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CHANGING IRELAND

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LETTER LINGO FROM LEITRIM

• Boardgame is runaway success.



VOICES FROM THE SADDLE

• Wesley Joyce, Terry Casey and Aoife Leonard.



HUMANS OF DUBLIN CITY COUNCIL

• Yogi tells her story.

How do you change a city?

With hundreds of volunteer community gardeners!



CORK CITY NOW HAS 25 COMMUNITY GARDENS

• Did you know that local authorities are now obliged to support community gardening?

ALSO INSIDE:

- YES TO PAY DEAL • WATER RIGHTS
- WELLBEING MAP OF BALBRIGGAN • VOLUNTEER OF THE YEAR • SPREAD OF POPULISM • CITIZENS' PARLIAMENT • WORKABILITY •



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• Maggie Woods of Galway City Partnership and Mayor of Galway, Peter Keane at the WorkAbility toolkit launch. See page 27.



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CONGRATS! WATERFORD, GALWAY AND LIMERICK JOIN CORK, DERRY AND BELFAST AS 'HEALTHY CITIES'

In a time of genocide, which we should actively oppose at all opportunities, good news has its place and this magazine has lots of good news. It is an antidote to the mayhem.

Limerick might be out of the hurling this year, but they made it onto the World Health Organisation (WHO) list of healthy cities, joining Waterford and Galway alongside long-standing success stories Cork, Derry and Belfast. Our front cover photo comes from Leaside and we looked at just one measure of success - community gardens, of which Cork city now has 25. There is so much to say about it that Cork's Healthy Cities people produced a book now available for free online - or you might prefer Togher's cookbook for teenagers. You can nearly taste crunchy veg reading these pages.

Local authorities are now obliged to support community gardening. Worth keeping in mind the next time you see a derelict piece of land.

I would like to welcome Owen Ryan and Helen Courtney who have joined us as freelancers to help us increase our

journalistic and online output. Don't be shy if you have a story worth telling!

One of the articles Owen covers in this edition is the Cwell course (p29) which teaches community wellness, empowerment, leadership and life skills. Like other good projects featured in this edition, over the years it is making a mark.

Owen also writes (p26-27) about the Uisce Cliste project highlighting the scarcity of clean public drinking water and practical ways to change this. The Uisce Cliste report was welcomed by the government, so we look forward to seeing improvements in every community. Access to water is a human right. (Is it just me or do many things remind you of the genocide happening daily?)

Speaking of rights and solidarity, congratulations to both Comhlámh and to Community Law and Mediation (CLM) on hitting 50! It is fantastic that so many organisations are now here that long - and points to the strength of our civil society.

By the way, anyone can use CLM's services. While they are based in only two

physical locations, you can make a free appointment by Zoom.

The 20th Social Inclusion Forum was more interesting than I expected. Clearly, Travellers, children, older people and people with disabilities should be helped out of poverty. More babies are born into homelessness today than 20 years ago. More older people are becoming homeless. Women are doubly at risk of poverty. While there has been progress on some measures, looking to the future, it is not our parents or grandparents we need to worry about. It is ourselves too.

Apols no laughs in this edition: Maybe you have an idea to share with readers to give them a cheer?! In the meantime, I'll give Horace McDermott a call to see can we convince him to return, if he's still talking to me after being dumped for the past two editions. Horace, come back, Changing Ireland needs you!

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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SALARIES & RETENTION

Fórsa: 86% vote 'Yes' to approve pay deal

Fórsa members in the community and voluntary sector will receive a pay rise of 9.25%, over two years, backdated to October of last year, following a ballot of members.

Over 86% of eligible members voted in favour of the agreement, which followed months of negotiations.

Under its terms there is a 2.25% pay rise backdated to October 2024, a 1% increase from April 1, and another 2% increase from November 1.

In 2026 there will be another 2% increase from April 1 and a final 2% from October 1.

Fórsa claimed that "the agreement was secured by unions after more than ten years of campaigning for better pay and conditions for workers in the community and voluntary sector."

Fórsa's head of Health and Welfare, Ashley Connolly, said unions



• Ashley Connolly, Fórsa's head of health and welfare.

want the funding bodies to ensure a speedy transfer of funds so that workers receive their pay increases in a timely manner: "These pay terms are more than a decade in the making.

"While the terms acknowledge that pay for some in the sector has fallen behind public sector levels and allows for future increases in public pay agreements to be applied to the community and voluntary sector, we need to see the funding bodies move quickly to ensure

our members receive these pay improvements as they fall due.

"We witnessed delays in funding during the implementation phase of the last pay agreement. This can't happen again. The sector continues to deal with challenges of staff retention, but it will only work if the terms are delivered on time," she said.

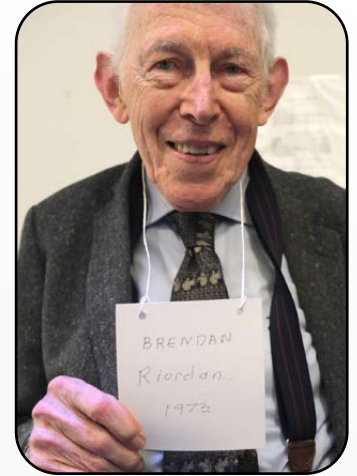
Fórsa had recommended members vote 'Yes' in the ballot.

Also, a 2023 WRC agreement provides for an independent data gathering exercise, which is to be conducted over the next eight months - before the parties return to the WRC once again to discuss the findings.

"The data gathering process will need to be completed because we are on a path here to securing pay parity with public service colleagues. There is a need to understand the pay levels across the sector and how they were determined and funded," said Ms Connolly

"It has taken a long time to secure these pay recovery measures. We secured an agreement that helps pave the way to getting a fair and better outcome for members. But we recognise the necessity to keep applying pressure, otherwise we will be left waiting again to achieve pay justice. That can't be allowed to happen," she added.

Comhlámh celebrates 50th



• Brendan Riordan, one of Comhlámh founders, first got involved in 1973 and continues to inspire members today. He is pictured here at a celebratory party held in April.

Comhlámh has for 50 years been a membership-based voluntary group of development workers who returned from overseas and anyone who wishes to show solidarity with others globally.

The organisation has campaigned over apartheid, debt, trade, pharmaceutical multinationals, female genital mutilation, unfair EU and other trade agreements. It has stood by the rights of people in the international protection system and has active campaign groups today covering – Access to Medicines, Trade Justice, Justice for Palestine and Ireland Says Welcome.

Comhlámh has helped to shape development education (aka Global Citizenship Education) with courses that have engaged many thousands of people. It encourages people to connect through international development and volunteering.

• To find out more or to become a member visit: <https://comhlamh.org/>

Government moving to extend Bereaved Partners Pension to unmarried partners

Progress on introducing payment of the Bereaved Partners Pension to unmarried partners is very welcome according to Treoir, but it wants further consultation before new legislation is finalised. Treoir works with unmarried parents and their children.

The Cabinet has approved a bill to be published which would extend the Bereaved Partners Pension to unmarried people, thereby removing a current inequity that exists in the law. While this social support is limited to married people, it excludes an estimated 150,000 cohabiting couples around the country.

