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CHANGING IRELAND

Issue 88 - Spring 2025

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• Aileen McBride helps 100 children from 14 countries integrate



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OLLIE MOORE BACK FROM WEST BANK

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

90% Grant Funding Announced for Charities, Social Enterprises & Community Based Organisations!



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FRONT COVER

- Main photo: Evanne Kilmurry at work in the Hub on the Hill. Story on pages 5-7.

INDEPENDENT

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

ABOUT US

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

The magazine was established in 2001 and is based in Moyross, Limerick. We value social justice, equality and fair play and 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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PEOPLE MAKE PLACES - PLACES MAKE PEOPLE



Scan for the tour showing how Moyross looks today - over 12k views to date

MEET US ONLINE



SOCIAL ENTERPRISE MAKES MORE SENSE THAN EVER!

Our lead story features 'The Hub on the Hill', a not-for-profit project that is turning a rubbish-strewn old concrete block into a social enterprise goldmine.

If pharma revenue does dry up, it is worth remembering that most people employed in Ireland work for small-to-medium enterprises. Social enterprises are now recognised nationally as an important element and it was encouraging for all fans of 'SocEnt' to see government ministers visit to announce the Hub's funding approval (the Hub received €400k while another 162 projects - see *opposite page* - also benefitted).

New ministers Dara Calleary and Jerry Buttimer visited the project together. Best of luck to both appointees and no doubt they intend to give their all to the communities they now serve.

I would like to thank the people in Ballymote, Co. Sligo, who came up with the 'Trump Think Tank' entry in the town's St. Patrick's Day Parade (see *page 31*). It nicely captures current US presidential thinking behind drastic cuts to US development aid globally.

While Trump's unelected nazi-saluting sidekick Elon Musk (*No wonder groups are quitting Twitter - page 32*) proceeds to kill off USAID, Trump has been talking up ethnic cleansing in Gaza and resolving to split "assets" with Putin while bringing so-called peace to Ukraine.

In such an atmosphere it is heartening to hear Jerry Buttimer (*page 15*) draw a clear distinction between how the USA views social inclusion and how Ireland does.

Why all the talk of foreign politics? It could happen here

and could be engineered from abroad. Community work - which we proudly promote - promotes listening, promotes participatory democracy and can be a bulwark against right-wing scaremongering. Community workers are valuable.

Community workers listen to people's frustrations. To ignore people's concerns allows malign forces to capitalise politically, as in America where a tsunami hit while many were on the beach with their heads in the sand.

This edition includes articles about Ukrainian refugees, a report from an Irish community farmer who recently visited the West Bank, the pay deal for Section 39 workers, plus reports on child poverty. It is a credit to the government that some of these voices were heard, not in whispers or at street protests (these also feature) but from a stage in Dublin Castle. The Department of Rural and Community Development provided the platform by organising what is known as the National Civic Forum. Stories were told there of impressive community work in areas few others have a reach into (*pages 20-21*).

What's happening abroad makes such work seem all the more important now.

Finally, we wish freelance journalist Kathy Masterson the very best of luck and thank her for the powerful articles she wrote in recent years for this publication.

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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THRIVING ECONOMY. RISING CHILD POVERTY

CHILDREN SHOULD NOT BE “SHOULDERING THE WORST POVERTY RATES IN THE COUNTRY”

The Government must urgently address the fact that children are “shouldering the worst poverty rates in the country”, says the Children’s Rights Alliance.

Speaking about the latest CSO figures from 2024, Tanya Ward, CEO, said, “The numbers revealed that more than one in five children are experiencing enforced deprivation.” She said that “despite a thriving economy” child poverty rates “jumped from 4.8% in 2023 to 8.5% in 2024.”



• Tanya Ward.

She said the increase was “worrying”.

“It is evident that the cost-of-living measures cushioned some of the impact given the spike that we would have seen in poverty rates when these are excluded. However, the direction of travel shows that these one-off payments are not enough on their own to turn the tide of poverty.”

“It is of deep concern to us and should be a serious priority for this Government that it is our youngest that are shouldering significantly higher poverty rates. In 2024, 104,780 (8.5%) of children

experienced consistent poverty,” she said.

She described children “growing up in a vice grip of poverty that impacts their lives every day and in every way.”

“Children and young people are dependent on the Government to make the right political decisions,” she said, castigating it for previous decisions which she says led to the rise in child poverty.

“We need to see urgency and drive behind targeted measures, like increasing the Child Support Payment and scaling up investment in Equal Start, that address the root causes of this enforced deprivation. This starts with the delivery of a Children’s Budget designed to break the cycle of poverty for children and young people,” she said.

SOCIAL JUSTICE

Reacting to the CSO’s latest figures, Social Justice Ireland, said that, “Fundamentally, child poverty cannot be separated from the poverty experienced by the families to which children belong. Child poverty solutions hinge on issues such as adequate adult welfare rates, decent rates of pay... and adequate and



available public services.”

It pointed to CSO figures showing that more than 140,300 people have work but are living below the poverty line.

For long-term success, Social Justice Ireland recommends, among other things, that the government:

- Adopts targets aimed at reducing poverty and deprivation among vulnerable groups.
- Poverty-proof public policies.
- Recognise the ‘working poor’ and make tax credits refundable.
- Support the widespread adoption of the Living Wage.
- Introduce a cost of disability allowance.
- Recognise poverty among migrants and adopt policies to assist this group.
- Move towards introducing a basic income system.

(See also page 20).



“She’s mad... (but) if anyone can do this it’s Evanne...”

Bernie Walsh, founder of the Sunflower Recycling Centre, now retired from paid work, but forever dedicated to volunteering, gave us her version of the madness (aka entrepreneurial spirit) needed to get the Hub on the Hill up and running.

Bernie didn’t hold back when recalling how the Hub began.

“Evanne said that she had got a premises and we just needed to do some work on it and she said, ‘Come up and have a look.’ Well, the first time myself - and Lindsay from the Sunflower project - walked into the place, we were saying ‘Mother of Divine God’.

“Walking out of the gate, the two of us were saying: ‘Ah, God love her’, and ‘She’s mad. She’s going to drive herself insane, it will take six months to clear out all the rubbish’.

“The rubbish was up to the top of the ceilings: stuff from playgrounds, from offices, from parks, all in every single room of this place. I couldn’t envision how she was going to do it.

“On top of that she didn’t have any money. But in saying all that, I know her so many years, I said, ‘Well, if anyone can do this, it’s Evanne.’

Sitting beside Bernie, listening intently, Evanne looked her in the eye: “But that’s what being a social entrepreneur is. At times you have to take a gamble and say, I’m going to do this, I want to get a social enterprise off the ground. There wasn’t one in the inner city. And for me, this hub is going to fulfill a need.”

(PTO for full story).

COMMUNITY RECOGNITION FUND

€14.4 million for 164 community projects announced by Minister Calleary

Across the country, 163 community projects are to share over €14 million after the latest announcement of funding approvals through the Department of Rural and Community Development’s Community Recognition Fund (CRF).

The CRF funding will deliver a range of projects and includes upgrades and enhancements to sports facilities, community centres, parks, walking trails and playgrounds. A number of vehicles for community use are also included in the list of approved projects.

Minister Dara Calleary said, “This announcement, and others to follow under various programmes administered by my department, will provide real support to ensure our urban and rural communities continue to flourish.”

The Minister announced the funding while visiting Dublin’s Inner City Enterprise (ICE) with Minister for Finance, Paschal Donohoe, and Minister of State with responsibility for Community Development and Charities,

Jerry Buttimer. ICE is receiving €400,000 under the fund - for details see opposite and pages 6-7.

Three examples of projects being funded are:

- County Leitrim - Dromahair: Refurbishment of Dromahair Garda Station and change of use to community hub and men’s shed- €176,590.
- County Donegal - Letterkenny: Development of walkway and associated works at St Eunan’s GAA club- €80,000.
- South Dublin - Clondalkin: Development of a full-size all-weather pitch at St Francis FC - €350,000.

The Community Recognition Fund was first introduced in 2023 to recognise the efforts made by communities in welcoming and supporting people coming to Ireland. The funding being provided is going to projects located in those towns, villages and city neighbourhoods that are hosting and supporting our new arrivals.

The A-to-Z of establishing a social enterprise hub in Dublin's inner city

BY EVANNE KILMURRAY

Inner City Enterprise, known as ICE throughout Dublin city, is a not-for-profit charity, set up to help unemployed individuals, social enterprises and youth entrepreneurs to establish their own businesses in Dublin's inner city. Funded partially by the Department of Rural and Community Development's SICAP Programme, ICE has two full time and five part-time staff and it serves as the enterprise wing of Dublin City Community Co-Op.

Over the course of the last 11 years, ICE has helped establish over 1,600 new businesses throughout the inner city.

ICE works closely with the Department of Social Protection's Intreo Officers who refer clients to the organisation wishing to become self-employed and establish their own businesses.

[**Editor's note:** Evanne is referring here to the Back to Work Enterprise Allowance (BTWEA) scheme which operates nationwide and is administered locally by local development companies].

ICE also runs the Dublin City Social Enterprise Awards on behalf of Dublin City Council (the only such awards event in the country) as well as a range of youth and refugee and asylum-seeker programmes. It also provides a range of pre and post enterprise support services for its extensive client portfolio.

HOW THE HUB BEGAN

Access to affordable workspace has always been a problem for our clients, so in 2018 the ICE board decided to look into the possibility of setting up an ICE social enterprise hub.

The idea was to run it as a social enterprise with 40% of ICE's marginalised tenants paying well below the market rate while the remaining 60% of the tenants paid the current market rate.

First off we had to find a suitable building in the middle of the inner city. No pressure!

We finally persuaded Dublin City Council (DCC) into leasing ICE a derelict former Council Housing Depot in Dublin 7. A friendly quantity surveyor inspected the building and estimated the 12,500 sq ft premises would cost around €250,000 to refurbish. (If only he'd



• Minister Dara Calleary, Minister of State Jerry Buttimer, Evanne Kilmurray, CEO of Inner City Enterprises, and Minister Paschal Donohue at the Hub on the Hill. Which one do you think is the greatest pool shark?

been right).

Then Covid struck and the Council needed the building back to house homeless people during those bleak months. Eventually, in November 2022, we signed the lease. The hub was back on track.

The jolly quantity surveyor appeared again only to deliver the gut-wrenching news that the building would now cost around €1.3 million to refurbish. Even my ice cool chair Vincent Crowley reeled ever so slightly as he absorbed this body blow. There was no going back, but the 10 mark question was: Where would we source the funding?

AMBITION FRIGHTENED CELEBRITY

Optimistically, I persuaded a well known celebrity and a wonderful sponsor of ours, who had been exhorting us to establish an enterprise hub, to visit. The visit lasted a mere five minutes and then she ran for the door shrieking for a taxi!

Fortuitously however, some Government funding via the Department of Rural and Community Development came on stream and

by year's end our finance officer Ger Russell and I had amassed a war chest of €167,000. Then, through a friend, architect Peter Kavanagh entered the picture.

Himself, myself and Ger sat around a wonky desk downstairs looking at floor plans and discussing some initial thoughts for the new hub. Our plans included hot-desking, co-working spaces, individual offices, a training room and a community space, as well as a craft-makers' space.

RAY WILSON'S SURPRISE VISIT

In February, 2023, Ray Wilson, ICE's patron - but better known for owning half of Shamrock Rovers F.C. - surprised us with a flying visit from Sydney. He took one look and suggested an immediate meeting with Liam Kenny, managing director of John Paul Construction (JPC).

Strolling in on Good Friday, Liam assessed the depot with an eagle eye and spoke the magic words - "Yes! John Paul Construction can do something to help. ICE can be our charity of choice for 2023."

Within a fortnight, Liam had dispatched his crack team of head

honcho and a fizzing bundle of energy Gary Howard, bean counters Gary Mitchell and Christian Gibney, and their head of health and safety Norman Keville. Over the following weeks, Ger Russell, the JPC lads and I huddled in the hub's icy kitchen, discussing possible refurbishment plans and bonding over mugs of tea and jammy dodgers. They were talking in terms of millions. Much laughter was heard, especially when I told them that the budget was €167,000.

WORKING IN PHASES

It was decided that on such a tight budget the best way of aligning ICE's strategic needs with the refurbishing requirement would be to undertake the work in three phases. Phase A included the top floor of the Depot and the outside Annex; after that we could tackle the ground floor.

Next, laconic site manager Paul Reynolds joined the team. He, like the rest of the JPC lads, took to the project straight away.

A best practice mode of delivery was chosen by the lads, inspired by the U.S. model of Integrated Project Delivery. This meant that the ICE and the JPC teams worked

(Continued from previous page)

as a single non-hierarchical unit with a shared goal, optimising open communication and ensuring timely planning and decision making. Within four and a half months, the designated area was completely gutted and bought 'up to fit purposes' standards.

The JPC lads gave so much - a huge amount of pro bono time, enthusiasm and sheer good humour. They also persuaded all of their suppliers to provide either free labour or hugely discounted rates. This generosity was one of the keys to the project's success. The true cost of the project was €338,008, but pro bono support meant that the final cost was €91,820, a saving overall of 73% for ICE. This allowed ICE and four other anchor tenants to move into the hub in mid-September last.

PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIP

The way in which this collaboration was undertaken was truly innovative. John Paul Construction, Dublin City Council and ICE created a Private-Public Partnership which delivered a very successful project for the greater social good. The phased nature of the project was unusual but necessary. The decision to focus the budget on key areas aligned with ICE's strategic goal of getting into the building as soon as possible so as to provide accessible workspace for their clients.

From the socially innovative perspective, JPC created a sustainable supply chain partnership that would work for other projects; it is replicable. Our original once-off project has become a long-term partnership with Liam Kenny who is now an ICE board director. The ICE project gave the lads and their suppliers a huge 'feel good factor' and showed them the tremendous value of a partnership united towards a common goal.

GAINING A REPUTATION

The hub now houses ICE and six other anchor tenants, so there are now 24 or 25 entrepreneurs all working out of the hub. When fully refurbished ICE's hub will house between 60-70 tenants, all working in a supportive, nurturing environment. The hub will provide a 'safe space' for clients of all nationalities to develop businesses with a wide range of in-house supports and services to help them grow in a sustainable fashion.

