and gender equality in local government.

The programme, delivered in Ballinasloe in February, aimed to encourage participation of women and people of diversity in local government, as highlighted in ‘Programme for Government – Our Shared Future’, especially in areas where there are very low numbers of women involved in elected politics.

The overall aim is to increase the participation of these groups in the 2024 Local Elections. The



programme also included training in personal development, leadership and resilience skills for existing councillors in these groups to encourage retention.

Our file photo (above) shows Maria Molloy and friends at the launch of Galway Pride Week in 2022.

WALK AND TALK IN FINGAL

Fingal County Council is seeking local men to lead Men’s Walk and Talk Groups in the area. In 2022, the Active Travel Section of Fingal County Council, in partnership with Get Ireland Walking and Age Friendly began setting up Men’s Walk and Talk groups around the county.

The volunteer-led groups seek to help tackle social isolation, improve mental health, promote physical activity and build a sense of community.

CLARE ENERGY ROADSHOW

Clare County Council’s Climate Action Team partnered with EirGrid, ESB Networks, Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland and Tipperary Energy Agency to deliver a series of in-person and online events in February. The Energy Citizens Roadshow covered home energy consumption, renewable energy and grants and incentives available.

LIMERICK CITY WALKERS GOING LOOPY

Limerick City and County Council has launched a new walking map to encourage locals and visitors to explore the city. The 3.8km Limerick City Loop Walk showcases the popular Slí na Sláinte route.

It features 18 points of interest, with information on local Turkish baths, sinking churches and the 1930s Limerick Grand Prix race ‘Round the Houses’. The map was created as part of the four-week Limerick on Foot campaign, encouraging people to get out walking, running, and hiking along Limerick’s scenic routes.

It builds on the three bridges walk made popular in recent years after the provision of riverside walkways in the Treaty City.



CONNECTING COMMUNITIES IN WATERFORD

Waterford City and County Council, in partnership with community groups and stakeholders, is hosting a series of Connecting Communities Roadshows throughout the city and county until May.

The roadshows will provide insight and guidance about setting up community groups, sourcing funding for developing community initiatives, and how to build a stronger, inclusive, and vibrant place to live. Attendees can also meet with ‘Community Champions’ which will showcase their local services at the roadshows.

The initiative is spearheaded by Healthy Waterford and Waterford PPN, in collaboration with organisations such as the Community Safety Partnership, Waterford LEADER Partnership, and Waterford Area Partnership.



GO HOME TO MAYO

The ‘Home to Mayo’ festival will take place over the month of May and is aimed at supporting events that encourage County Mayo’s diaspora to travel home to the county. Coinciding with Home to Mayo will be Mayo Day - the annual celebration of all things Mayo, which celebrates its tenth birthday this year and will be held on Saturday, May 4th.

Mayo County Council has grants to support community groups planning to hold celebrations.

NEW DUBLIN GREENWAY

Dublin City Council has officially opened the Herbert Park to Donnybrook Road section of the Dodder Greenway. It is one of several projects that Dublin City and the neighbouring local authorities are delivering along the River Dodder.

This section is 480 metres long and provides walk, wheel and cycling amenities along the riverbank. It completes the pedestrian and cycling link between Ballsbridge and Donnybrook.

FREE AGE-FRIENDLY MAGAZINE LAUNCHED

The Age-Friendly Programme of Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown (DLR) County Council and the County Age-Friendly Alliance have launched the 2024 edition of the DLR age-friendly magazine.

The magazine is funded by Creative Ireland, Healthy Ireland and Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council. The main theme of this year’s magazine is promoting ‘Good Brain Health’.

The free 84-page magazine features information on services and programmes to encourage and support older people to take part in age-friendly activities and services. There is also advice on issues relating to brain health as well as creative writing, puzzles, local heritage and more.

Email community@dlrcoco.ie for a print copy, or access it here online: <https://bit.ly/DLRfriendly>