The bill follows a landmark Supreme Court ruling in favour of John O'Meara and his children, which recognised the rights of cohabiting partners to access the Widow's / Widower's Pension. The ruling in January 2024 mandated the Government to address the situation and the exclusion of unmarried partners.

Treoir CEO Damien Peelo said: "We welcome this Cabinet approval that the Bill now be presented to the



• Damien Peelo, CEO of Treoir.

Dáil, but we have not been contacted in advance and have not seen the details of what is proposed.

"Either there should be consultation with a representation of cohabiting couples affected, or a short period for scrutiny and consultation," he said.

It is reported that the introduction of the payment would apply to cohabiting partners with and without children, would apply from January 2024 with approximately 500 couples eligible – and Treoir welcomes this.

"However, in reality Treoir knows from working with families that there are many particular scenarios and circumstances which different

families find themselves in and we need consideration and clarity that the Bill would apply fairly across all eligible families."

John O'Meara and his late partner Michelle Batey had three children and were together for over 20 years. Despite this, when Michelle tragically passed away in 2020, Mr O'Meara was denied access to a Widow/ Widower's / Surviving Civil Partner pension due to the couple's marital status. He contacted Treoir and was supported to take a case with legal representation from Free Legal Advice Centres (FLAC).

At the time of the Supreme Court decision Mr O'Meara said it was hugely important that the validity of his family unit had been recognised.

"This was important for myself and my children. This ruling recognises my family as a family and shows we're not considered 'less than' but we're an equal family," he said.



Letter Lingo from Leitrim hits bullseye

- *Waiting list for new boardgame to improve English while having fun*

BY OWEN RYAN

Leitrim may find new fame as the origin of a game generating national and international interest. The boardgame Letter Lingo makes time go faster while people are learning or improving their English, for example in Fáilte Isteach groups. They are also having more fun because of the game, and as word has spread demand has soared.

Looking a little like 'Snakes and Ladders' it was launched in April by Leitrim Development Company (LDC) and already people are signing up to join waiting lists for the game. It was created after staff funded through the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP) recognised that language is the biggest barrier to integration.

Deborah Shirlaw is an integration officer with LDC and she was amazed with the reaction to the game she created. Even RTÉ came down to film the launch.

"We have no more copies left. We have all these people on waiting lists. People have contacted us internationally. When I created this I didn't expect there would be so much interest," she said.

Thankfully, there has been official recognition of the value of a creation intended to help people of all ages and abilities to improve their English and foster social connections across communities.

"We just got more funding under SICAP to get more games created," said Deborah.

GAME WORKS FOR ALL

Starting out, she wanted to create a game that could be enjoyed by people with varying levels of ability in English, from beginners to fluent.

"I do a lot of Fáilte Isteach groups and I noticed that it was very hard to keep conversations going, especially with people having different levels of English. I was trying to come up with a concept that would work for all, no matter if you were a beginner or quite good at English, something that could be played by everybody.

"There are different ways of adapting the game. I wanted to make sure that it could be played by Irish families, by people who might have dyslexia and things like that. It's a fun, interactive way of learning English, that's the whole point of the game. I find that the time in the groups goes really fast because everyone has a laugh."

Explaining how it works, she said, "You roll an alphabet dice and pick up a card. You could land on something that tells you to name a country that starts with 'A'. It could be to name something in the household that starts with 'B', it could be a piece of clothing, there are all different things."

WILD CARDS AND LUCK

Deborah was helped in designing the game by her colleague Caillin Reynolds and they left a certain amount of blank cards, so people can create their own questions as well. Also, for anyone with poor English, there are wild cards that can stand for any letter "to get people used to the game".

"Obviously it'd be very hard if you had to come up with a particular letter when you don't even know the letters fully yet.

"I wanted to make sure that it could be played by Irish families, by people who might have dyslexia and things like that. It's a fun, interactive way of learning English."



• "The time in the groups goes really fast because everyone has a laugh," says Deborah Shirlaw. Above: Derick Osazuwa Lyamu, Bernie Linnane and Frank Heslin playing Letter Lingo.

Explaining how you start, Deborah Shirlaw said, "You roll an alphabet dice and pick up a card. You could land on something that tells you to name a country that starts with 'A'. It could be to name something in the household that starts with 'B', it could be a piece of clothing, there are all different things."



• Caillin Reynolds, Chris Gonley (CEO Leitrim Development company) Bernie Donoghue (SICAP manager) and game creator Deborah Shirlaw.



"Some people who are good at English think it's going to be easy, but it depends on the letter you land on."

- Deborah Shirlaw

(Continued on next page)

NEWS: Community gardens

Local authorities are now obliged to support community gardens



(Continued from previous page)

"Some people who are good at English think it's going to be easy, but it depends on the letter you land on, with the question you have to answer. It's a luck of the draw thing. I've found that simple words, which we might take for granted - a lot of people who have recently arrived don't know the meaning of the word, so it's a good chance to explain what the word means. They're not just learning how to read and speak English, they're also learning exactly what words mean."

Deborah says it is not the kind of thing you play once or twice and then put up on the shelf.

"It's the type of game you can play every week. It's not the case that once you finish, that's it. Every time you play is different, you get different letters, different cards. I'm thinking about maybe bringing out a second series of cards, new cards."

"I piloted it with a few groups before we released it, just to make any changes needed or things like that. Everyone was saying how much they loved it, they all wanted copies to take home. We have just been blown away by how popular it has been and how strong the demand has been," she said. She regularly visits a coffee club in Manorhamilton where they play Letter Lingo weekly.

MORE GAMES COMING SOON

While the game is popular, it is not about turning a profit.

"Right now the games are free, under SICAP* rules we can't make money. We are talking to Pobal to find a way that to make back what the game cost us, so we could make more and more of them. It's not that we'd make money, it would just go back into making more games."

If you would like to request a game, email Deborah at deborah@ldco.ie and she will send a link adding you to the waiting list.

"There will be more games made available soon," she promised.

* SICAP stands for Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme.

One page amidst a 906 page planning document augurs well for Ireland's community gardeners and those aspiring to have one in their area, because it for the first time obliges local authorities to support such initiatives.

Since last year, Ireland has a renewed Planning and Development Act which officially defines community gardening for the first time. Now all councils must include the following in their development plan, according to the Act:

"Prepare a strategy for the creation, improvement and preservation of sustainable places and communities" which includes "the reservation of land for use and cultivation as allotments and prescribed community gardens and the regulation, promotion, facilitation or control of the provision of land for that use".

Community Gardens Ireland, a fully voluntary network, played a starring role in ensuring community gardening was covered by the Act. (Allotments were already covered by legislation since 1926).

As Molly Garvey of Community Gardens Ireland, writing on



LinkedIn, said: "Now it's in law, and it's up to community groups to make it known to their councils that this is something they are looking for."

"This is for anyone who wants to give food growing a go with other people. Local councils are a resource to support this, from land access, to facilities (water, leaf mulch), to funding. However, not all councils are the same at the moment, and not all councils have supporting food growing in their sights.