Even though only partially refurbished, the now christened 'Hub on the Hill' is quickly gaining a reputation throughout the community and voluntary sector as a warm welcoming space - many community groups are now utilising its training rooms, and lots of sole traders and social enterprises are availing of the hot desking facilities.

STILL NEED HALF A MILLION

At the time of writing this article, ICE had required €900,000 to finish off the large ground floor space. However, on February 24th, we received a most welcome grant of €400,000 under the Department of Rural and Community Development's Community Recognition Fund for Phase 2 of the refurbishment. Huge thanks to my favourite Department!

ICE and John Paul Construction are picking up their tools again and then it's onto sourcing a further half a million for the final phase of the 'Hub on the Hill'!

Visitors are welcome to call into the Hub on the Hill - at 49/50 Coleraine Street, Smithfield, Dublin 7 (D07 XW62). T: 01 6174852. More info: innercityenterprise.com

More info on the Community Recognition Fund at: gov.ie/en

Social enterprise aims to turn the coffee industry "on its head"



• Nes who works in the operations room, Megan Clark, who looks after accounts, and Shane Reilly, managing director. Photo by AM.

Moyee Coffee (moyeecoffee.ie/) roasts coffee at origin in Africa, ensuring that more jobs and profits remain in the producing countries, then sells it to outlets in Dublin and beyond.

And co-founder Shane Riley could not be more enthusiastic about his business location on Constitution Hill, Dublin 7.

"We roast coffee at origin in Ethiopia and Kenya so more of the jobs and profits stay there. We call our model FairChain. It's about

turning the coffee industry on its head and making sure it's a 50-50 split between coffee producing countries and consuming countries. We're a limited company. We kind of see ourselves as a for-profit social enterprise," he said.

"We fit in completely with the vibe and the atmosphere here in Hub on the Hill," he added.

Asked about the coffee that Changing Ireland enjoyed upstairs in the common meeting area, he said,

"That's the Kenyan roast! It's roasted by a partner roastery outside Nairobi where 15 staff are employed."

Kudos.

He named three attractions to working in the hub:

"There's a great atmosphere here. There's a great link between established for-profit companies and social enterprises. The location is fantastic as well for us, so we supply to a lot of tech companies in the city centre and we can deliver by cargo bike," he said.

Being in the city centre is also handy for "popping into meetings" and clients are always impressed when they visit the hub for meetings. He gave examples of new customers that came his way thanks to

networking at the hub.

He said the hub's new plans "look fantastic" and will lead to more opportunities for all.

"It will be great to welcome more businesses in. That can only help us collaborate more," he said.

- A. MEAGHER



• Coffee beans being packed at source for roasting, boosting local employment.

Solicitor and her clients like "the ethos"

Siobhan Conlon (pictured right) is a solicitor working in human rights.

"We represent a lot of asylum seekers and immigrants and other vulnerable people," she said. "For me, this place works really well because diversity and inclusion is a big aspect of the hub. So my clients feel very welcome here. I feel very welcome here and my staff feel welcome."

She said businesses operating from the hub "all kind of have the same ethos" and she appreciates when collaboration occurs. For example, some of her clients go on to receive



support through ICE to set up in business.

"The hub just really works. I think the main reason is the people," she said.

More info: siobhanconlon.ie/

David prefers hub to corporate setting

David McDonald (pictured right) is the managing director of Dialsave (dialsave.ie) which is based one of seven businesses currently operating from the Hub on the Hill. In an interview with Changing Ireland, he highlighted the benefits of working in a collaborative environment compared to a corporate setting.

His company specialises in internet telephony, but working alone can be hard on self-employed people and he enjoys the good company at the hub. There are plans to provide space for more businesses and social enterprises.



Government continues to undermine integration by moving Ukrainians

BY ALLEN MEAGHER

Changing Ireland put out a request to readers asking: What should happen next? This is continuing to happen. We have government departments responsible for integration and for community development and cost-saving by one department seems to be undermining the crucial work of another department. It does not sound like a whole-of-government approach.

Community workers say that moving refugees from the places that welcomed them with great heart undermines volunteering, undermines integration work, and disrupts family life and children's education and employment.

As Olya Maryntseva, a community worker with North East West Kerry Development told the Irish Times: "We greatly appreciate the support Ireland has provided, but all of a sudden it's like you've lost interest in us."

She didn't mean the people of Kerry, who have been most welcoming and accommodating, but the Government. Refugees in counties across the country are being moved in a disruptive manner with little notice.

The Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth says that "moving location can be very disruptive, but at all times the Department was clear that State-funded accommodation is temporary and subject to change."



• Ukrainians and community development workers voiced concerns in February over displacement from where they had integrated into community life in Dublin city to an equestrian centre in Kildare.

Responding, Kathryn Kingston, development Officer at West Cork Development Partnership, said it brought a tear to her eye:

"Multiple departments are working against each other to the detriment of the refugees. With each move, relationships with friends, work colleagues, tutors and volunteers are all lost. Each move means more dependence on social welfare, as jobs are lost and new school uniforms need to be purchased."

She said that even if they are still within commuting distance of work, there is little opportunity to get involved in local groups in a new area.

"Worse still, if they have to give up work and

return to €39.80 (the new weekly refugee payment) it makes small donations to community bands/choirs/sports organisations impossible."

Brandán Ó Caoimh, a Kerry-based geographer and social researcher, said:

"Storm Eowyn has shown us, yet again, the importance of volunteers and community leaders. They have been at the forefront of integration, and policy needs to be more supportive."

"Moving people around like this is undermining integration, and it's also very disruptive for the so-called host communities and the countless volunteers, who have welcomed people."

See also below and page 12.

Community workers say displacements are "heartless" and we should learn from Britain's experience

The plight of refugees, grateful to be here, yet shocked at being moved from one county to another after integrating, was highlighted on the national airwaves by refugee adults and children, as well as Noel Wardick, CEO of Dublin City Community Cooperative.

One mother said, "My oldest daughter is really in stress about this moving. We ask to let us stay here until the end of the school year. In the past three years, we were moved six times."

Wardick told RTE News at an organised protest that "the sheer lack of humanity is shocking" in regards to plans to move 240 people, including up to 50 children, who are well integrated in Dublin, to an equestrian centre in Kildare.

He highlighted the "disgraceful decision by the Government to upend the lives of 240 Ukrainian refugees who have been living, working and going to school and college in Dublin for the last three years".

Moving children in the middle of the school year is "absolutely unacceptable", he said. "It is

"When policies clash, we need to intervene with common sense and mitigate for the humans stuck in the middle." - Carol Baumann

heartless, it's callous. Those making these decisions need to have a long hard think about the impact that they're having on women and children."

Despite the protests, the refugees were still issued with relocation - in their eyes, dislocation - letters.

The Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth also erred by suggesting children would be separated from their parents. When this was brought to their attention by the Co-op,

the Department said it was "an administrative error" and promised to correct it.

Carol Baumann, CEO of the Local Development Company Network (the LDCN, formerly known as the ILDN) applauded those who spoke out:

"What do we do when policies clash and people pay the price? Our thanks to colleagues in Dublin City Community Cooperative for highlighting this issue and trying to support those affected. Sadly this is being repeated up and down the country with some policies undermining work done on integration," she said.

"It's important to remember that when we talk about 'integration' it's not in the abstract - we're talking about vulnerable children, women and men, who've been uprooted from their homes violently, and now uprooted here again, sometimes more than once. As Noel Wardick has so eloquently set out, the human cost is high.

"So when policies clash, we need to intervene with common sense and

mitigate for the humans stuck in the middle. Time to think again?" she said.

Senan Turnbull, a charities governance specialist, spoke of learning from British experience hosting refugees in the post-WWII era.

"This moving of people from places where they are well integrated reflects a poor appreciation of the impact on the new arrivals and the local community. We must do better."

He met with UK local authorities and agencies in the mid-2000s to learn from their decades of experience regarding immigration/refugees.

He said, "They gave us the single message of integration, integration and integration."

The Ukrainians who were moved, despite the protests, to the equestrian centre in Kildare refer in broken English to their new accommodation in "Horse House". Noel Wardick said about half of the group of 240 refugees were moved there, with others sent to Swords and other places.

FALCARRAGH VOLUNTEERS ARE HELPING WAR-WEARY REFUGEES

BY SEAN HILLEN*

Men, women and children desperately escaping the war in Ukraine have found a warm home-away-from home in Cloughaneely.

Every week, Fáilte Isteach Falcarragh hosted by the local community centre, Pobail Le Chéile, attracts a multi-national group of volunteers to help these war-weary refugees improve their English-language skills under a project that promotes greater integration and a deeper sense of community spirit by forging new friendships and facilitating learning about different cultures.

“Everyone has been so helpful to us over our last two years here in Donegal,” said Victoria Moreva, from Mariupol, who is a doctor of chemistry and was professor at the university there. “My husband Alexander, my daughter, Victoria, and I were twice displaced from our homes by the war. We had to flee from Donetsk first and then driven out of Mariupol two years ago by Russian aggression. Since moving here, I’ve been very lucky to conduct research at the Cill Ulta organic centre.” Alexander, a construction engineer, said he’s also lucky, “I’m very excited, having just started a new job this week in Dunlewey as an environmental officer.”

Oleh Sobol, who fled from the Black Sea port of Odessa after being bombed by Russians, said Pobail Le Chéile’s initiative eases his



* An Ukrainian woman attending a Fáilte Isteach in Falcarragh.

loneliness. “The English speaking club is very important to me. It gives me a chance to talk to local people. I don’t feel so lonely when I have the group to look forward to.”

Sonja Wilson from Leeds, who has lived in west Donegal for 18 months and worked as a nurse for more than 30 years in paediatric cardiology, at a children’s hospice and in a school for children with

profound medical needs, explained why she is a project volunteer. “Many years ago my mother was a refugee and because she and her family were welcomed in Germany, they went on to live happy, fulfilled lives. I believe as human beings we are all stronger when we stand together. I have learned a lot from my Ukrainian friends and my life is so much richer for knowing them.

I hope what we do helps them feel welcomed and valued.”

Maggie Maclean, a retired midwife from Ontario, Canada, said, “I have first-hand experience living in a country where I didn’t speak the language so I wanted to help our Ukrainian friends adapt to their new life. Every week I come away with my spirits uplifted because of the joy, determination and tenacity of these lovely people who have experienced and lost so much. It’s a privilege to share time with them.”

Joan Sweeney, from Philadelphia, said, “I really appreciate all the work Pobail Le Chéile has done, especially the weekly Ukrainian conversation group. I understand how difficult it can be navigating a new country, especially challenging when you don’t speak the language. Our little group assists our Ukrainian friends with a myriad of needs - from completing important paperwork to making shopping lists. Sometimes just having a stress-free cup of tea and making new friends makes a world of difference.”

More volunteers are welcome. Phone: (074) 918 0111.

**Sean Hillen is an author and former foreign correspondent for The Irish Times. He is also co-founder of Ireland Writing Retreat in rural Donegal and the Wild Atlantic Writing Awards (WAWA).*

COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL AUTHORITIES

Food brings people together, as Tullow demonstrates

Gráinne O Neill, integration support co-ordinator with Carlow County Council, has highlighted the importance of food in bringing people together. Local authorities and community organisations around the country regularly host events to promote integration and she pointed to the success of Tullow’s Multi-Cultural Supper Club - held recently for new arrivals into the county.

She reports: “Healthy Carlow said the second event of Tullow Multi-cultural Supper Club, held at the Cairdeas Centre, was a big success. The mission is to celebrate the rich diversity within the community through the universal languages of food and music.”

The Tullow Multicultural Supper Club brings together people from different cultures to share their



culinary traditions and music.

“The event brings people together in a warm, inclusive atmosphere, fostering understanding and connection,” said Gráinne.

Martina Walsh from Healthy Carlow said, “This Supper Club is an important platform for celebrating the diverse cultures (in) Tullow. We are incredibly proud to host these

events.”

Frank Morris of Tullow Men’s Shed said the Supper Club was fantastic for connecting people.

“It’s heartening to see the community come together in such a joyful and inclusive setting,” he said.

The Supper Club “is becoming a beloved tradition in Tullow”, said Gráinne. “It offers a platform for cultural exchange and celebrating what makes the community unique.”

The initiative is funded by Healthy Carlow with support from local organisations including Carlow County Council’s Integration Team, County Carlow Development Partnership, the Cairdeas Centre, Develop Tullow Association and Tullow Men’s Shed.

COMMUNITIES HOSTING REFUGEES

We don't all love beetroot, but we now appreciate Ukrainians, their culture and similar history

BY ROBERT CAREY*

When I was growing up, Eastern Europe was a mysterious entity reduced to caricatures from spy movies. My knowledge about Ukraine, before the Russian invasion, was limited to Chernobyl, soccer star Andrey Shevchenko, the Klitschko brothers (boxers) and the 2014 War. The fact that the country and its people were as eclectic as those in Western Europe was lost on many of us and it has been a pleasure to get to know Ukrainians, even though we should never have had the opportunity. Here are 12 things I have learned about Ukraine and its people since February, 2022.

1. PLANTS AND NATURE

From chatting with Ukrainians I understand that vegetable plots are still common in villages in a way that was true here decades ago. Ukrainians have retained this rootedness and interest in nature, and I think we could learn from them here in Ireland. Basically, I don't see many Ukrainians eating chicken nuggets and wedges!



2. LET TALK ABOUT BORSCHT!

OK Ukrainians, let's talk about borscht, this mix of meat with beetroot, cabbage and other vegetables! Daria, who works with me, kindly brought us in borscht to taste and, while some loved it, my reaction was that it occupies



* Ukrainian doll-making in Kerry with author Robert Carey pictured centre.

that liminal space between a soup and a stew in which no food should reside! When I mentioned this to other Ukrainians they said - oh, she should have put this or that in it, so clearly there are many ways of making borscht. I don't like beetroot, so sorry borscht, it's probably me not you!

Salo is another Ukrainian favourite which is, eh, cured pig fat. I better stop commenting while I still have some Ukrainians friends left!

As regards baking, many Ukrainians I have met like to bake, they bake fabulously, and generously share their produce.

Ukraine is a big honey producer and I have received many gifts of honey and flavoured teas.

Ukraine also has Tatar cuisine which has similarities to Greek and Turkish food (also, see number 10).

3. CRAFTS AND MOTANKA DOLLS

NEWKD have set up a number of integrated craft groups and Ukrainians are very talented and interested in working with their hands.

Some of my colleagues arranged a wellbeing session that involved burning a doll, which was new to us. First, they put out candles

and a floral centrepiece which I commented on as being lovely. Work colleague Aylonia said that it had been a windy weekend so her mother gathered some leaves and made it, just rustled it up as it were!

The dolls – Motanka Dolls are traditional dolls which can represent many things including protection for your home. This session involved making the doll, writing down your worries, putting the worry-notes in the doll and burning said doll – Health and Safety regulations were probably also destroyed in the process!

4. INDEPENDENCE & FREEDOM

Fighting for freedom is not new to Ukrainians. Ukrainians risked their safety in the 2004 Orange Revolution and in the 2014 Euromaidan protests.

The Euromaidan was over government corruption and the refusal of Kremlin-influenced President Viktor Yanukovich (who later fled to Russia) to sign an agreement with the EU which had been in development for years. Over two months millions of people protested and a whole support structure developed around the protest with a huge voluntary effort providing food and security.

Historically, Ukrainians have been fighting for freedom for hundreds of years.

A point of interest which people may not know: In 1993, Ukraine gave up its nuclear arsenal (the third largest in the world) in order to help secure peace. The consequences of doing this are now looking more and more grave.

5. HORRIBLE DILEMMA

Two Ukrainian friends, both mothers, recently visited Ukraine as their sons, both aged 17, are now obliged to sign up for the army, although the current age for call-up is still 25. They did not have to do this as they are living in Ireland and I asked one mother about it. She said that of course they didn't want to sign up, but she had said to her son that when the war is over she wants to be able to say that they followed the law and their duty. She said to him that it is important that those laying down their lives know that the younger generation is supporting them, even though they hope the war will be over before they are called up. Supporting the army while not wanting your loved ones to join up and get killed in action must be a horrible dilemma for many Ukrainians.

6. SIMILARITIES WITH IRELAND

Ukrainian and Irish history have much in common:

Oppression from an imperial power over hundreds of years. ✓

Attempts to destroy our language and culture. ✓

Resilience and eventual independence from foreign power. ✓

Famine supported by the imperialists to oppress or destroy the population. In the Ukrainian famine, 'The Holodomor', instigated by Stalin, an estimated 5 million died. ✓

Colonial power does want to let go (e.g. Ireland - six counties, although in 1993 the British government stated that it had no "selfish strategic or economic" interest in the North; Ukraine - Russian invasion). ✓



see a Ukrainian leaving work at 5pm, it must be a bank holiday ... I didn't say they had good jokes!

Wellbeing: Therapy and help-seeking is not common part of the culture and therefore they are less likely than the Irish to avail of supports such as mental health

12 THINGS I NOW KNOW ABOUT UKRAINIANS AND THEIR FABULOUS COUNTRY



7. RELATIONSHIP WITH RUSSIA

As us Irish know, when you are colonised and population plantations take place over long periods you get cultural and linguistic interconnections between the oppressed and the oppressor. Many Ukrainians grew up (like many former Soviet bloc members) speaking Russian and consuming Russian culture (similar to Irish interest in the BBC, soccer, music, newspapers).

However, like Ireland, Ukraine has a distinct history, culture and mentality. As Ukrainian historian Yaroslav Hrytsak sees it, "In Ukraine, Stalin or Putin is impossible (because) in Ukraine power is not sacred. We never love power, we always criticise it."

Ukrainian writer Andrey Kurkov says that Russians crave stability, while Ukrainians prize freedom above all. It is more important to them than wealth.

8. CULTURE & CHRISTMAS

Ukrainians' pride in their culture and language has increased since the invasion. My colleagues wear traditional Ukrainian dress at many events we run and the Cossacks, who established an independent Ukrainian state in 1649, are a big part of Ukrainian history and culture. In Kerry, Ukrainians have put on fantastic Christmas concerts and we have a large number of classically trained musicians which seems to be a feature of Ukrainian culture.

Christmas - The majority of Ukrainians are Orthodox Christians and on Christmas Eve they prepare 12 vegetarian dishes and the table is decorated with a sheaf of wheat which symbolises the ancestors' spirits.

9. SMILING AND STRAIGHT TALKING

Smiling: One of the first things Ukrainians remarked to me was that Irish people smile a lot. Now thinking about some of the miserable so and sos you know you may be surprised at this! Apparently, smiling is not common in Ukraine and some have said they will continue to show off their teeth more when they return!

Graciousness and manners: Ukrainians are quick to show gratitude for even small gestures, they want to contribute, and if you make any attempt to speak a few words of Ukrainian they are embarrassingly nice about the fact that you have mangled something they have fought valiantly to keep alive!

All talk: Because of our indirect, circuitous, often poetic way of expressing ourselves, it took my Ukrainian colleagues a few months to realise that when an Irish person says, "I will get that sorted", "Give me a call soon on that", etc, we mean something may happen sometime somewhere. Ukrainians are more direct and literal.

10. CRIMEAN TATARS

Last summer my work colleague Olya invited her friend Akhtem Seitablaiev, a famous Ukrainian actor and film director, to Ireland for the anniversary of Ukrainian independence. He has starred in many films and is now in the army, involved in projects to help injured combatants and boost morale.

As a surprise we took him to see Riverdance and he was riveted throughout and got very emotional when a Ukrainian dance piece took

to the stage - we had not told him this was going to happen. This has been part of the production since the invasion so kudos to Riverdance!



• Akhtem Seitablaiev, a famous Ukrainian actor and film director.

We showed his films in Kerry and Dublin. He happens to be a Crimean Tatar. He was born and grew up in Uzbekistan as his parents were expelled from Crimea as part of Stalin's purge of Tatars. (In 1944, over three days, around 200,000 Tatars were expelled - ethnically cleansed - from Crimea. Most were moved to Siberia, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan).

11. WORK AND WELLBEING

Work: "If there was work in bed, he'd sleep on the floor." We know laziness like industriousness is a human trait and therefore there must be lazy Ukrainians. I however have not met any. The biggest problem in fact is to get them to work to normal hours and look after their wellbeing. Hard work seems to be part of the culture as there is a Ukrainian joke something along the lines of - if you



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

supports and addiction and substance misuse supports.

12. RESOURCES AND ECONOMY

Natural resources: Ukraine is the second largest country in Europe and is roughly 8.5 times the size of Ireland. Nearly a quarter of the world's most fertile soil, known as chernozem, is located in Ukraine. It also has titanium ore, bauxite, alunite (for potash) and mercury (which Trump is seeking to exploit). Its natural riches and location are one of the reasons imperial powers sought to control it during WW2.

Economy: Ukraine is highly digitalised. For example all government docs are on an app called Diia and Ukraine had one of the highest levels (pre-war) of tech specialists in the world. The war has ravaged the economy and wages are low - for example, the sister of a Ukrainian work colleague of mine is a teacher in Ukraine and she earns just €400 per month.

• Robert Carey is a community worker and SICAP manager with North East West Kerry Development. He is also a member of Changing Ireland's editorial team. He writes here in a personal capacity.

“It does cause discomfort and I hope we can overcome that”
- Minister Jerry Buttimer

In relation to the displacement of refugees, particularly from Ukraine, Minister of State Jerry Buttimer told Changing Ireland in February that he would talk to his ministerial counterpart responsible for integration.

The Minister, who was attending a local development companies event held in Dublin, said, “There needs to be a rationale to where we move people. If there are people who are settled in communities, who are making a contribution to local education, the local economy, the local community, then there must be a conversation.”

We had pointed out that community organisations have been supported by one arm of government to help refugees to integrate, yet another arm of government is moving refugees about, for example, from Killarney to Mahon.



• Ukrainians refugees were moved from Killarney in Kerry to Mahon in Cork, over 90km apart

The Minister said, “We must be clearer and we must be, I suppose, personal in our engagement with people. It’s not about just moving people for the sake of moving people. It does cause disquiet, it does cause discomfort. And I hope that we can overcome that. I’ll be talking to the new Minister for Integration about that.”

“We see the benefit in many communities where, in particular, Ukrainian neighbours and friends have come in, they’ve enriched us all; our schools are better, our communities are better and they’re making contributions,” he said.

He said that many Irish people emigrated and were welcomed across the world.

“We saw when we expanded the European Union that we were a country of welcome. Our country has benefited from immigration and I hope that we can have that sensible conversation under my brief as minister for community but equally with the new minister for integration,” he concluded.

See also page 8.

Clones children’s project has a telling impact

- *Storytelling initiative supported by Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme*

BY FRANCIS MCCARRON*

The County Monaghan SICAP programme undertook an unusual project with St Tiernach’s National School in Clones in late 2024. Storyteller Aideen McBride was engaged to work with children of 4th, 5th and 6th class over an eight-week period.

Her mission was to teach the children stories and, more importantly, how to tell stories to their peers, to younger students in junior classes and to their parents and teachers.



• Aideen McBride, storyteller.

Just short of 100 children took part in the Storytelling Project. For almost half of these children, English is their second language and many of them attend extra language support classes in the school. The children came from a broad spectrum of countries and backgrounds.

They included Irish and Irish Traveller children, as well as children from Algeria, Brazil, Bulgaria, El Salvador, Lithuania, Morocco, Nigeria, Poland, Romania, Russia, Syria, Timor East and Ukraine.

TWO GOALS

The project had two goals: Firstly, to help all the children in a class to improve their language, literacy and creativity skills through learning storytelling techniques; secondly, to help integrate the children coming from different backgrounds.

The EAL (English as an Additional Language) teacher reported that her students had been telling her the stories each week and they were animated and excited by the project. Their confidence and fluency surprised and impressed everyone and three of her students teamed up to tell a story together at the event finale.

The project was evaluated by asking all the teachers did the project improve the children’s spoken English and did it create opportunities for children to be included. The responses were overwhelmingly positive (see panel).



• Children telling their stories to other classes.

TRAVELLER STORYTELLER

The teachers were delighted to see a 4th class boy from a Traveller background, who would normally struggle with literacy in the classroom setting, tell a long story on his own at the finale event. It was clear from early on in the project that he had a particular gift for remembering the stories and picturing what was happening and the teachers felt the Storytelling Project gave an opportunity for his oral skills to shine. They were delighted to see him find a skill in which he rightly deserved praise and recognition and which he showed a great aptitude for.

MOROCCAN PRIDE

The project also helped integration. Some of the 5th class students told their stories in their mother-tongues. These stories were told in tandem with an English speaking student. Many of their classmates had never heard these children speaking anything but English and it opened a great conversation about the languages, the similarities between the languages and the differences between the languages. Also, while trying to understand the various languages (Portuguese, French, Russian, Lithuanian) the children understood a little what it must be like for children coming to this area who do not speak English.

One of the 6th class students sourced a Moroccan story in the Berber language and with support from home translated it into English. She shared the story of finding the story and working on the translations with great pride to her class.

STORYTELLING IN YOUR SCHOOL

Overall, the project was very successful. Every participating child told some or all of a story in front of their peers, and Aideen identified many who could easily stand before a larger audience. The children were creative in how they told their stories, from those who changed their voices for the different characters to those who composed refrain lines for their stories.

Every child’s contribution was valued and the input any child had to offer, especially when it was to share a difference or similarity from their own culture, was listened to with respect by their peers.

The Storytelling Project is replicable in other towns and counties; it just requires a storyteller with the required skillset to work in a school setting. If you would like more information on it contact Monaghan Integrated Development - email: info@midl.ie.

FUNDING

The project was made possible through support from the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP). SICAP is co-funded by the Government through the Department of Rural and Community Development and the European Union. It is overseen locally by Monaghan Local Community Development Committee (LCDC) with support from Monaghan County Council.

* Francis McCarron is the development team leader with Monaghan Integrated Development and a locally renowned storyteller.

The Secret Community Development Worker

It's 2027 and us Irish are refugees

The Secret Community Development Worker is alarmed to see that the Government's warm welcome for Europeans fleeing war seems to be getting a little colder. Ukrainians are being displaced across the country, payments have been reduced to €38.80, and there is talk of reducing the €800 per month Accommodation Recognition Payment. This is against the backdrop of Trumps pro-Putin stance which is distressing for Ukrainians.

Let's imagine it's 2027 and that instead of hosting refugees Ireland is invaded by Great Britain and we are the ones seeking refuge:

How did this happen, we keep asking ourselves. Perhaps the English never forgave us for getting independence in 1922, and of course many were not happy when Tony Blair apologised in 1997 on behalf of the British Government for An Gorta Mór.

However, ostensibly it was the election in Britain of a right-wing fascist politician called Nigella which was the catalyst for the invasion. Nigella wanted to be at the table with Trump and Putin as an imperial fascist leader and took electoral advantage of the worldwide rise in neo-fascism.

The new British government moved at lightning speed to re-establish Britain as an imperial power, starting with bringing semi-autonomous domains such as Bermuda and Montserrat under direct control, and establishing the Commonwealth as an economic and political power in opposition to the EU. The devolved governments in Scotland and Wales were disbanded, and the Northern Ireland Assembly were next to go.

The malfunctioning assembly was overshadowed by the British Government's desire to follow Trump and a number of other right-wing regimes in rolling back years of progress on equality and human rights. The equality legislation which attempted to redress inequalities suffered by Catholics in Northern Ireland was criticised as being "woke", "divisive "anti-Protestant and anti-union", and the British government and loyalists in the assembly wanted to have it revoked.

The excuse for the invasion however was trade. The UK backtracked on the post-Brexit deal with Ireland and the EU and tore up the Windsor Framework. Protests and chaos at various ports, followed by loyalist violence in the North, led to with Irish nationalists rioting. The UK sent



• *Imagining a time in the near future when Irish people flee to Germany.*

thousands of troops to the North and declared martial law. On February 20, we woke to news reports that thousands of British troops and tanks were now massed just north of the border.