"That's why we at Community Gardens Ireland thought that it would be good to give them a wee push. All councils are required to create development plans on a rolling basis. These development plans are guided by the Planning and Development Act. We thought community gardening support should be a requirement, so we got it added into law," said Molly.

"We need to provide for community-managed spaces

alongside our new housing sites so that our houses can become homes and our homes can become neighbourhoods. Community Gardens and allotments are one of the many ways of doing this," she added.

According to a 2020 Local Government Management agency report, eight local authorities in Ireland did not provide any allotments or community gardens.

This year, on April 26, President Michael D. Higgins called directly for more community gardening:

"While it is heartening to see interest in community growing projects increase in recent years, it is a matter of some concern that Ireland currently offers one of the lowest levels of provision for allotments and community gardens in Europe.

"Community gardens, allotments, neighbourhood plots, and shared growing spaces are not only places of cultivation, they also contribute in real and measurable ways to the United Nation Sustainable Development Goals, advancing sustainability, social cohesion, health, and food security," he wrote.

- ALLEN MEAGHER

Official definition of community gardening

Ireland agreed last year on an official definition of community gardening.

The Planning and Development Act 2024 now defines a "community garden" as meaning "an area of land that— (a) is let or available for letting from a local authority to members of the local community for collective gardening purposes, and (b) is used or intended for use— (i) wholly or mainly for either or both of the following: (I) the production of vegetables or fruit mainly for

consumption by members of the local community; (II) the propagation of plants for environmental or decorative purposes in the local community, and (ii) otherwise than for profit."

Source: page 127 of the new planning Act. Allotments are also defined on the same page.

You can access the full document here: <https://bit.ly/PlanningDevtAct2024>

HEALTHY CITIES: Community gardens

Togher Community Garden gave its founder a healthy place to go – now 90 people are involved

BY OWEN RYAN

Volunteering in her local community garden has helped Mandie Rekaby get through some very rough times over the last couple of years.

Community gardens have flourished in Cork City over the last few years, and Mandie is the lead volunteer at Togher Community Garden, very near where she lives and grew up.

She first became involved as she needed an outlet for herself while busy as a carer to her parents:

"Just after Covid I had given up my job as a chef to look after my parents. I was kind of hanging around the house for most of the day, after my parents had their breakfast I'd be waiting for the lunch and then the dinner.

One of Mandie's friends worked as a social prescriber and she put her in touch with Maria Young, Green Spaces for Health co-ordinator.

"I'm big into gardening and Maria said I'd fall right in, that I could tip away during the days."

And so she did.

"It was me time, when I was looking after sick people all day, it was something I could get away and do for myself."

She was also pleased to get involved with in a project that could help restore the social fabric of her area, right after the pandemic.

"Covid took chunks out of people. The community garden gave people a chance to meet each other, which had been gone for years. I was all about getting the community back up and running again."

Since 2022, the Togher Community Garden has given her and many other people a huge, ongoing boost.

"It's a pity you can't bottle it and sell it, it's unreal. It's so good for people.



• *The social side, such as people gathering around a dinner table after volunteering, is at the heart of community gardening, says Mandie Rekaby.*

We have this guy from Chile, he's in his thirties. When he arrived last summer he had a really bad stammer, he was so anxious. He was moving out of his rented house, had tools and he wanted to know if we wanted them. Now, a year later he's a different man altogether. He's confident, he looks forward to coming down every Saturday and doing work. We'd always have work for him to do.

"A lot of people have mental health issues, and they want to get back into the world. We have teenagers coming with special needs. I kind of take them under my wing. I'd say we have nearly 90 people coming, from every walk of life," she said.

The Community Garden is also helping to integrate people in an area that has had its challenges.

"Last Saturday, we had 11 nationalities around one table (each day concludes with a light lunch).

It's absolutely amazing what it has done for the community. A lot of new houses have been built in our area, there are people from different nationalities who would never have mixed or known their neighbours."

She feels she could have fallen into a depression if she didn't have the Community Garden, having suffered a number of tragedies.

"My mother, my brother and my sister all died in the space of four months. I threw myself into the Garden, helping everyone else helped me in turn. My Dad passed away a few weeks ago too. If I didn't have it, I probably wouldn't have gotten out of the bed. It was perfect for me, I could put my energy into helping everyone. I love it, I'd be there seven days a week because it's right on my doorstep."

Maria Young says community gardens are really flourishing on Leeside now. "There's hardly a parish

in the city without one now. It has been terrific, very positive for all the communities."

Maria feels knowledge learned in the gardens is spreading out around the city. "Many of the houses built in Cork in the '50s and '60s would have had fairly nice sized gardens for people to grow food, that was the expectation and people are starting to do that. It is really rippling out. A number of primary schools came to us and they now have their own gardens," she said.

Follow Togher Community Garden on Facebook: [@Toghercommunitygarden](https://www.facebook.com/Toghercommunitygarden)

Cookbook for young chefs is online (free)



• *Mandie Rekaby speaking at the book launch - photo by JJ O'Donoghue (see more on his substack 'Tripe and Drisheen').*

As well as being a chef and community garden volunteer Mandie Rekaby (pictured left) has written a cookery book called 'From the Garden: A Fun Cookery Book for Young Chefs'.

It includes simple recipes using local ingredients as well as a map showing the city's community gardens.

The publication was supported by Cork Green Spaces, Cork Healthy Cities, Cork Food Policy Council, Munster Technological University Library, and Cork Equal and Sustainable Communities Alliance (CESCA).

Over 600 print copies were distributed to schools and community groups. You can download it here, for free: <https://sword.cit.ie/monographs/2/>

Global context to Cork's community gardens

The Healthy Cities concept was initiated in 1986 by the World Health Organisation (WHO) to improve and promote health through policy work, collaboration and community participation.

In Ireland, the cities of Belfast, Derry, Galway, Cork - and very recently Limerick - have WHO designation as Healthy Cities. Cork joined in 2012. Its designation as a WHO Healthy City came from a partnership between the HSE's Health Promotion Department, Cork City Council, the Northside Initiative for Community Health Education (NICHE) and UCC.

A key goal of the WHO Healthy Cities initiative world-wide has been the importance of local action in all aspects of developing health and wellbeing.

Here we look at one element of the Cork Healthy Cities programme of works – the establishment of 25 community gardens, led by an energetic and passionate worker Marie Young. She is fortunate to work in a unique role (read her interview).

Community gardens are transforming the way Cork city people look at their city, their kitchens and what they eat. The gardens serve as social spaces, while communities across the city are now familiar with growing produce such as Passion Brune Winter Lettuce, Basil, Verdil Winter Spinach, Kale, Caffrey's Oats, Canasta Butterhead Lettuce and much more.

Cork Healthy Cities published a book last year about its work to date and has an excellent website: <https://corkhealthycities.com>

“People are very committed,” says Green Spaces co-ordinator Maria Young

BY OWEN RYAN

Maria Young is the co-ordinator of a project that has helped to set up 25 (and counting) community gardens around the city. Recently, she won a Lord Mayor's Civic Award for sustainability for her work with Green Spaces for Health under the Cork Healthy Cities banner.