PROTECTION FROM IRISH NAZIS

On February 24, 2027, British tanks and troops in armoured vehicles rolled across the border into Monaghan, Cavan and Meath meeting only ineffective resistance and they were soon camped outside Dublin. Resistance increased but ultimately lasted only weeks as Irish troops had to withdraw to hold the Midlands and Munster. Surely the world will come to our aid, we thought, as towns and villages were being taken over, men arrested and tortured and women raped.

Various countries pointed however to the fact that we are not in NATO or the new EU defence pact, so while we can purchase EU arms we have only our own troops on the ground. In fact, right-wing governments in

the EU are calling for all military aid to Ireland to cease and are describing the invasion as "just another historical domestic squabble within Britain which has been going on for centuries".

The majority of the world condemns this imperial thuggery, but the British prime minister insists the invasion was to protect British citizens from Irish nationalist nazis.

The British Prime Minister justifies this description by saying that Ireland didn't support the allies during WW2 and that our president sent condolences on the death of Hitler.

The Taoiseach met Trump to ask for American aid and was humiliated with Trump directly backing Britain and saying:

"You know I have heard those mother and baby homes were like concentration camps, so maybe we need a fresh start there."

Rewriting history and spreading lies until truth becomes a meaningless concept is part of the fascist playbook, and the best lies contain a kernel of truth.

LIFE AS A REFUGEE

Life in Germany: As a refugee I experience gratitude, incredible generosity, despair, uncertainty, prejudice, and lack of empathy and understanding. As a community worker I am a good communicator; it is one of my key weapons. However, I no longer have this as I am still learning German and feel that I come across as uneducated.

A lovely German family took in me and my wife and kids to stay in their large apartment for free which showed kindness beyond measure. The picture is complex however - the other day my wife was shopping and a local on hearing her speak said to her, "The UK are a great nation, they're just trying to look after their own people and I don't know why you are at war with them."

I drive a BMW, I drove it here as the best means of escape and I need to it to drive to work, to the construction site outside Munich. On seeing it in the car park I was asked why I have an expensive car if I am a refugee? People don't realise that what is a conceptual debate for some is very real for us and all these interactions are traumatic. There are stories in the media saying the Irish are loaded, they drink too much and are messy on the streets after bars close in city centres.

There are a number of Irish not working due to having to mind children, lack of German language proficiency or qualifications not recognised and the recent news that government payments have been cut to €38.80 means big stress on families and poverty, making it harder to integrate into society. It looks like the warm welcome is becoming a little colder.

Editor's Note:

Ireland of course looks forward to continuing warm, friendly and co-operative relations with Britain. The scenario pictured here is about promoting empathy.

To suggest ideas or propose a submission as The Secret Community Development Worker, email the editor.

NEW MINISTERS

Dara Calleary busy from first day as new Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht - and as Minister for Social Protection

Hours before Storm Éowyn swept the country, Fianna Fáil's Dara Calleary was given responsibility for supporting communities. The Ballina native was appointed as Minister for Social Protection and Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht on January 23 by newly elected Taoiseach Micheál Martin.

As on previous occasions when storms have struck, community groups, local development companies and local authorities play an active role in seeking to support the most vulnerable. The minister got stuck in on his first day by announcing details of emergency funding for households impacted by the storm.

His appointment was celebrated in Mayo which has now seen two TDs in eight years take the helm.

Aged 51, he attended St. Murdach's College secondary school overlooking the River Moy in Ballina and later studied at Trinity College Dublin before taking on a role for the Chambers of Commerce of Ireland.

His political path follows that of his father Seán and his grandfather Phelim who between them served as Mayo TDs for 36 years between 1952 and 1992.

He was first elected in 2007 and has served as a minister of state in multiple roles and as the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine for a short time in 2020, he was reappointed as a minister of state with responsibility for trade promotion, digital and company regulation.

APPOINTMENT WELCOMED

Minister Calleary's appointment was widely welcomed.

The Western Development Commission recalled previous work with him, saying:

"As a proud Mayo man, he brings a deep understanding of the unique challenges and opportunities facing our region."

Social Enterprise Republic of Ireland welcomed the appointment saying they also previously met with him and were "very encouraged by his understanding of, and engagement with, the social enterprise sector".

Meanwhile, the Local



• The recently appointed Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht, Dara Calleary (front and centre) pictured last year with staff and supporters of Leirim Development Company as they celebrated 20 years of the Rural Social Scheme.

Development Companies Network (formerly known as the ILDN) said:

"Although Local Development Companies work with several government departments, those now coming under the leadership of Minister Calleary are of particular importance to the communities we work with and for. We were very happy to have Minister Calleary join us for Local Development Week in 2024, and we look forward to supporting him in this important work," it said.

RURAL AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Political commentators like to point to the Department of Rural and Community Development as a good news department for the office-holder as it allows them to make regular funding announcements for communities nationwide. This overlooks the Department's serious responsibilities developing policy and national programmes that aim to reduce poverty, promote capacity at local level, empower communities and give people on the margins a voice locally and nationally.

In recent years, the Department also took on an important role in supporting integration at community level as war refugees and asylum-

seekers from various countries made their way to Ireland. It is also responsible for supporting offshore islands – most of which are in the West.

The new minister will be familiar with the Department of Rural and Community Development because Ballina has hosted department staff since partial decentralisation a decade and more ago.

RETURN TO 'CRAGGY'

Amid concerns about its future, Minister Calleary's appointment was a relief to those who value the work of the Department of Rural and Community Development, the smallest government department apart from the Department of the Taoiseach.

The Constitution limits the government to 15 senior ministers and previously Heather Humphreys headed up two departments – the Department of Social Protection and the Department of Rural and Community Development. The former has a 2025 budget of €26.9 billion while the latter has a budget of €472 million. Minister Calleary has now taken on both roles, as well as having responsibility for the Gaeltacht affairs.

There had been some public

speculation that a new Department for Infrastructure would be established, which led to concerns that the Department of Rural and Community Development might be dismantled and its parts scattered among various ministries.

Instead, the Department has grown in size and stature with the addition of Gaeltacht affairs, harking back to the 2002 to 2010 department configuration inaugurated by Galway's Éamon Ó Cuív when he was Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs.

Its acronym DCRGA and its western leadership led to Ó Cuív's department being fondly nicknamed 'Craggy'. While DRCDG doesn't have the same ring to it, the department names and configurations are comparable.

POLICY DEVELOPMENT SINCE 2017

The junior minister with responsibility under the previous government for community development, charities and some areas of integration was Joe O'Brien from the Green Party. He had previously worked as a community worker and he made a point of spending one to two days a fortnight touring every county in the state to meet community groups. This equitable approach to connecting with and highlighting work at local level took him two years and was much appreciated.

Nationally, ministers O'Brien and Humphreys progressed work begun under the stewardship of the previous Minister for Rural and Community Development, Michael Ring (from Westport) by developing policy in areas such as social enterprise, social inclusion, charities regulation and – most recently – philanthropy.

Minister Calleary and junior minister Jerry Buttimer (*see opposite page*) will seek to build on this work.

And if Storm Éowyn got the senior minister off to a challenging start, let's hope it's a breeze for him and more so the communities he supports from here on in.

- BYA. MEAGHER

Minister of State Jerry Buttimer talks about giving people a voice and eliminating social injustice

BY ALLEN MEAGHER

Jerry Buttimer from Cork is the new Minister of State with responsibility for Community Development and Charities in the Department of Rural and Community Development and Minister of State responsibility for Rural Transport in the Department of Transport.

We interviewed him (see also pages 16-17) in Dublin in February and he said he was “very excited” about his new role.

“I’m looking forward to working with everybody to ensure that we create a better, more inclusive, fairer society,” he said.

He has served as chairperson of his local GAA club, and as a member of his community association, his parish council, and on the board of supervisors of the local credit union – and has learned that “the importance of community, the importance of volunteerism, the importance of community development is about ensuring that we make the lives of people better”.

“It’s also about giving those people who are in the margins, those who are vulnerable, those who are perhaps voiceless, an opportunity to have their voices heard. And for me, it’s about collaboration, partnership, support, working together, le cheile,” he said.

AG CAINT AS GAEILGE

Conversing in Irish is important to him: “Tá Gaeilge agam. Níl sé b’fhéidir go fluirseach - Tá Gaeilge agam agus tá mé ag iarraidh an Gaeilge a úsáid,” he said.

The minister looks forward to having the opportunity to practice his Irish when visiting island communities. He is especially fond of Cape Clear.

“Bhí mé sa Cape Clear uaireanta, bhí mo deartháir agus mo deirfiúr ag obair sa siopa Dinny Burke. So, tá a lan grá orm le Cape Clear go mórmhór,” he said.

VISITING GROUPS

He hopes to visit many communities as his predecessor did.

He said, “I want to commend Minister Joe O’Brien for the work that he did in the Department. Joe was a passionate supporter of community development, of everything that’s been done in the Department, and I hope that I can follow in his footsteps by not just visiting community development



• Minister of State Jerry Buttimer speaking at the launch of the LDCN (formerly known as the ILDN).

projects, but many communities across the four corners of the country.

“For me as minister, it is partly about me being somewhat familiar, but also about learning more about the great work that’s being done, about ensuring that my role as minister works with, in support of and in partnership with everybody.

“I don’t know everybody, I would be on a learning curve, but I look forward to working with people, le cheile, ag caint libh. It’s about ensuring that we together can make life better for people,” he said.

CONTRAST WITH USA

He reiterated a point he made in his speech to Local Development Company CEOs:

“If you contrast what we do here in Ireland by comparison to what’s

happening in the United States, where there’s a potential cut to many programmes that are about people – for me as a politician it’s about ensuring that every life matters, every person is equal. It’s about creating a just, fairer society where we can all have a voice, we can all be held in equal footing and parity of esteem.

“Community development is important. It’s about ensuring that people have access to education, to childcare. To those who are most affected by the storm we saw the importance of the community development networks. So for me, this is an exciting opportunity,” he said, promising to work in partnership for “a better Ireland”.

AMBITIONS

Asked what he might be cautious about, and what his ambitions were,

he replied:

“My ambition is to make sure that we continue the great work that’s been done. Specific ambitions will come later when I read into the brief properly and when we engage with people.

“But for me, it’s about ensuring that the voice of community partners is heard in the department, that we work together to make sure that the projects, the programmes that are being very well resourced, that are being very well run - continue, and that we can look at different ways of expanding programmes and how we can make lives better for people,” he said.

ELIMINATING SOCIAL INJUSTICE

He praised the work of community groups.

“We see the welcome that the Ukrainian people received in our communities, the welcome that we saw for that new voice in our communities that make our communities better.

“Equally, we see (the impact of the work) where people are given an opportunity for education to be re-energised. Similarly in the whole area of community development it’s about empowerment, it’s about eliminating social injustice, about creating a just, equal, fairer society,” said the Minister.



• Minister Dara Calleary and Minister of State Jerry Buttimer chatting with Chris Gonley, CEO, Leitrim Development Company.

NEW IDENTITY: The ILDN rebrands as the Local Development Companies Network



• Dozens of members of the Oireachtas attended the rebranding launch in Buswells.

BY ALLEN MEAGHER

The Irish Local Development Network is now known as the Local Development Companies Network.

At an official rebranding event, held in Buswells Hotel, Dublin, on February 12, CEO Carol Baumann, hailed the network's new identity saying:

“Local Development Companies provide local solutions to local problems. However, these local problems are often caused by systemic issues that must be addressed at a national level. Through the Local Development Companies Network we are a strong representative voice for all local development companies and we look forward to working with the new Government and with policy makers to address these systemic issues to create a fairer society.”

Minister of State Jerry Buttimer and Minister Dara Calleary along with politicians from all parties attended the rebranding event.

The chair of the network, Martina Earley, CEO of Roscommon LEADER Partnership, highlighted how Local Development Companies provide on-the-ground services supporting rural development, social inclusion, climate change and integration, amongst others. She emphasised the companies' community development approach to their work.

She expressed gratitude to funders including the departments represented at the rebranding event, acknowledging their critical role in enabling local development work.

“We have a huge reach. We don't just do local and national programmes, we also deliver EU

programmes,” she said.

The network represents 45 of the 49 local development companies active across the country.

Minister Buttimer was among three people to make short speeches and it was his first official public engagement since being appointed.

He said, “When you leave here today, don't just think that a new minister is ticking a box by being here with a new ceann comhairle and new members in the Oireachtas. We need you, we work with you and we will work with you, because (you work with) the most marginalised, the most vulnerable, those who need help, those who need support.”

He stressed the importance of community development to society.

“If you look at the whole importance North-South of the peace

process, at its core, at its heart, is community development,” he said.

“There are challenges that we will have to face and overcome together,” he said. “And you've done it,” he said, “supporting communities and people through the pandemic, the war on Ukraine, the cost of living crisis, the storms that we recently had.”

“The SICAP programme reaches into every part of our country. It is at the heart of what you do, giving people and communities a voice, a platform to launch their own policies, their own personal development, being able to think beyond the box,” he said.

Watch videos of the full speeches by Minister Buttimer, Martina Earley and Carol Baumann on [Changing Ireland's YouTube channel](#).



• Rose Conway-Walsh, TD, and Sabina Trench, CEO, South West Mayo Development, share a laugh at the launch of the LDCN, accompanied by (left) Lynda Butler, DSCP, and (right) Maura Walsh, CEO, IRD Duhallow.



• Barry Heneghan, TD (centre) with Sarah Clohessy and Paul Rogers from Northside Partnership.



• Adeline O'Brien, CEO, Empower, Carol Baumann, CEO of the LDCN (formerly the ILDN), Claire Kerrane, TD, Martina Earley, CEO of Roscommon LEADER Partnership and LDCN chair, and Noel Wardick, CEO, Dublin City Community Co-op.



• John Feerick, CEO, Sligo LEADER Partnership, Carol Baumann, CEO of the LDCN (formerly the ILDN), Frank Feighan, TD (Sligo), Shay Riordan, CEO, West Limerick Resources.



• Michael Cahill TD, Shay Riordan, CEO, West Limerick Resources, Danny Healy-Rae, TD, Maura Walsh, CEO, IRD Duhallow, Minister of State Michael Healy-Rae, and Arran O'Driscoll, CEO, West Cork Development.



• John Clendennen, TD, and Róisín Lennon, CEO, Offaly Local Development.



• Brian Kehoe, CEO, Wexford Local Development and Verona Murphy, TD and Ceann Comhairle.



• Senator Niall Blaney, Padraic Fingleton, CEO, Donegal Local Development, and Philip Finn, LDCN research and policy officer.



• Eamonn O'Reilly, CEO, North East and West Kerry Development, Rose Conway-Walsh, TD, Pa Daly, TD, and Maura Walsh, CEO, IRD Duhallow.



• Martina Earley, CEO of Roscommon LEADER Partnership and LDCN chair, Michael Fitzmaurice, TD, Chris Gonley, CEO, Leitrim Development, and Sabina Trench, CEO, South West Mayo Development.



• Jennifer Moroney-Ward, CEO, PAUL Partnership, Senator Maria Byrne, Minister of State Jerry Buttimer and Shay Riordan, CEO, West Limerick Resources.

TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE!

THE ULTIMATE COMMUNITY & VOLUNTARY SECTOR



CROSSWORD

ACROSS

3. The acronym for the fund for investment in (and refurbishing of) community centres. Clue: Read the question again.
7. Not a square. A national support group for community and voluntary organisations, charities and social enterprises.
10. One of the best magazines in Ireland, if not the world, is located here.
12. Fill in the missing word - Social Inclusion and Community ***** Programme.
14. Outside Dublin, where does the Department of Rural and Community Development have offices?
15. What is the first name of the new Minister of State for Community Development and Charities, and for Rural Transport?
16. Communities engaged in community development become...
18. Formally registered as a charity, this agency dispenses over €900m p.a. to communities.

DOWN

1. The acronym for the umbrella body for Family Resource Centres.
2. Necessary for volunteering with children.
4. Community development seeks...
5. Fill in the missing word - UCC is home to the Centre for C*****e Studies.
6. First name of a retired activist, legendary community development worker and former member of parliament - from Cookstown, Co. Tyrone.
8. True or False: Michael King, TD, from Westport, Co. Mayo, was a former Minister for Rural and Community Development.
9. What is a big hindrance for people wanting to set up a community group?
11. Where do Irish activists against foreign military flights usually demonstrate?
13. What is the first name of the Sinn Féin spokesperson for Community Development?
17. What's the first name of the former Irish president who also served as United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights?

Answers on page 32. No looking!

National Civic Forum now part of the annual calendar for Community and Voluntary Sector folk



Artist Esther Blodau kept track of the day's discussions through her drawing.

ALLEN MEAGHER REPORTS FROM DUBLIN CASTLE

The third annual National Civic Forum took place on December 4, last in Dublin Castle. The event provides for a dialogue between the community and voluntary (C&V) sector and local and central government, with presentations and discussions throughout the day.

It was all new to everyone in 2022, but now the forum has become part of the annual calendar for people working and volunteering in the (C&V) sector. It was organised by the Department of Rural and Community Development (DRCD).

The attendance for the event was by invitation and included an even representation from both the State and the C&V sector.

The speakers of most interest to this attendee were those speaking about community work on the ground, especially those funded through the Community Development Programme and the Sláintecare Healthy Communities programme. However, there were other interesting updates from other contributors.

The opening address was given by Mary Hurley, secretary general, DRCD (see page 22).



• Anne Finn, SICAP manager with Mayo North East LEADER Partnership, addresses the forum.

VALUES AND PRINCIPLES

In 2022, a document on Values and Principles for local and central government and agencies working with community and voluntary groups was launched. Kieran Moylan, principal officer, DRCD, and Colette Bennett from The Wheel gave an update on its adoption. Colette also emphasised the need to address pay and retention in the sector, pointing to The Wheel's Pay and Benefits Survey Report 2024 which showed a 27% increase in staff turnover since 2022.

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

The impact after three years of the Community Development (Pilot) Programme was discussed by Deirdre Kelly, principal officer, DRCD, Rachel Doyle from Community Work Ireland, and Belinda Nugent from the Inner City Organisations Network (see page 20).

SLÁINTECARE

Speakers on the implementation of the Sláintecare Healthy Communities programme were Greg Straton from the Department of Health, Mairéad Carney (see page 23) who works with Mayo County Council, and Anne Finn, SICAP Manager with Mayo North East LEADER Partnership.

OPEN GOVERNMENT

Sarah Glavey from the Department of Public Expenditure and Shana Cohen, executive director of the Think-Tank for Action on Social Change (TASC) discussed the implementation of the Open Government Partnership.

FINAL REMARKS

Bairbre Nic Aongusa, assistant secretary, DRCD, rounded up the day saying that the contributions and feedback would inform the Department's work in the future.



• Bairbre Nic Aongusa, assistant secretary, Department of Rural and Community Development, speaking at the forum.

“Huge increase” in poverty pushing children into criminality - Belinda Nugent

Belinda Nugent is a community worker with the Inner City Organisations Network (ICON)* in Dublin who spoke at the National Civic Forum in December to highlight increasing child poverty rates in the northeast inner city and the related and concerning trend of children as young as ten being recruited into criminality. She said this must be addressed or it risks become locally normalised behaviour.

ICON is one of ten projects countrywide that receives funding through the Community Development (Pilot) Programme to engage communities in collective decision-making for social change and Belinda gave an overview of the programme's Community Development Projects (CDPs). She pointed out that projects have exceeded their engagement targets, in ICON's case reaching 1,265 people compared to the target of 120 people over three years.

She outlined learning that all the CDPs agree on from their on-the-ground experience working with marginalised communities – the key challenges include housing, accessing health and education, rising hate group activities, and increasing needs versus limited project capacity.

On addressing far right pressures and misconceptions about migration, Belinda gave an example where ICON's work helped people to understand their housing issues related to poor maintenance rather than immigration:

“We were meeting with groups one-to-one, we were able to break down what was the issue. It wasn't people was coming into the country taking houses or jobs, it was inadequate housing.

“And maintenance issues weren't being addressed. There had been a



• Belinda Nugent, ICON, speaking at the annual National Civic Forum.

national retrofitting plan, but (the authorities) weren't going into the aging housing complexes and fixing windows and doors, doing regular maintenance, getting rid of mould.

“When you broke this down with the communities - and this is a real power and strength of the Community Development Programme - you're giving them the language and the tools to actually look at what is the issue.

“Then you help them to go and lobby, whether it's to lobby the government or the city council or private landlords, to bring about that social change. We bring that human rights approach into their lives and their communities.

“You can walk with communities, engage them in conversations, and actually have them collectively deciding what it is that they want to

do, going forward, that would help bring social change within their lives, within their communities,” she said.

One challenge has been the rise of the Far Right and the resulting pressure on communities.

“CDPs are able to talk face-to-face with people and give them the language and the tools to actually address this within the communities,” she said.

CHILD POVERTY

She said that increasing levels of poverty and particularly child poverty are being seen by those working in community development projects.

“In the northeast inner city we see a huge increase in child poverty. That child poverty has seen children from the age of 10 being recruited into

criminality.

“We work with the families and youth clubs to ask - what is the issue here?”

“If child poverty means children see crime as the only way to bring food home, and if communities begin to see this as a normalised behaviour, how can we address this?” she asked.

The project met with local youth services and family resource services to hear of their experiences with child poverty and, recently, ICON produced a short movie called ‘The Runners - A Trafficking Timeline’ as a way for the community to highlight child poverty and show what is actually going on. It was also aimed at changing the narrative. (Watch the film here: runnersfilm.ie)

The learning from ICON's Community Development Project is:

“Trust building is huge. It's the only way to get people to participate, to share their lived experience. You really have to network and build that trust. Then people will take part in collective decision-making to make the social changes that we all want to see in our communities,” she said.

She also said racism and discrimination must be tackled “because the next generation cannot be allowed to suffer the same inequality”.

She called for better representation for communities on decision-making structures, something all CDPs identify as a challenge.

* ICON is a member of the Dublin City Community Co-operative and, along with its CDP funding, the project receives core funding through the Social Inclusion Community Activation Programme (SICAP).



• Panel discussion with: Greg Straton, Sláintecare Healthy Communities programme; Anne Finn, SICAP manager for Mayo North East; Mairéad Carney, Sláintecare Healthy Community officer, Mayo County Council; Belinda Nugent, CDP leader, ICON; Deirdre Kelly, principal officer, DRCD; Rachel Doyle, co-ordinator, Community Work Ireland; Kieran Moylan, principal officer, DRCD; and Colette Bennett, advocacy and research, The Wheel.

CIVIC FORUM: Healthy Communities

Mairéad Carney was initially “run out of Belmullet”, but has since earned their trust

Mairéad Carney works as a local development officer with Mayo County Council, serving communities in the westernmost area covering Achill, Belmullet and Ballycastle. Her official title is Healthy Communities Development Officer and the demographic challenges are stark: 4% of residents lack a home water supply, 27.7% are living with disabilities from a population of 14,500, and 19.5% have only a primary school education or lower.

Her team has made progress by listening to people. When, for example, they organised a health information event sought by locals on Achill Island, 112 people showed up in a tiny hall there and half of the attendees committed to be more proactive about calling to their GP, while 86% said they would prioritise self-care.

However, it took time to establish good relations. Mairéad had been all but run out of Belmullet and she later went out to sea (she can't swim) with women from Corraun to gain their trust. Her team have now set up four programmes in Achill, Belmullet and Ballycastle and she spoke about her work at the annual National Civic Forum.

“We take it down to the most basic level within the communities and create full programmes, which makes us a little bit unusual,” said Mairéad.

Mayo's landscape adds to the challenge: “The Sláintecare Health and Communities Programme works in Achill, Belmullet and Ballycastle, geographically the most westerly area of the country. It has got enormous deprivation levels, across two municipal districts.”

When she began, she was surprised to learn that 4% of the population in these areas have no water supply coming into their own home, and 27.7% live with a disability, out of a population of 14,500.

“Also, 19.5% of the population have primary education or lower,” she said.

The area also includes Gaeltacht communities (3.7% of the national population) and Mairéad is working on her Irish. “Tá siad ag caint as Gaeilge, ach níl a lán Gaeilge agam,” she said.

The challenge was to implement a new Sláintecare programme in this environment.

“I've been asked an awful lot ‘What is a health and wellbeing worker doing in the local authority?’, ‘What do you do?’,” she said.



• Mairéad Carney, local development officer with Mayo County Council, is responsible for the Sláintecare Healthy Community Programme in Mayo. She spoke about her work at the third annual National Civic Forum.



• The Corraun peninsula as seen from Achill Island, Co. Mayo. PHOTOS: A. Meagher.

“I've been asked an awful lot ‘What is a health and wellbeing worker doing in the local authority?’, ‘What do you do?’,”

“We're quite agile, we work on the ground with our communities to promote our message around health and wellbeing.”

Her role within the local authority involved “pulling sections together and having conversations about the people that we work with and for – to see if we can build programmes”.

“I had the audacity when I first started to go out into communities, promoting our programmes, saying, ‘Oh we've got Healthy Food Made Easy, we'll all be really healthy’ and so on. Well, I got run out of Belmullet. As a colleague (afterwards) said, people are exhausted with programmes. So, I turned tail and I came home again to the local authority, and I reassessed with my stakeholders and partners.

“I had to consider the people in those areas. They were dealing with huge unemployment, lack of access

to services, chronic illness, energy poverty, food security, lone parenting, ageing, and substance misuse. And their distance to services was up to an hour and a half to reach Castlebar or Ballina,” she said.

That was the context in which Mairéad and colleagues sought to roll out four programmes focused on: physical activity, health literacy, food sustainability and health information.

“When I first went out to the communities, they didn't even want to talk to us. The trust was destroyed. So (to gain trust) I ended up in the Atlantic Ocean - in a boat with a group of women from Corraun and I can't even swim, to actually have a real life conversation with them about what life is like for people living there.”

She gave an example of how engaging with the community was an education in itself:

“Personally, from my experience in Sláintecare over the last three years, people have been the most important asset that we've had.”

“On one of our physical activity days a fit gentleman aged 75 fell – and that created chaos, because he needed an ambulance and it was an hour and a half away. When we actually asked the man what made him fall, it turned out he was not taking his medications on time, because he didn't understand his medications. He didn't understand his own health. That led us into working with Dublin City Council and Dublin City University around health literacy.”

She summarised other learning: volunteers were exhausted, transport issues are huge, and communities wanted more clinical information.

She reached out to Anne Finn, the SICAP manager at Mayo North East: “They work very closely with us on Mayo Sustainable Food Project. We had our first series of health information events and now we're building on that with Anne and her team in SICAP who have been doing this for a while.

“I accept there are silos in local authorities and the doors are extremely hard to knock down. But it's important we work together and leverage money together, leverage resources and leverage people.

“Personally, from my experience in Sláintecare over the last three years, people have been the most important asset that we've had,” she concluded.

PAY DEAL FOR SECTION 39 WORKERS

An agreement was reached on March 10 at the Workplace Relations Commission for pay increases for up to 40,000 employees of agencies contracted by the State to carry out essential health and social care work.

It will see approx. €140 million per annum in additional investment in these organisations to support delivery of their services and supports.

Presuming the agreement is approved by trade union members, it means that workers in Section 39 agencies will receive pay parity with public sector employees doing the same work.

The agreement includes:

- A 9.25% increase for up to 40,000 workers equivalent to the Public Sector Pay agreement 2024-2026.
- Pay backdated to Oct. 2024 with phased increases in 2025 and 2026.
- An automatic link to all future public sector pay agreements to match all future pay increases.
- Taken with the Oct. 2023 agreement of an 8% increase, it amounts to a 17.25% pay increase over a 3½ year period.

For example, under the terms of the agreement, a social care worker with a salary of €36,500 would see their salary increase to over €38,000 over the course of this year and to over €39,000 by the end of 2026.

The organisations delivering these services range from multi-national operations with hundreds of employees to local community based organisations.