Maria first became involved in environmental work as a volunteer.

"I came from the arts, I was an oboe player and I worked in theatre for most of my life. I love nature and I was getting more and more concerned about what was happening to biodiversity as a consequence of climate change. There was nobody talking about it.

"I went from being somebody who was a bit downhearted and worried and not knowing how I could do anything about it, to being somebody quite empowered. I began to volunteer with SHEP, the Social, Health and Education Project in Cork. Then I was tasked with organising a lecture series and I got training in the Schumacher College in Devon and I did a course in the Netherlands on reconnecting with nature," she said.

Her own climate anxiety is greatly lessened by the knowledge she is doing what she can.

"It's not that I don't worry about it any longer, but I am doing something about it. There's an awful lot of work



• Maria Young off exploring with pupils from Blarney Street CBS – in one morning they found a fallen bird's nest, many plants, snails, a land living crustacean; a pill bug and the boys were “brilliant at observing nature” said Maria.

“I went from being somebody who was a bit downhearted and worried and not knowing how I could do anything about it, to being somebody quite empowered.”

to do and there's no shortage of volunteers. People are very committed, there is a lot of engagement, and there is nothing more beautiful or satisfying than planting a tree."

She talks excitedly about a frog being spotted at a new pond in a local community garden, about ground nesting birds and cleaning rivers in the city, and it is evident she is passionate about what is being achieved.

"Last night I was out until 9pm watering. I don't really have boundaries, I was never in a 9 to 5 job. In theatre you work morning, noon and night and your focus is to get the show on stage. The fact is I love this," she said.

The Green Spaces for Health project is funded by Healthy Ireland, Cork Healthy Cities, the Social and Health Education Project, and Cork City Council.



€20 book on Cork's years as a healthy city now free online

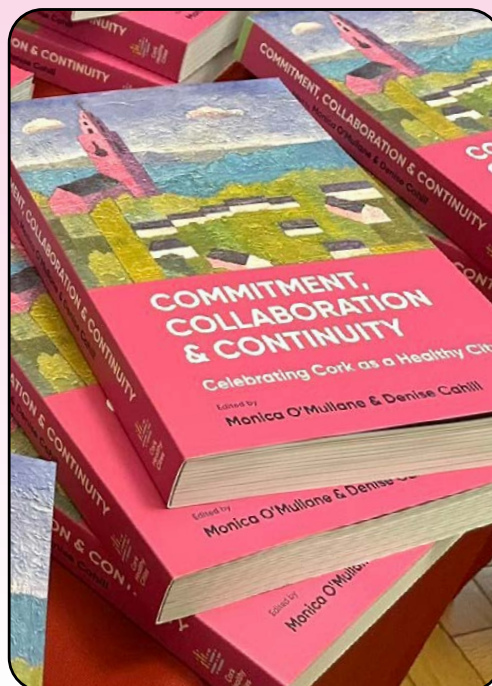
Last year a 180-page book titled - 'Commitment, Collaboration & Continuity: Celebrating Cork as a Healthy City' was launched to mark the first decade of the city's involvement in the World Health Organisation's Healthy Cities initiative.

The book showcases the projects partnered with or led by Cork Healthy Cities so that other cities and urban spaces across Ireland can learn from Cork's experience and forge their own path. It records the highs and the lows and the learning along the way.



The book, heralded as the first of its kind published in Ireland or across Europe "highlights this intersectoral approach and showcases the key projects in Cork that have changed the dial to develop Cork as one of Ireland's most liveable cities".

An example of one such project is Green



Spaces for Health, which started in 2018 coordinated by Maria Young, and has initiated and supports 25 (and counting) projects, especially community gardens. The project has resulted in a some life-changing health impacts for communities.

In terms of encouraging intersectoral policy action, the book welcomed the launch of Sláintecare's Healthy Communities programme, as a "concerted focus on addressing health inequalities" in communities in Ireland.

It is a book with a healthy (pardon the pun) mix of text, photos and graphs which makes it easy to move from reading one section to another.

The book was edited by Denise Cahill and Monica O'Mullane and went on sale last year for €20.

You can find out more about the book here: <https://corkhealthycities.com> and you are now welcome to download it for free from: <https://bit.ly/CorkHealthyCity>

- ALLEN MEAGHER

"I had no idea that we (my family) lived in poverty until my circle expanded"

BY ALLEN MEAGHER

Carol Baumann did not realise she and her neighbours were living in poverty until she went to secondary school and saw how others lived. That experience and her mother's involvement in the community and her strong principled stance on fair play and social justice helped to guide Carol into work in the world of development.

"It was kind of a circuitous route. I didn't get up one morning and decide I want to do a degree in community development," she said.

Today, she is driven by the experience of having seen people unfairly treated because of their social status or ethnic background. Respect, dignity, solidarity and support are important to her – and all whom she works with.

She believes staff in Local Development Companies (LDCs) have much more to offer than is realised.

"Where we have added value is by being able to tap into frontline staff of two and a half to three thousand. That's the number of people we have on the ground nationwide," she said.

Having served for over three years as CEO of the Local Development Companies Network (formerly the Irish Local Development Network) we thought it timely to interview her.

There are currently 46 LDCs that are members of the network and three other LDCs whom she hopes will soon rejoin the group.

Just prior to joining the network, its member companies made an impression nationally during the pandemic by responding swiftly and astutely to local needs across the country.

During Carol's tenure, network staff numbers expanded from two to six personnel and LDCs were to the forefront at community level responding to the arrival of refugees from Ukraine and more recently responding to the impact of the hurricane-like Storm Eynow.

In the normal day-to-day, they help to bring dozens of national programmes to life at local level, while nationally the network is represented on over 40 national groups and forums, including across a range of government departments.

"We take that representation seriously. We see it as an honour and a privilege and we use it responsibly," said Carol.

"We're very member-led. The network is highly equitable, very

My mam (Doreen) had no fear, no fear at all and that was a lesson for us. She used to always say to us, 'You're better than no one, and no one is better than you'.

transparent, and everybody gets access to all of the information. And we operate by community development principles. I believe that makes us an effective network. We live our values," she said.

However, I began by asking Carol how her own upbringing might have prepared her for working in social inclusion, human rights and community development.

Now living in Galway, she was born and grew up in Cabra, Dublin, the last of eight children.

"Like a lot of families there at that time money was always an issue. However, I had no idea that we all lived in poverty until my circle expanded when I made new friends in secondary school. They didn't live the way we did. Their streets were different, their houses were different, the things they did were different. That didn't turn me into an activist, but I did note that it was different.

Another influence was her mother Doreen who was "pretty active in the community".

"More importantly, she had strong principles around fairness, around helping those worse off, around giving whatever you could give. And around speaking out - my mam had no fear, no fear at all and

that was a lesson for us. She used to always say to us, 'You're better than no one, and no one is better than you'. If you had a view, you said your view."

"I was lucky"

Looking back she realises how lucky she was:

"My brothers and sisters all finished school aged 14 or 15, and not because they necessarily wanted to leave school, but that's just how it was. I was lucky being the last one, because I was allowed stay in school and I ended up doing a business degree.