The organisations are funded under Section 39 (Health Act 2004), Section 56 (Child and Family Agency Act 2013), Section 10 (Housing Act 1988) and Section 40 (Domestic, Sexual and Gender-Based Violence Agency Act 2023).

Strike action had been threatened and the agreement would see the establishment of a joint monitoring group with the funding agencies, employers and trade unions represented to ensure practical issues and disputes can be resolved in a timely and effective manner.

An independent body will examine pay and funding across the sector and their observations will be considered in future pay talks.

Welcoming the agreement, James Browne, Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, said, “We recognise the staffing challenges facing service providers across the community sector and this unprecedented move will assist them to address the impact of staff recruitment and retention on the viability of these essential services.”

CIVIC FORUM: Progress

Mary Hurley highlighted recent achievements in support of communities and not-for-profits



• Mary Hurley, secretary general, Department of Rural and Community Development, speaking at the annual National Civic Forum.



• Greg Straton, assistant principal officer at the Department of Health with responsibility for the Sláintecare Healthy Communities programme.

In her opening address at the third National Civic Forum, Mary Hurley, secretary general of the Department of Rural and Community, said the event has become “one of the most important forums in our department diary”.

“It’s an opportunity for us to meet you all, to hear what you have to say, and to listen to what you have to say, and to implement and include it in our work,” she said.

She spoke about cross-departmental work and work with the community and voluntary sector.

She emphasised the importance of working in partnership and of continuing to promote and implement the Values and Principles document (launched in 2022) across central and local government and beyond.

She also highlighted her Department’s work in six areas:

1.

“The signing into Law of the Charities Amendment Act 2024, which will see the addition of the advancement of human rights as a charitable purpose, is a welcome development,” she said, pointing out that the Act also includes provisions for greater financial transparency, and defining charity and trustee duties.

2.

She described the recently published National Social Enterprise Strategy – ‘Trading for Impact 2024 to 2027’ – as a key document. “Social enterprises really are making an impact on communities up and down this country,” she said.

3.

Another key piece of work resulted in the launch of Training Needs Assessment Reports which will benefit the Community and Voluntary Sector, as well as boards in charge for organisations, and Local Community Development Committees.

4.

She said the philanthropy policy published in 2023 is also a key document and a key policy initiative, noting that this was recognised in the budget.

5.

She also highlighted the roll-out of the latest iteration of the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP) and congratulated all working with and

through the programme.

“SICAP is such a fantastic programme and we’ve seen that more than ever in terms of work with our new communities, and in terms of the work you have been doing on the ground to support all people.”

6.

She expressed pride in her fellow civil servants and in community workers.

“I want to say how proud I am of the work that we’ve done together over the past year. My own team and indeed the sector have been fantastic. More joint working, collaboration and doing things together is how we operate and get things done right,” she concluded.



• A group discusses issues of the day at the National Civic Forum. The wine bottles contained water in case anyone is wondering!

CIVIC FORUM: Photos



• A participant at the National Civic Forum.



• A group discusses issues of the day at the National Civic Forum.



• Shana Cohen, CEO, TASC, and Sarah Glavey, Dept. of Public Expenditure, spoke at the forum.



• Deirdre Kelly, principal officer, DRCD, speaking at the annual National Civic Forum.



• A participant at the National Civic Forum.



• Most of the participants attending the third National Civic Forum are pictured above. We had a few escapees before the group shot!



• Kieran Moylan, principal officer, DRCD, and Colette Bennett, director of advocacy and research with The Wheel.



• Chloe Ni Mháille, bainisteoir, Comhar Caomhán Teo (Inis Oírr Comm Dev't Co-op), Inis Oírr, Co. na Gaillimhe, ag caint.

Rural resilience takes on a different meaning in Palestine's West Bank

While Gaza is almost completely under siege, Palestine's West Bank, despite Israeli attacks there, remains accessible to community workers and humanitarian workers seeking to provide support, bear witness and show solidarity. Oliver Moore went with a farming organisation and visited mostly rural communities in the West Bank:

BY OLIVER MOORE

During the summer, a Palestinian farming organisation called UAWC - the Union of Agriculture Work Committees - issued an urgent call for solidarity. The organisation wanted fellow farmers from the global peasant farmer movement La Via Campesina to come and see the "severe and critical conditions" on the ground in the West Bank in Palestine.

Attacks on farmers by settlers, the stealing of land, water and other resources, the intensity of military occupation, and injuries and deaths, were all increasing.

UAWC wanted to show people directly, to empower people to advocate back home for Palestinians. They also hoped to foster ongoing solidarity.

I jumped at the opportunity - and then spent months worrying.

There are many things you learn taking on a trip like this, and more properly understanding real fear is one of them. I never worried so much and for such a prolonged period.

I didn't know others in the group and didn't speak Arabic or Hebrew, and while I know about farming, I'm not an actual farmer. So, I wasn't even especially handy should that be needed!

No matter what else was going on in my life, the clock seemed to gallop inexorably towards landing day, December 10th. Family time became especially precious.

Every pulse of dread (which always came at night-time) was accompanied by the guilt of comparing this to anything a typical Palestinian faced.

These months were a great lesson in understanding my own privilege - not knowing fear - and what to do with it.

ARRIVAL

Once we got there, UAWC were incredible hosts, so welcoming and warm. They really took us under their wing.

Our team of nine internationals lived in each other's pockets - along with Fuad, Agsan, Sanna and Tamam, the local UAWC crew who spent every day with us. We found



• LEFT: Moayyad Bsharat of UAWC chatting to Mansour Abu Amer, a herder in the Jordan Valley.



• ABOVE: Oliver Moore.

camaraderie over shared meals and stories, songs and laughter in people's own homes. And daily tears.

The ten-day itinerary was intense. We visited six cities - Nablus, Hebron, Ramallah, Bethlehem, Jericho and Occupied East Jerusalem; four villages - Qusra near Nablus and Bardala, Al Farsiya, and Jiftlik in the Jordan Valley; two refugee camps, Dhesheh and Aydah, in Bethlehem; and one school in the Masafer Yatta region.

SMALLER THAN COUNTY CORK

Palestine is smaller than people think. The West Bank is smaller than

County Cork (5640 sq km vs 7500 sq km) and one of the first things you feel is trapped. Getting around was a long winded, stressful undertaking. Everywhere there are barriers. There were 800 or so roadblocks when we visited.

Cities like Nablus - the size of Belfast - have over 130 barriers to entry and exit. Some of these are fully militarised checkpoints, while others have huge orange gates closed without information or warning. All travel and trade, all trips to school, to hospital, to work, is impaired by these closures.

For us, this meant delays. For locals, this means the basics of life, whether routine or emergency, cannot be done easily or with certainty.

While settlers have their own well-built roads, Palestinians have winding ways to get around, on badly kept back roads full of traffic and roadblocks. Israel has been retaining tax revenue generated in the West Bank from the Palestinian Authority since October 7, 2023, so little investment is happening in upkeep.

WE HEARD TESTIMONIES

When stop-start moving, we also felt the suffocation of being surrounded by hilltop settlements. They were everywhere. For the UAWC team, the landscape was constantly changing. Two staff who are regularly out in the field visiting farmers and herders, kept pointing out the huge imposing Israeli flags indicating new land claimed by illegal settlers. Flags, outposts, settlements - increasing everywhere and always on the hills.

Outposts and settlements come with increased attacks on locals. Dozens of settlers can attack villages and go on the rampage. Many people had their story of their village being attacked by settlers, or family members being beaten up or arrested for the smallest of things by soldiers.

We heard testimonies about how the army often comes in after a settler attack and fires teargas and rubber bullets at people gathered to check-in on each other, compounding the abuse of the attacked.

About Oliver Moore

Fairness around food and farming has always been core to me. In the early '90s I volunteered to sell what was to become fair trade coffee in the corridors of UCD; now I work in agri-food policy.

I also lecture on the MSc in Agri-Food, Sustainable Development and Cooperatives in UCC's Centre for Co-operative Studies.

Where I live in Cloughjordan, I volunteer with and am a member of a community-owned farm. We use participatory budgeting to work out production costs, to pay our farmers decent wages, and we charge ourselves accordingly. We have a 'take what you need/should' policy for distribution.

Talamh Beo was established in 2017 at 'Feeding Ourselves' - an event we organise in Cloughjordan every April.

I've been a member since then, and Talamh Beo is a member of La Via Campesina. And this membership is how I ended up in Palestine. The purposes of the trip for me and for all the team were solidarity, knowledge building, and advocacy.

(Ed's note: While he doesn't say it, Moore also has a PhD in the sociology of farming and food).

“UAWC is amazing, acting like a cross between LEADER, the Department of Agriculture and a huge farming organisation with thousands of members.”

(Continued from previous page)

Since January 2023 over 1,000 Palestinians in the West Bank have been killed and over 16,000 injured. One million people have been arrested since the occupation began in 1967. The situation in prisons is deteriorating rapidly, including restrictions on visits, overcrowding, and arbitrary detention.

RURAL PALESTINE

We spent much time in area C - rural Palestine, where the Palestinian Authority has no authority (about two-thirds of the West Bank). This means the Palestinian police aren't allowed in, so people must simply lock their doors and if caught outside, take their beating when settlers attack.

Ostensibly, the Israeli army protects locals from extremist, violent settlers. In practice, the two are largely in cahoots, moreso since thousands of weapons were distributed to settlers by the government.

Community after community was pressurised to abandon their land and homes. People faced constant attacks on themselves, their livestock and property. We saw many demolished houses and more about to be demolished.

CROPS DESTROYED BY MILITARY

Israel grants Palestinians about five permits annually to build homes, while demolishing about 2,000 structures annually.

As we went into the Jordan Valley, we encountered low-flying military planes. 20% of the West Bank is now a 'firing zone' - an area closed to Palestinians and kept for military use only. Nearby crops are destroyed by military manoeuvres and the sounds of war echo through the valleys constantly.

Firing zones are getting bigger and bigger. Once this designation happens, farmers face restrictions in accessing roads and their land, forcing them out.

Concurrently they face ever more illegal outposts and settlements also taking more and more land.

RURAL RESILIENCE IN A WARZONE

In the face of all this, how do people keep their resilience? People work out ways to keep supporting each other through sumud, a particularly Palestinian iteration of sometimes static, sometimes creative, steadfastness.

Staying on the land is the core of sumud (sometimes passively, sometimes with resistance). For example, UAWC's seed bank enables sumud - by providing farmers with hardy, free, drought-resistant seeds with a 90% germination rate.

Against huge odds, court cases are won - people have won the right to return at least to the region they were intimidated from (as happened in Khirbet Zanuta near Hebron in early February). In this case, the community demonstrated sumud. All acts of return - including the return to northern Gaza - is sumud.

ROADS, WELLS AND OLIVE TREES HELP COMMUNITIES

UAWC is amazing, acting like a cross between LEADER, the Department of Agriculture and a huge farming organisation with thousands of members. Simply put - UAWC helps farmers stay on the land and helps communities stay together. It has built dozens of roads, drilled wells, planted olive trees, grant-aided machinery, helped establish dozens of coops, runs an incredible seed bank and a rooftop hydroponic garden for refugees, and helps farmers assert their legal rights.

UAWC also brings international volunteers to help protect and monitor the harvest, a proactive action credited with increasing the olive harvest by over 1,000 hectares in 2024, according to the Nablus governor Ghassan Daghlass we met.

There are numerous other human rights-orientated organisations doing similar work.

Occupation and colonisation has a thousand little ways to relentlessly beat people down; resilience and resistance has a million multi-layered manifestations.

More info: <https://uawc-pal.org/about-us/>



• At a school in Masafer Yatta, international visitor Morgane Oddy greets Fuad Abu Saif from the Union of Agriculture Work Committees.

About Talamh Beo

Talamh Beo is a small farmer and agro-ecology* organisation established in 2017. It has over 300 members, and is part of a wider European and International movement of farmers called La Via Campesina.

There are 200 million+ farmers in La Via Campesina, fighting to defend peasant farmer rights.

As Talamh Beo describes it: “We believe that farmers and communities should be at the centre of decision-making for food and agriculture systems and developing agricultural policies.

We stand for a system which puts the power back into the hands of farmers, communities and citizens instead of corporate interests and industrial agriculture and food production.”

Currently Talamh Beo is campaigning for support for the many small-scale horticulturalists who lost polytunnels and other core growing infrastructure in the recent storm.

* Agro-ecology is about new farming methods that increase yields while reducing environmental impacts.

To visit the West Bank

The ISM - International Solidarity Movement - and Faz3a are the two main organisations people travel to Palestine with for the Autumn Olive Harvest.

Both ask for an initial contact by email, using an email address that does not include your full legal name. For ISM the email is ismtraining@riseup.net. Faz3a has a form here: <https://www.defendpalestine.org/en/join>.

Two weeks is the minimum stay, with longer preferred. Both provide initial online training. Volunteers usually self-fund the cost of travel (often doing local fundraisers to help).

According to Faz3a intensive on-the-ground training includes “orientation, legal rights and obligations, principles and tactics of non-violent intervention and de-escalation, effective documentation practices, and adherence to Palestinian leadership and local community needs”.

Volunteers are then stationed in threatened communities and they may also be mobilised for emergencies.

The Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel also provides a protective presence. Here, ‘accompaniers’ spend up to 3 months helping through activities like walking children to school. For more see: www.oikoumene.org.



• The entrance to Aida refugee camp in Bethlehem. The giant key symbolises the right of return for refugees. PHOTOS (c) La Via Campesina.

CLIMATE ACTION AND HOUSING

ARTS PROJECT IN SOUTH KERRY GAELTACHT REFRAMES THE DEBATE AROUND HOUSING

BY ALLEN MEAGHER

Artists who immersed themselves in the South Kerry Gaeltacht to get to know aspiring home-owners, housing activists, community workers and staff in statutory agencies, have proposed novel actions to tackle housing scarcity.

The artists - Síomha Brock, Susan Leen, Emily Fitzell, James Rogers, and Zoë Uí Fhaoláin – lived and worked for three weeks in the Uíbh Ráthaigh (Iveragh) Gaeltacht. Some spoke English, while others were fluent in Irish, and after running short projects with people locally, they proposed the following:

- A South Kerry Gaeltacht housing festival.
- A stronger emphasis on sustainable community-building rather than just on house-building.
- The use of local materials, products and labour in construction.

“Local organisations have been highlighting the shortage of housing in the locality for many years,” said Róisín Greaney, climate justice researcher with the Think-tank for Action on Social Change (TASC).

“This shortage is threatening the long-term viability of the Gaeltacht. The housing crisis is a nationwide phenomenon, but there are localised complexities,” she said.

It is difficult for the community in Iveragh to grow and be resilient, due to a lack of affordable housing to rent or buy, holiday homes and second homes - many of which are vacant for long periods - and challenges securing planning permission.

A community vision emerged from the artist residencies which operated during the winter under the project title of Tochail (meaning ‘excavate’).

Róisín said, “The residencies succeeded in reframing the rural housing debate through using arts-based methodologies and by creating spaces that were imaginative, inspiring, and future-focused.”

As a result, it is now clear that local people want to see a housing model that supports local and community development.

“Core to this vision of the future is the widespread use of the Irish language and ecological sustainability,” said Róisín.

The research findings will directly inform TASC’s



• Participants in the Dromaíd gteic digital hub. Photo courtesy of Michael Herrmann Photography.

People’s Transition project in the Gaeltacht, which explores the development of social and economic interventions to contribute to a more egalitarian climate transition journey for the people of Iveragh. According to Róisín:

“The residencies explored how socially engaged art can create an enabling environment for place-based and community-led approaches to rural housing within the context of a just transition. At this critical moment of social and ecological change, arts-based interventions help us set aside the constraints of the present and envision a diversity of new and previously unimagined possibilities for the future.”

The launch of the Uíbh Ráthaigh People’s Transition report was set to take place in April.

For more information:

- Cumas Ceantar: uibhrathach.ie
- TASC: tasc.ie

Here’s why one artist focused on forestry



• You can follow Susan Leen on Instagram at: [@sue_leen](https://www.instagram.com/sue_leen)

Susan Leen’s artistic endeavours focused on the inland community of An Dromaíd. Her work highlighted the challenges of land use, particularly commercial afforestation.

Sitka Spruce plantations have come to dominate many of the hills and valleys in South Kerry away from the Ring of Kerry tourist route. These plantations have contributed to biodiversity and habitat loss, and they have taken up land that had been farmed for generations. Susan’s drawings depicted the impacts of these plantations, but she also drew birch trees, branches and leaves, as this pioneer species symbolises new beginnings and new growth.

Her engagements with local farmers, members of the Irish Countrywomen’s Association and schoolchildren, among others, converged on the triple objectives of employment, services and culture.

Participants found solutions via meditation, feedback loops, postcards from the future, and clay modelling

Artist Síomha Brock (pictured right) used a mixed-methods approach that included meditation, collages, postcards from the future, clay modelling and feedback loops. This enabled participants in workshops held in Cahersiveen to envisage a viable community housing project.

Participants emphasised community-building, rather than just house-building, and they placed a high value on the Irish concept of Meitheal (neighbourliness/mutual



help).

Workshop participants also wanted a new approach to housing that would incorporate social, recreational and food-production spaces, local energy supplies and the circular economy.

They emphasised the revitalisation of the Irish language and Irish cultural expression, and were optimistic that, with the development of community housing, the language would thrive.



• “Ar ais go dtí an oifig!” says Susan Leen, pointing Instagram followers to where she was based.

Retaining the youth in South Kerry Gaeltacht mirrors challenges facing communities in Wales and Scotland

- *Uíbh Ráthaigh* avails of Creative Places funding in quest for solutions

Breandán Ó Caoimh is a geographer and social researcher who has written at length about activism, housing and community development in the South Kerry Gaeltacht. In a recent paper, he points out that the challenges in Kerry are common in communities not just along Ireland's western seaboard, but also in rural Wales and Scotland.

A play called 'Taigh Tŷ Teach' was staged in An Dromaíid Community Centre on the Iveragh peninsula in February, 2024, and it illustrated the challenges facing communities in the three Celtic countries.

The tri-lingual play saw nine actors speaking Irish, Scots Gaelic and Welsh as they dramatised the challenges with regard to holiday homes, AirBnB lets, a lack of supply, unaffordability, youth out-migration and the associated decline in, and threats to, indigenous culture and identity – especially the Celtic languages.

Breandán reports that the play coincided with the launch of a community-led housing pilot project called *Togra Tithíochta Uíbh Ráthaigh* – which envisages a four-pronged approach to improving the housing situation locally, based on:

- new-build and affordable rental homes;
- renovation of vacant properties for affordable purchase;
- community-led approaches (including a community land trust);
- and embedding housing within a wider community development and family support framework.

This also comes at the same time as people are considering the results of an artist residency project called *Tochail* (meaning to excavate) which sought a fresh approach to the housing issue in South Kerry and beyond.

Tochail came about through the Arts Council's Creative Places (*Cumas Ceantar*) programme, which has so far invested in 19 places that have had fewer opportunities than other areas to take part in the arts. (A recent round for new funding applications closed in March).

The Creative Places approach is underpinned by inclusion and diversity and is grounded in socially engaged arts practices and community development principles.

Local stakeholders partnered nationally with TASC, an



• Inset: Zoë Uí Fhaoláin, James Rogers, Emily Fitzell, Breandán Ó Caoimh, Áine Uí Boláin, Marina Ní Dhubháin, Caitlín Breathnach, Róisín Greaney, Susan Leen, Fiona de Buis, and Síomha Brock pictured in the Dromaíid gteic digital hub where artists - after three weeks of engagement - shared research findings and recommendations. Photo courtesy of Michael Herrmann Photography.

independent think-tank whose mission is to address inequality and sustain democracy by translating analysis into action.

In Iveragh, the project was coordinated by Comhchoiste Ghaeltacht Uíbh Ráthaigh (the community development organisation for the South Kerry Gaeltacht) and it was delivered through a steering group involving local community representatives, agencies, including Tascfhórsa Uíbh Ráthaigh (under the aegis of Údarás na Gaeltachta), Ealaín na Gaeltachta and Kerry County Council (which provided funding of €10,000 to

support the project).

As a result, local people have depicted their hopes and visions in workshops, storytelling and other art forms.

Participants emphasised community-building and the Irish concept of 'Meitheal' (mutual support) in their vision for future housing. They noted that housing, climate resilience, community development, and language revitalisation are interconnected.

Breandán says that, "Arts-based approaches can reframe housing debates, making them more inclusive, imaginative, and solution-

focused."

The *Tochail* project also offers a replicable model for other rural communities facing similar challenges, something which should be of interest to councillors and officials who are interested in housing and/or the arts.

"It is also relevant to those interested in policy-making and the interfaces between the policy domains of local government and the communities they serve," says Breandán.

- BY ALLEN MEAGHER
IN COLLABORATION WITH
BREANDÁN Ó CAIOMH

Community arts can deal with thorny issues of holiday homes, planning, land use, contested spaces, water and mobility

Rural housing is often a contested issue; when planners and policy-makers have engaged with communities on this topic, it has not always been cordial or constructive.

Much of the media narrative about housing focuses on conflicts, objections, laws, regulations, financial issues and hard infrastructure.

By using community-based and socially engaged-arts approaches

to addressing this topic, Creative Places devised innovative, respectful, reflective and cordial spaces in which people could envisage the future of housing in their communities in harmony with our natural environment.

The methodologies used in South Kerry can work in other locations, and processes of engagement can be broadened to include agency personnel and other decision-makers.

Community arts methodologies also have the potential to enable those interested in rural housing to deal with the thorny issues of holiday homes, planning permission, land use, community resilience, contested spaces, water quality and mobility.

They will also need to address the role of local authorities in planning and place-making – as enablers and regulators.

- BREANDÁN Ó CAIOMH

Community development works in addiction recovery in County Wicklow

BY JOHN BALFE*

At first, they didn't know why they were there.

When I arrived at Tiglin's Aftercare Programme in Greystones to deliver a module on Sustainable Community Development, I was met with blank stares and blunt honesty.

Some participants, like Gerry, told me outright: "I don't see how this is useful to me". Others said they planned to return to trades and couldn't see how learning about community development would fit into their lives. For a few, the idea of anything resembling formal education brought a visible wave of unease.

It didn't take long to understand why. Many in the room had lived through an Irish education system that shamed them, told them they would amount to nothing, and in some cases, subjected them to physical and emotional violence. The Christian Brothers era loomed heavily in their pasts, and with it, the trauma of being made to feel small, unheard, and powerless. Here they were, decades later, in recovery from addiction, and being asked to engage in a system that had already failed them.

But this time, education looked different. This time, it was built on principles of empowerment, participation, and social justice—the very foundation of community development. The first step was unlearning the past: moving away from a top-down approach where knowledge is deposited into passive learners, and instead fostering a space where lived experience held value.

I structured the classes around open dialogue, collective problem-solving, and experiential learning. Instead of lecturing, we engaged in discussions that linked learning to emotions, feelings, and real-world issues. We debated topics like democracy, climate change, immigration, and corruption—not as abstract concepts, but as forces shaping their lives.

One moment stands out. I had introduced a case study on how communities in Sub-Saharan Africa use community development approaches to challenge inequality. What started as a lesson on grassroots activism soon spiralled into a passionate discussion about race, immigration, and Ireland's own treatment of migrants. Initially,



• Community development studies can be part of addiction recovery. Photo from Tiglin's Facebook page.

extreme views were voiced - unfiltered, direct, and in some cases, problematic. But rather than shutting down debate, we leaned into it. Through guided discussion and respectful challenge, participants began to reconsider their positions. They listened to each other. They saw the perspectives of others, sometimes for the first time.

That was the shift.

By the end of the module, conversations had evolved from reluctant engagement to deep, respectful debate. "I actually enjoy this," Peter admitted, surprising himself. Another, who had started the course with visible reluctance, later reflected: "I never thought I'd be talking about politics and power, but now I see how it all connects to my own life."

The change was tangible - not just in their understanding of community development, but in how they saw themselves within it. They began to see how they, too, could take back control, become active citizens, and shape their own futures.

What made this work? It wasn't just the content - it was the approach. Learning was rooted in real-world experiences. We simulated social issues, engaged in role-play

exercises where participants had to argue perspectives they disagreed with, and facilitated a deep sense of connection between peers. The key was shared power: recognizing that knowledge isn't just held by the lecturer but is built collectively in the room.

This wasn't the first time I had seen education transform people who had been excluded from traditional learning spaces. Previously, I had delivered in-reach education in Portlaoise Prison, the first of its kind in Ireland where university lecturers taught undergraduate modules behind bars. I saw the same shift there - initial scepticism giving way to engagement, empowerment, and a reclaiming of identity through education.

At the South East Technological University, we are now proposing to work with Common Knowledge, a build school where University of Sanctuary scholars - migrants and refugees - learn not just construction skills, but a philosophy of rebuilding: physically, psychologically, and socially. Community development, at its core, is about giving people a voice and making them feel heard.

The experience at Tiglin was not just transformative for the students - it changed me as an educator.

"In university settings, knowledge often flows in one direction. But in community education, learning is reciprocal."

It forced me to confront my own assumptions, to listen deeply, and to let go of power in order to empower others. In university settings, knowledge often flows in one direction. But in community education, learning is reciprocal.

Higher education institutions need to do more of this. Not just in name, but in real, community-rooted collaboration. Too often, education remains the privilege of the elite, while those who need it most are structurally excluded. But this model - one based on relationship-building, active participation, and respect for lived experience—shows what's possible when we break down those barriers.

It's time for universities to stop seeing outreach as an add-on and start seeing it as essential. More of this is needed. And the transformation isn't just for the students - it's for all of us.

* John Balfe is a lecturer with the Department of Humanities in the South East Technological University (SETU). E: john.balfe@setu.ie

For more on Tiglin: tiglin.ie/

The community development module meant the most to me - Eimear



• Women who attend Tiglin's rehabilitation centre having fun on Brittas Bay beach.

IN AN INTERVIEW WITH ALLEN MEAGHER

Eimear – from Bray, Co. Wicklow, told her story to Changing Ireland about addiction, recovery and community development.

Eimear's father was alcoholic and stopped drinking when she was aged 4.

"But I had his traits, because when I was 11, I picked up my first drink. Everyone used to say I was wild. I'd be drinking all the time, and when I got a bit older, I'd be partying and it spiralled out of control, to the point where I lost everything. I lost my house, I lost my job, I lost everything.

"It was through my sister's persistence that she got me to the door of Tiglin. I went in there straight off the streets and I was very traumatized when I arrived.

She said that as well as drinking and taking street drugs she was also on psychotic medication.

"So you're detoxing on that as well. For the first two to three months, I was shell-shocked. I didn't know where I was. I wasn't even broken, I was shattered, and they put me back together again.

"It's a really tough programme, but one of the highlights was that we do therapeutic programmes, and we do rehabilitation classes and stuff like that.

"I did a foundation in adult learning, which was great, because I hadn't any other qualification bar the

Leaving Cert. To actually learn how to learn again was really good.

"I did communications, and enabling health and wellbeing, and critical thinking, and then community development. It took the focus away from the therapeutic stuff. It was good to focus on something else, and you come out with a certificate at the end of it. It doesn't look bad on your CV.

"He had us walking around Greystones taking photographs on 'poverty walks' and on 'wealth walks'."

"The community development one spoke to me more than any of them. The tutor John Balfe was different from any other tutor that we've had. He was different in the approach to took.

"He basically sat us down on our first lecture and said, 'Right I'm gonna meet you where you're at.' He said, 'We're going to teach this to you however we can get it to you'.

"We're all coming from different backgrounds - some people are coming from prison, some people are coming from the streets. We

have different addictions. And we're all coming from very different upbringings as well.

"There were some people on the first day saying, 'I've no interest', 'Not interested', and 'Not gonna really put anything into this' - and by the end of it they were all loving it. We all passed it and we all got our certificates.

"Instead of death by PowerPoint, it was interactive learning. We were brought out on the streets - John had us walking around Greystones taking photographs on 'poverty walks' and on 'wealth walks'," she said.