"I often think a business degree is a working class degree. It looks like a trade, it has a skill set to it, it has a vocation set to it. I remember somebody telling me their brother was doing arts and I asked was he good at drawing, because I didn't know what an arts degree was. That's how out of the loop I was.

She completed her degree and "was absolutely certain I did not want to go into banking or

accountancy" and instead she began teaching in a school where some of the pupils were experiencing high levels of deprivation.

"I remember I was supposed to be teaching budgeting to a group of kids who lived in a block of flats and all of the examples - saving to buy a car, a holiday or a house - meant absolutely nothing to them.

"And I became more interested in them than in the subjects that I was teaching. I could see that their life chances and their life expectations and their aspirations were already so limited," she said.

She then moved abroad and found work on European programmes for young people who dropped out of school early and for women returning to education, and on coming home to Ireland, she found a job in local development.

Appalled at disrespect towards people struggling

She gave examples of unfair treatment of people struggling to get over structural barriers that still irk her to this day. Parents called one day to a local development company she worked for, looking for help to get their sons into secondary school because they wanted them to be able to read and write. The family were Travellers.

"They were given the run-around. Absolutely blatant racism dressed up as, 'Ah, your kids would be better here' and 'Your kids might be better there'. I remember feeling how disingenuous it was. All the man wanted was for his kids to be able to read and write, it really wasn't a huge amount to ask for," Carol recalled.

She had similar stories to tell about teenage girls becoming pregnant and being unsupported.

"Their opportunities to stay at school, to do anything else to build a decent life for themselves and their kids, really disappeared," she said.



A Life in Development



• **LDCN STAFF MEMBERS as of June, 2025:** Catherine Lane and Hussain (Behtaash) Bakhshi, co-ordinator and administrator respectively of the Community Connection Project, Carol Baumann, CEO, Michelle Mullally, programmes, impact and communications officer, Conall Greaney, finance and admin officer, and Philip O'Donnell, research, policy and rural affairs officer.

Carol worked for a long time in the Money Advice and Budgeting Service (MABS) which provided “incredible support” and she was appalled that clients were discriminated against in wider society.

“They were sometimes portrayed as having been the architects of their own demise, that in some way they were inept, they were feckless or they were undisciplined. I found that hugely offensive.

“The clients we supported were people who managed exceptionally well on very little. They had very little money and walked a tightrope every day with no safety net.

“A crisis would tip them over: Somebody getting sick, a washing machine breaking down, a young fella needing new shoes, things that they just weren't able to put money by for, and they would end up then in a spiral that they'd find very difficult to get out of.

“And yet there seemed to be little respect for them. That experience taught me huge respect for people who were forced to live with so very little. And that lesson stayed with me. And it's always driven me in respect of the policy work and the advocacy work that we've been involved in.”

Proud times

She recalled proud times.

“I worked for a few years with a domestic abuse service and we opened a new refuge. It was much more than a building, we built a new client-centred service where we accepted no compromise in regards to the quality of the service. I remember when we started, thinking we'll never get what we want, but we did, and it was a moment of great pride for me and colleagues that what we built was second to none.

“The service is still there to this day,” she added.

Solidarity in us as a people

She enjoys working in a country with “a very long tradition of community”.

“It is a really important part of our fabric. It's part of our DNA. We know the need to help each other. We know what it is to recognise when something systemically is wrong and we're good at saying it.

“Look at how we rally around in

times of crisis, or a tragedy, or even if you look at the GAA. Those things help form the fabric of communities, they give people a sense of place, a sense of identity, a sense of mutual responsibility.

“And maybe there's a bit of religion in that as well, the way people say, ‘Oh, there but for the grace of God’. But there is a real sense of solidarity in us as a people, we don't tend to turn a blind eye. In other countries I've lived in, that's different,” she said.

Asked who or what is really impressive in creating social change through bottom-up community action, she replied, “Small local groups with people who feel passionately about an issue. They're the people who create social change, not big anonymous entities.”

Values V. Pay

Regarding work in the community and voluntary sector, she decries short term contracts and low pay.

“How long can you rely on people staying in the work because they're values-driven? It's not fair, it's exploitative. The work has got to pay. Nobody's going to get rich working in

community, but they should be able to at least achieve a reasonable standard of living.

“It's not in keeping with the statements that are often made about how important the community and voluntary sector is. If it's that important, please invest.”

Best government programmes for communities?

Carol said the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP) was the most important government programme for communities at present.

“It has evolved over the years, and is a very effective programme. But I'm a bit concerned that SICAP risks becoming quite bureaucratic. It's something the stakeholders are aware of.”

She said the newish Empowering Communities Programme is “fabulous”.

“It's just community development. It is very like programmes I'd have known in the '90s, where you had very small area-based work,

where you were meeting with people, listening to them and, more importantly - when they told you what they needed and wanted in their area, working with them to deliver it. That's what Empowering Communities does. I'd like to see it expanded.”

LEADER

She believes the LEADER programme “definitely needs more resourcing”.

“LEADER is critical in our communities. Its community-led approach is about allowing people deciding what they want to achieve in their own community. It is a very respectful and democratic way of working, and much more valuable than any kind of imposition from a remote department or agency,” she said.

LEADER funding relates to what is available at European level (as well as what's available nationally) and I put it to her that EU funds may be redirected towards defence spending.

“Defence isn't only about weaponry and armaments. Defence is also about food safety, it's about resilience in communities, so that's also a valid form of defence.

“Nationally, we all need resilient communities whether rural or urban,” she said.

National issues

“A local development company exists to work on developing local solutions to local problems, but some local problems are not caused locally and cannot be solved locally, they're systemic, they are policy-based, and they need to be amplified and they need to be elevated to a national forum, and that's why the network is required.

“We're member-led and I'm very proud that the network is in a very good place. I was fortunate enough to follow in the footsteps of my predecessors Brian Carty and Joe Saunders. They both took the network very far along a particular road. The network is vibrant and relevant and doing great work and it's recognised.

The views expressed here by Carol are in a personal capacity and not as CEO of the LDCN.

Ace jockey Cathy Gannon had advice for aspiring jockeys during Volunteer Week

BY ALLEN MEAGHER

“Work hard” if you want to make your dreams come true of working in the equestrian industry. This is the message to youngsters from former champion jockey Cathy Gannon from Dublin who in May met with 30 aspiring young jockeys in Limerick.

Her visit coincided with National Volunteering Week and she was joined by other volunteers on the day – Michael O’Kelly, a founding member of the Limerick Equine Education And Therapeutic Programme (LEETP) and photographer Tony Grehan.

Cathy had 450 wins in a remarkable career spanning 4,500 races.

“That’s ten percent,” she said proudly as youngsters looked at her agog. “I had a good time of it. I worked hard, it needs a good work ethic,” she said.

She was well placed to empathise with the teenagers who gathered in Clonshire Equestrian Centre outside Adare, Co. Limerick.

“I used to love horses and wasn’t very good at school. I used to ride the pony down to school and tie it up outside,” she recalled.

“We just wish we had a place somewhere like this in Dublin when we were starting, you know. This is great, great facilities, great for the kids,” she said.

“It’s not all about being a jockey, you could be a stable hand, or a rider, a farrier, a vet, a physio, or a dentist - there’s lots of work in horses,” added Cathy.

Cathy was there as a guest of the Moyross Youth Academy (MYA) which runs courses in equine education and horse welfare. It is called the Limerick Equine, Education and Therapeutic Programme and it connects with and educates children from five secondary and seven primary schools in Limerick city.

Almost all the teenagers hope to become jockeys and, in Clonshire, they got a real feel for thoroughbred racing; Niall Byrnes from the Racing Academy and Centre of Education (RACE) brought a racehorse simulator to Limerick for the occasion.

Tommy O’Donnell from Ballinacurra Weston and Crescent College Comprehensive was reluctant to mount the machine: “It’s



• Former champion jockey Cathy Gannon meets 30 aspiring jockeys in Limerick. L-to-R - Zara Quinn, Emma Downey, Cathy Gannon, Kerry Collins, Tianna Fitzgerald, Chloe Mallard and Bernadette Corbett. PHOTO: Tony Grehan.

a horse with no legs,” he said. Afterwards, he said he would like to go again and he hopes to follow others on training visits to Newbridge.

Nathan Devereux, who joined Moyross Youth Academy’s programme when he was in fourth class in Corpus Christi Primary School, and is now a student in Thomond Community College, has been up to Kildare where RACE is based.

“You experience the speed on a racetrack and what it’s like to be around thoroughbreds and how to tack them up and what to do with thoroughbreds. It’s a good experience up there,” he said.

The plan is to bring these youngsters together again over the summer.

HORSE INDUSTRY, LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND COMMUNITY

MYA also delivers a programme at primary school level and one of the schools was represented by Liam



• Participants in the Limerick Equine Education and Therapeutic Programme pictured in Clonshire Equestrian Centre, on May 20, 2025. PHOTO: Tony Grehan.

Kelly from Corpus Christi Primary School as part of the therapeutic element of the programme. As part of the primary schools element, MYA has five ponies based with John and Marie Burke of Clare Equestrian Centre in Doora, Barefield, Co. Clare. They have been a strong supporter of the project and its development since 2007.

Long-term plans include setting up an employment programme for young people from Limerick interested in finding work in the horse industry – which is why Horse Racing Ireland and the Limerick

and Clare Education and Training Board (LCETB) are involved.

MYA staff present in Clonshire the day we visited included Andrew O’Byrne, Damien Gavin, Tony Carey, John Quinlivan, Catherine Normoyle, and Eoin Ruane.

The horse industry and local government were represented by Stephanie Scully, education officer with Horseracing Ireland, and Tommy Barrett from the regeneration office of Limerick City and County Council.

Also present were teaching staff from the five secondary schools involved, namely Crescent College Comprehensive, St. Clement’s College, St. Munchin’s College, Thomond Community College, and CBS Sexton Street.

Moyross Youth Academy is funded by the Department of Justice and their equine project is funded through the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, in conjunction with Limerick City and County Council’s Economic and Social Intervention Fund (ESIF), with support from LCETB.

Voices from the saddle

I had the pleasure of meeting and interviewing three smashing natives of Moyross and Southill recently who love to be in the saddle and are already working in the horse industry.

Wesley Joyce is a champion jockey, Terry Casey while new to racing has already notched up one win, and Aoife O'Driscoll while much younger is already doing some paid work in a local equestrian club. All

love horses and have taken the opportunities offered to them through Moyross Youth Academy (MYA). Aoife who is still a teenager is still availing of MYA courses, support and events.

Here are some of the standout quotes from those interviews. The full interviews will appear on Changing Ireland's website shortly.

- EDITOR

“If you invest your money into Moyross Youth Academy, you might win it back on a jockey someday.”
– Wesley Joyce, Moyross, 55 national flat wins (and counting)



• Wesley Joyce said, "When I was a kid, I saw people going up to RACE from Moyross Youth Academy and that gave me hope and inspired me. You can be a poor kid like me and you can make it. Anything is possible if you're ready, if you really want it and you work hard for it. Dream, believe, achieve. Believe in yourself."



• Terry Casey on a return visit to Moyross Youth Academy. PHOTO: AM

“For me, when you're on a horse, the speed, just getting the feel off the horse, there's no other feeling like that. My dream was to work with horses, but without Moyross Youth Academy I definitely wouldn't be a jockey today. They're very supportive.”
– Terry Casey, Southill, jockey, recently recorded his first win.

“With the Moyross Youth Academy, you know, they really help young people out. They help people not to get into trouble. As my mam says the Equine Programme was my saving grace. I know I will qualify in the future to be an instructor,”
– Aoife Leonard (14) Moyross, showjumper.



• Aoife Leonard with her horse Ace in Clonlara. PHOTO: AM

Environmental Justice Centre grows in 5 years to fight good causes

BY OWEN RYAN



Having been founded in 2021, the Centre for Environmental Justice (CEJ) nowadays finds itself at the centre of some important cases and demand for its services is growing.

The centre was set up by Community Law and Mediation which has now itself grown to now employ 25 staff and around 80 volunteers.

“There is no charge for people availing of our services, but the services are primarily targeted at those impacted by disadvantage and inequality,” said Elizabeth Devine policy and communications manager.

Clodagh Daly is the centre’s manager and she outlined why there was a need for the environmental justice service.

“We (had) people coming to our clinics whose health was being impacted by air pollution for example. We (had) people come in whose homes were repeatedly flooded and they could no longer get insurance. We realised that there was a gap in meeting that legal need and that’s why we set up the centre,” she said.

Environmental issues are becoming much more prevalent and the CEJ now employs four staff to give communities support.

“There are so many issues that people are presenting to the clinic with. So many people can’t afford their energy bills and about a third



• As part of a new project, CLM’s Centre for Environmental Justice teamed up with Bohemians Football Club to launch five comics by graphic designer Paddy Lynch. The comics connect big environmental issues to everyday concerns like housing, air quality, and access to green spaces.

of the country’s population struggle to pay their heat and electricity bills. People are struggling with lack of access to green space, children who don’t have parks or playgrounds nearby. Poor housing conditions, water quality in urban as well as rural areas. (Some) people are dealing with severe water pollution. There are all those kinds of issues,” said Clodagh.

The CEJ is currently at work on two major cases relating to climate justice.

One is challenging the Climate Action Plan 2023, that’s a core plank of the Irish Government’s climate policy.

The case was due to be heard at the Court of Appeal as we went to print. At stake is the argument that the Government has not published a

sufficiently detailed Climate Action Plan. For instance, it is not clear from the plan how emissions will actually fall in line with our legally binding carbon budgets.

“The reason that we are involved in that case is that the longer that reductions in emissions are delayed, reductions consistent with the legally binding carbon budgets that the Government have agreed to, the more difficult they will become. The policy response might become abrupt, forceful and disorderly, and we won’t be able to have that just transition and the consultation required with communities,” said Clodagh

The CEJ is involved in the case representing Friends of the Irish Environment as their client.