During these walks, the group took photos that to them represented poverty, or wealth, and later discussed what they saw as a group, with the aim of identifying ways they could help the community.

"We did everything as a group," she added.

She made friends for life: "I trust them 100 per cent. They know me inside out. They've supported me through difficult times and they're very special people," said Eimear.

Tiglin has a Christian ethos and attendees must take part in religious services. Nonetheless, it has a good reputation, according to people we spoke to, including an independent HSE addiction support worker. The residential courses it runs are for a longer duration than most treatment centres.

€390,000 FOR 10 ISLAND PROJECTS

Dara Calleary, Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht, announced almost €390,000 in CLAR programme funding on March 20.

Ten projects on eight islands off the coast of Cork, Donegal, Galway and Mayo will benefit. The funds are going towards community centre upgrades, waste management and recycling, enhancements to playgrounds and sports facilities, and support with island transport initiatives.

MAY & JULY DEADLINES FOR TOWN AND VILLAGE RENEWAL SCHEME

The 2025 Town and Village Renewal Scheme (TVRS) has been launched by Dara Calleary, Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht.

The funding primarily supports projects in towns and villages with populations of less than 10,000 with a focus on stimulating town centre economic and social regeneration through sustainable employment creation. This year's call for proposals allows one additional application for a larger scale project (up to €300,000) for local authorities with an inhabited offshore island and/or Gaeltacht areas.

The closing date for the submission of applications under the TVRS Building or Land Acquisition Measure is May 2, while the deadline for applications under the Main Scheme and Project Development Measure is July 25.

WHEEL SUMMIT IN CROKE PARK ON MAY 28

The Wheel's annual Civil Society Summit in Croke Park takes place on May 28 and the theme is 'Thriving Through Change'.

Organisers promise, "This year, there will be even more opportunities to network and engage with leaders from civil society and beyond."

Fees apply for those attending. More info: wheel.ie/

**SUMMIT
2025
Thriving
through
Change**

THE FETTERCAIRN YOUTH HORSE PROJECT



• Customers getting ready to take a lesson in Fettercairn's newly refurbished arena funded by the Department of Rural and Community Development under the Community Recognition Fund. Photo by Ben Ryan.

BY KATHY MASTERSON

There is a racehorse in New Zealand called *Fettercairn*, which also happens to be the name of an estate in West Tallaght in Dublin. It seems like an odd coincidence, until you realise that the mare's trainer is Samantha Wynne, a native of Fettercairn whose equestrian skills were fostered as a teenage member of Fettercairn Youth Horse Project (FYHP).

The FYHP has been in operation since 1995, following much campaigning and fundraising by local residents, community workers and elected representatives.

"It's kind of a little family within the community. The staff here are all local, everybody knows everybody, so it's really community-based," said manager Colette Needham.

The idea for the facility came about in response to the introduction of the Control of Horses Act, which made it almost impossible for young people in urban areas to legally keep horses.

However, many of them had grown up in families who had a tradition of keeping horses, and they wanted to work with them. The founders were keen to skill up local young people to give them a route to employment in the equine industry.

Sheilann Monaghan, community development worker with South Dublin County Partnership, recalled that era:

"Our big thing at that time, and still, is that horses were here long, long before the houses. Horses were economic animals and that's where the whole interest came from with

the guys in Fettercairn. One of the founders, John Phelan, worked in Finglas where horses were used there to pull milk lorries. Another guy Noel was in Ballyfermot and he used horses to pull the scrap carts.

"Both John and Noel ended up having sons and daughters who saw photographs and said: 'How come you had horses when you were young?'. They had an interest, so they got wandering horses. And there were most definitely issues at that time around horses being on football pitches and going out in front of cars and stuff," she said.

MAKESHIFT STABLES

Sheilann said they met with the local authority at the time "and the council chairperson said, 'I will give you this piece of land, if you promise

to keep the horses within that', and that was the start of it."

The project began with between 10 to 15 makeshift stables. Then the Irish Horse Welfare Trust became involved and began to teach children how to look after the horses properly. They also held educational day trips to show young people how to get into the equine industry.

Sheilann said the founders were "very clear" that the project should have a strong focus on youth education.

"They wanted young people from Fettercairn to be able to handle a horse as well as anybody else from any other part of the country.

She recalled "huge opposition" to the project: "Horses were seen as for people in Kilkenny or Killiney or whatever, people who had money and who had stables, not for young fellas or girls from disadvantaged

communities."

NOW AND THEN

In the project's early days, young people owned the horses and paid a membership fee to use the centre. As time went on, the project began to provide horse-riding lessons to the general public to generate more income. The project bought, and was donated, horses suitable for lessons.

Colette said, "We now offer mainstream and therapeutic lessons to all the local groups, schools, and the general public. All walks of life use us," she said. The project has up to 25 different groups regularly using the centre and they come mainly from Tallaght, the North Inner City and Blanchardstown.

"Weekly we have five or six local schools, and they're on a rotation. We have a waiting list of schools," said Colette.

BENEFITS

Horse-riding provides many benefits. On the educational side, children receive lessons and learn what it takes to care for a horse in the right way. In terms of therapeutic benefits, the children lead other kids on out on horses and this helps to develop empathy.

The project has a contract with the HSE where an occupational therapist with equestrian experience carries out sessions with young patients.

"For kids (with additional needs) that come in and have the lessons, it helps with their motor skills, their balance. Parents tell you 'It's helped so much with regulating their



• Fettercairn graduate Samantha Wynne racing in New Zealand.

VOLUNTEER AT WORK



• A volunteer at work in Fettercairn Youth Horse Project. Photo by Ben Ryan.

(Continued from previous page)

emotions' and stuff like that," said Colette.

FUNDING

It costs roughly €200,000 annually to run the FYHP, although costs fluctuate depending on the price of feed and veterinary bills.

The project receives ongoing funding through the Department of Rural and Community Development's Community Services Programme and recently it was also a beneficiary of the Department's Community Recognition Fund which enabled the project to completely refurbish Fettercairn's arena. It also hopes to soon open a sensory garden.

The project generates regular additional income through running programmes and providing lessons and pony camps.

However, costs are rising and animals need to be fed and looked after 24/7, so the project regularly applies for grants and seeks out corporate sponsorship.

"We have to generate income continuously all the time, no matter what the outside circumstances are," said Colette.

EMPLOYMENT

All of the staff at the FYHP are local, with all the instructors having started out as volunteers, helping to feed horses and muck out stables as young people.

"It's a full cycle, we now employ the people we trained," said Colette.

Sheilann added: "The founders were completely right. If you get skilled with a horse, you can use that

in any place, at any time. For every aspect of the life of a horse, there is a skilled job."

ROLE MODELS

Several former members of the project have gone on to train at RACE, the Racing Academy and Centre of Education in the Curragh, Co Kildare, where the competition for places is fierce and standards are high.

"One year RACE had three people from Fettercairn who applied and got spaces, they thought some sort of a deal had been done, but that wasn't the case! One of those was Samantha Wynne," said Sheilann, speaking of Fettercairn's greatest success story in the industry.

Today, Samantha is one of the top female jockeys in New Zealand and she runs her own yard.

"She has her own racehorse who competes, who she actually named 'Fettercairn', said Sheilann.

"Orla Casey is a jockey and rides out over there too. She has opened up a yard as well, where she takes in racehorses that are retired and can't compete anymore, and she retrains them. We also had another girl Lynsey Spellman that went on to become a groom in the Army Equitation School," she said.

Colette believes that having more horse projects like FYHP around the country "would make a huge difference" to many young people and their communities.

DEVELOPMENT AID

IRISH HUMANITARIAN WORK ABROAD HIT BY DOMINO EFFECT OF USAID CUTS

The human impact of the Trump administration's moves to shut down USAID has already resulted in two-thirds of NGOs either halting or reducing operations and there is a growing domino effect as other donors cut aid, according to the International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA).

The cuts have impacted on the work of Irish charities such as Concern which has moved to lay off a portion of its staff at home and abroad as it cut back on programmes. Other major charities are in the same boat and many local and refugee-led organisations face collapse, says ICVA.

Dóchas, a network for Irish-based international development and humanitarian organisations, expressed dismay at USAID's demise followed by cuts to development budgets by some European countries, including Britain.

The British government had been one of the first to announce cuts and Dóchas CEO Jane-Ann McKenna responded by calling on the Irish government "to use its voice to push the EU and its Member States to stand by crises-affected communities".

She said the British Government's cuts to its aid budget from 0.5% to 0.3% was "a devastating blow" especially as humanitarian needs are at unprecedented levels and on top of USAID cuts.

SURRENDERING SOFT POWER

She urged Ireland to push the EU to boost humanitarian funding to ensure people have continuous access to basic services.

In the longer term, she wanted the EU to convene a global strategic dialogue to shape "a principled, sustainable and flexible new humanitarian system that works with and for the most vulnerable communities".

Since Dóchas issued that statement the situation has deteriorated further.

In March, MEPs Barry Andrews, Aodhán Ó Riordáin and Lynn Boylan attended a roundtable organised by Dóchas so its members could ask what the EU's response should ideally be.

Barry Andrews, speaking earlier in Brussels, had condemned the European Commission's failure to respond speedily or effectively.

"The US, Netherlands, Sweden, Belgium... the list goes on of countries who are cutting their development aid budgets. The EU is surrendering soft power and influence at an industrial scale. Several EU Member States, along with the US, have cut development aid budgets and replaced them with nothing," he said.

- ALLEN MEAGHER



• TRUMP THINK TANK! A clever entry that caught our eye from this year's Ballymote St. Patrick's Day Parade. Photo courtesy of Sligo PPN.

Groups are boycotting Twitter (aka X)



Community-based organisations and non-governmental organisations have been quitting Twitter, aka X since Elon Musk of nazi-salute fame bought the company.

Wexford Local Development (WLD), the PAUL Partnership, Volunteer Ireland, Uplift and Dublin City PPN and are among those to have boycotted the platform.

WLD said: “We think that the benefits of being on X are now outweighed by the negatives and that resources could be better used promoting our work elsewhere. This is something we have been considering for a while given that we are a values-led organisation and the often disturbing content promoted or found on the platform is at odds with our values of respect, integrity, leadership, equality and inclusion,” it said.

WLD deleted its Twitter account in January, weeks after the PAUL Partnership also quit the platform.

Dublin City PPN left in March, while retaining a presence on Facebook and opening a new account with LinkedIn.

Amy Woods of Volunteer Ireland, which also quit Twitter, said: “I know a lot of organisations are struggling with this decision but it’s definitely one we are happy to have made.”

John Harvey, communications manager with Vision Ireland, has helpful advice for groups who want to leave Twitter, who wonder how best to do it and where to go next. His advice can be found at: charitiesinstitute.ie/

Meanwhile, community groups continue to have a strong presence on Facebook, despite the platform losing followers in recent years after being condemned for interfering in US elections, influencing Brexit, amplifying hate, and provoking genocide in Myanmar against the Rohingya.

TikTok, despite being under Chinese government influence, appears to be increasing in popularity.

PAULINE MCLYNN WAS SPECIAL GUEST AT AONTAS 2025 STAR AWARDS

The special guest speaker at this year’s Aontas STAR Awards, held on March 7, to recognise the best in adult and community education across Ireland, was writer and actress Pauline McLynn.

Best known as Mrs Doyle from *Father Ted*, Pauline spoke about her own experience with learning.

“Any of the skills I’ve acquired have just been learned the hard way,” she said.

Talking about the hope that adult learning offers, she said, “Just making the choice that you want to learn something – that is your super power.”

The awards are divided into five categories: Health and Wellbeing; Learner Voice; Social Inclusion; Global Citizenship Education; and Third-level Access and Engagement.

The Learner Voice award was won by Rehab’s *Voter Education Programme* which engages people in the National Learning Network and in RehabCare services to understand and use their vote.

The winner of the **Health and Wellbeing (Large Organisation Category) award** was *The Blocks* from Rialto Community Drug Team and the City of Dublin Education and Training Board (ETB). This is an arts initiative for people whose lives have been impacted by addiction in the Rialto and Dolphin’s Barn areas of Dublin city.

The Health and Wellbeing (Small/Medium Organisation) award was won by the Recovery Through Art and Education (RADE) project in Dublin 8 which supports



• Dee Lynch from award-sponsor Mental Health Ireland with two members of RADE and actress and guest speaker Pauline McLynn. RADE stands for Recovery through Art, Drama and Education and the project won a STAR Award in the Health and Wellbeing Category (Small/Medium Organisations).

people who have been affected by problematic drug and/or alcohol use. It runs relapse prevention workshops and art projects to encourage creativity.

The Social Inclusion (Large Organisation) award went to the *Great to Train* initiative, funded by Cork ETB and led by Cork Simon Community. It supports people accessing homeless services in Cork by building their personal and work-related skills through training, therapy and learning.

The Social Inclusion (Small/Medium Organisation) award was won by The Welcome English Language Centre in Cork city. It provides social integration supports and English language classes to people new to Ireland.

Global Citizenship Education award went to the *Active Citizenship Voter Education Programme* at the Dublin



• Members of projects supported by the Laois and Offaly Education and Training Board which won two Special Recognition awards.

Adult Learning Centre informs people living in Dublin’s north inner city about voting and democracy through informative and interactive sessions.

The Technological University of the Shannon (TUS) won the **Third Level Access and Engagement award** for its Certificate in Transition to Higher Education, a foundation course

for people from under-represented groups to access higher education.

Two **Special Recognition Awards** went to Laois and Offaly ETB, the first for its *Beyond the Barriers* project. This project captures and shares the voices of adult learners in the Laois and Offaly ETB literacy service. Their second award was for their *Transformative Journeys for Traveller Women* project.

Crossword Answers

See crossword on page 17.

DOWN

1. FRCNF. 2. Veting. 4. Change. 5. Cooperative. 6. Bernadette. 8. False. 9. Bureaucracy. 11. Shannon. 13. Conor. 17. Mary.

ACROSS

3. CCIE. 7. The Wheel. 10. Moyross. 12. Activation. 14. Ballina. 15. Jerry. 16. Empowered. 18. Pobal.