“The other case that we’re taking

is against the Climate Action Plan 2024, in which some of the same issues persist. So we decided to challenge that as well,” she said.

“We’re challenging it because it doesn’t detail how emissions will fall in line with Ireland’s carbon budgets. We’re also claiming that as a result there is an infringement of fundamental rights under the Irish Constitution, the European Convention on Human Rights and the EU Charter of fundamental rights. In that case we are acting as the client for the first time in our history and we are joined in that by a grandfather, a youth climate activist and a child, represented by their mother. It’s a really exciting case.”

Anyone is welcome to consult with the CEJ to see if their issue comes within its remit.

The centre has offices in Coolock and Limerick, but is open to enquiries countrywide.

“Anyone can avail of our clinics,” said Clodagh. “We offer clinics in person every fortnight or you can access them by phone or by Zoom, whatever is suitable for people. There’s no query too big or small. Basically, a clinic is a meeting with a solicitor which will usually last for 20 to 40 minutes and people can book a follow up consultation if needed.”

She feels the centre will become even busier in the near future.

“I think there is a real need for it,” said Clodagh.

More info: <https://communitylawandmediation.ie/centre-for-environmental-justice/>

What is Environmental Justice?

Give me examples!

Environmental justice seeks to protect people from the impacts of climate change and other environmental harms. It seeks to ensure the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people in the development, implementation and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations and policies.

Communities who experience disadvantage or marginalisation are often more vulnerable to climate injustice.

Environmental harms can include:

- Health concerns from air or water pollution.
- Illegal dumping/ littering.
- The burning of private waste.
- Homes at risk of flooding.

- Flooding or lack of flooding infrastructure in high-risk areas.
- Poor housing conditions (cold, damp).
- Poor sanitation or poor access to clean water.
- Lack of access to green space, parks etc.
- Noise pollution.
- Energy costs and access to retrofitting schemes or fuel allowance.
- Pollution of lakes, rivers and marine life.
- Inadequate traffic/ cycling infrastructure.
- Dereliction.
- Biodiversity loss.
- Mining, coal extraction and fracking gas.
- Difficulty accessing information on environmental issues.



COMMUNITY LAW AND MEDIATION 50th ANNIVERSARY



• Bernadette Devlin McAliskey, social justice and human rights campaigner and Michael Farrell, human rights lawyer, at Community Law and Mediation's 50th anniversary event in March.

The Community Law and Mediation organisation, which was started in Coolock, Dublin, is celebrating its 50th anniversary this year.

The organisation was established by the Free Legal Advice Centres, better known as FLAC, in 1975, and was modelled on an American neighbourhood law centre. Initially set up as the Coolock Community Law Centre, it achieved its core aim of designing a blueprint for how a community model of civil legal aid could be rolled out nationally.

Over the five decades, it evolved from a local to a national service with physical locations in Coolock and Limerick and new areas of work in mediation, environmental justice (see opposite) and children's law.

In Limerick alone, CLM now provides support, advice, advocacy and more to 750 people a year.

Community Law and Mediation, as it is today known, began its 50th anniversary celebrations with a human rights event in February at Dublin City Hall. It featured a public discussion of human rights issues today with Bernadette Devlin McAliskey, social justice and human rights campaigner; Michael O'Flaherty, Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights; climate justice lawyer Tessa Khan; and Rose Wall, outgoing CEO of Community Law & Mediation.

The discussion was a fine way to show CLM's intent to continue to fight for fairness, justice and human rights in our communities.

To find out further CLM anniversary events later this year, visit: <https://communitylawandmediation.ie/>

DUBLIN: Feeling Excluded

Dublin community workers raise alarm over poverty and populism



• See no evil, speak no evil, hear no evil. PHOTO: AM.

THE emergence in 2024 of far right or populist political figures in Dublin like Malachy Steenson, Gavin Pepper and Gerry Hutch, shows what Ireland's political future might look like if deprived communities continue to be neglected.

That's one of the key findings of Dublin City Community Co-op's newly published advocacy paper, titled: *Poverty and Populism - Is Dublin City a Canary in the Coalmine?*

Steenson and Pepper won seats on Dublin City Council in last year's local elections while Hutch came close to taking a seat in the Dáil, realities that show a greater willingness by many to vote for the far right or other figures from far outside the mainstream.

The paper warns that the emergence of such figures illustrates what could happen on a far larger scale, if long-standing, legitimate grievances continue to be neglected:

"In many ways, Dublin's political shift is a canary in the coalmine, highlighting the dangerous consequences of neglecting poverty and exclusion, and signalling that similar trends could emerge across the country if these systemic issues remain unaddressed.

"If these trends continue unchecked, we risk further alienating already vulnerable communities, allowing discontent to fester and creating conditions where extremist narratives can take deeper root."

It said that the rise of far-right and anti-establishment views shows that people in deprived areas feel they have been left behind, and are increasingly cynical about mainstream politics:

"These trends indicate a growing sense of frustration among marginalised communities, where economic inequality, inadequate housing, and crime have persisted for decades.

"Government departments, policymakers, community organisations and community activists must now confront the reality that distrust in state institutions is deepening, and in some cases, being exploited by divisive political movements. Are we ready for what this could mean?"

"The increased polarisation of political discourse, alongside the normalisation of anti-immigration rhetoric and misinformation, threatens to undermine social cohesion, hamper community development and weaken democratic engagement," the paper states.

"It's OK to question immigration policies; it however is not ok for the government, public representatives or communities to scapegoat immigrants. Dublin City, where far right and anti-establishment candidates secured local elected representation for the first time and just

missed out on a seat in Dáil Éireann, serves as a stark warning."

Extremism will thrive unless issues addressed

It warned that if nothing is done to address grievances in places such as where Steenson, Pepper and Hutch drew their support, extremism is likely to thrive, but it can be headed off if the very real issues those communities face are addressed:

"If these trends continue unchecked, we risk further alienating already vulnerable communities, allowing discontent to fester and creating conditions where extremist narratives can take deeper root.

"To counteract this, the government must prioritise adequately resourcing communities, foster real community engagement, and ensure that those who feel excluded from the political process have a voice in shaping solutions that address their genuine concerns. This moment demands proactive and inclusive strategies to prevent the further erosion of Ireland's democratic and social fabric," it advises.

To read the full report, visit:

<https://bit.ly/Povertypopulism-Dublin>

"To counteract (poverty and populism) the government must prioritise adequately resourcing communities, foster real community engagement, and ensure that those who feel excluded from the political process have a voice in shaping solutions that address their genuine concerns."

Encouraging data means nothing when you're the one struggling

- Secretary general John McKeon can empathise as we hear testimony from communities

BY ALLEN MEAGHER

The Social Inclusion Forum 2025 was held on May 8 in Croke Park, Dublin. This was the 20th edition of the forum and you might wonder what's the point in talking, year after year for 20 years. Actually things have changed for the better as John McKeon, secretary general of the Department of Social Protection, pointed out.

Hailing from Dublin's inner city, he also interestingly gave personal insights into his own challenging upbringing in a poor neighbourhood where many of his classmates end up behind bars or dead. His talk followed a tearful account of her own upbringing surrounded by poverty and drugs by author Katriona O'Sullivan. He noted that while he also grew up in poverty, his family escaped the added pain of drug addiction.

"I was born and raised in north inner city Dublin. I went to school where there were 54 lads in the class; 51 of them ended up in Mountjoy and I was one of them who didn't. The reason I didn't end up in Mountjoy is because my parents weren't drug addicts and my mother in particular placed an awful lot of store in education.

"And although she was involved, she had a profound disability (and) I and my sister spent an awful lot of time caring for her.

"So I know what disability is. I know what child caring is - she could do one thing: She made sure we did our homework and she helped us do



• John McKeon, secretary general, Department of Social Protection, addressing the forum. You can view his speech here: <https://bit.ly/SIF2025secgenJK>

PHOTOS: AM.

that homework and she told us, get educated and get out.

"So I know, I have a background, I have an understanding, as do an awful lot of other senior civil servants if you speak to them. Don't assume that we don't know what it takes to be a carer, or what it means to be a person

with a disability," he said.

He asked attendees to be open-minded: "Sometimes when people talk, they talk in an 'us' and 'them' scenario. It's not us and them, it's us together," he said.

STORIES EMBOLDEN US

He said social inclusion "is good for the economy" and is also about "respect": "It's about parity of esteem, it's about aspiration, opportunity. It's about love, security, connection. The data doesn't tell us that, but your stories tell us that.

"And that's what emboldens us, and what energizes us, and what encourages us to go and make the case on your behalf for the changes that need to be made," he said.

Looking at national statistics, while he could show that measures to tackle poverty had been partly successful, he acknowledged that if you were poor today you could not feel the benefit of a statistical curve upwards.

"The fact that consistent poverty has reduced from nearly 10% to 5% in six years is of little comfort to the person who's in that 5%. If you're one of that 5%, your experience of consistent poverty is 100%.

"The averages are great, but they hide the individual stories. And we've got to be aware of that," he said.

• Illustration by Robyn Deasy.



Social Inclusion Forum 2025

• Megan O'Malley, Clare Island CDP and Chloe Ní Mháille, Community Work Ireland.



(Continued from previous page)

Nonetheless, deprivation rates between 2014 and 2024 have "more or less halved (and) the risk of poverty has more or less halved," he said.

New efforts to reach the hardest-to-reach people were promised. Giving examples of ideas that came through the SIF - such as free school dinners - he spoke of the continuing usefulness of the forum and the impact that community workers have.

He noted that as poverty rates come down, making further progress required fresh approaches. He said we should be "100% focused" on tackling discrimination. Also, we should view expenditure on social inclusion as an investment, not a cost.

The forum was held to bring the state and civil society together and to hear what community groups see and what they recommend to reduce poverty.

FORUM DISAPPOINTMENT

Voices from the floor indicated a loss of patience with the government. Things are worse now than they were in 2007, said one speaker pointing to the number of babies being born into homelessness in Dublin in 2025.

"I was one of the unfortunate people who were so excited when you sent out that huge survey on the cost of disabilities. I helped over 180 people to fill it in, me and other volunteers," she recalled.

"And then we were told, we're actually going to support people with disabilities, to give them an opportunity to participate, to contribute and actually have a real existence.

"We were given that little bit of

hope, and then nothing happened, nothing changed. There is no real vision for what you're going to do, because the poverty trap is entirely created by the state, and this is part of the problem.

"We've got the highest number of babies born into homelessness just down the road.

"I don't see the change, I don't see the vision. I look forward to having a report, but I've been coming to these since 2007, and it's worse now than it was in 2007. I'm probably one of many who's really disappointed," they said.

ISLANDER'S MESSAGE ON WEEK OF TRAGEDY

In the same week that an islander lost his life on a pier on Clare Island, Megan O'Malley travelled from the island to Dublin to deliver a call at the forum for better infrastructure to make life safer and less isolated for all living on Ireland's offshore islands.

She said, "During winter we put our lives at risk every day trying to get out to get food, water, baby's nappies, new clothes, school items, everything.

"We know all too well what it's like to be isolated and not be able to get the services in in time when they're needed in an emergency," she added.

END DISCRIMINATION IN STATE SERVICES

Kathleen O'Connor works as a primary healthcare co-ordinator in Co. Wicklow and is appalled at the lack of progress. She said, "Travellers are living in substandard accommodations, ten years after the Carrickmines tragedy that took the lives of ten of our people from our community."

She highlighted poor pay and conditions in the sector and a lack of pension support for some staff.

Traveller primary healthcare workers and their communities face daily racism and discrimination, including "a lot of barriers" against Travellers seeking to access services.

"It's very hard as Travellers to go into a service."

"It's very hard as Travellers to go into a service even and then to go in and being discriminated against which makes it even harder. So we do try to work with that as well but that's what we're facing every day," she said.

TWO THINGS CHANGED MY LIFE

Guest speaker, author and lecturer Katriona O'Sullivan, said, "Poverty and inequality robs you of connection. And that is something that we all deserve to have."

"You do not expect someone like me to end up here. If you go back 30 years, I'm 16, 17, I am living in a homeless hostel in Birmingham. I have a baby. He's nearly one. I am completely welfare dependent. I left school a year before with no qualifications at age 15. Terrified and alone, no family support," she recalled.

"I grew up in a home where both of my parents were heroin addicts. I woke up every single day hungry and not just for food. I hungered for a hug, for someone to teach me how to regulate myself, for someone to tell me that I was worth more."

She went on to describe support she received from, among others, a community worker called Joe and it made a difference.

"He guided me towards the two really important things that changed my life, therapy and education," she said, adding that good policies and support services can help people to rise above poverty.

"They offered me free education, rent assistance, free child care and therapy. All of them were connected. I didn't have to trade anything off."

The theme of this year's SIF was 'Reflecting on the Past and Informing the Future of the Roadmap for Social Inclusion.'

300% increase in children going into care

Lorraine Lally from Galway works nationally with the Community Law and Mediation Centre and she gave voice to workshop observations relating to families and children. She said they are "suffering more than I've ever seen before in my life".

"We are heading towards more equality among migrants, Travellers, Irish, non-Irish, blended families, foster families, children in care, because they're now all equally deprived and suffering," she said.

"We have had a 300% increase in the

last five years of children going into care. A 500% increase of migrant children and Traveller children going into care. So, we are breaking up families and the state is having to deal with that," she said.

"Children in care are the most vulnerable children you can imagine. They are really suffering and you need to do more," she appealed.

• Lorraine Lally from Galway speaking at the Social Inclusion Forum.



Stop putting people off with exclusively online services and raise the pension! says Liz Dunne

Liz Dunne, Bray Family Resource Centre, gave the views from workshops held in advance of the Social Inclusion Forum. She focused on older people saying, "For the first time in history, we have older people who are actually finding themselves homeless. They can't afford to pay the rent."

From what she and others were seeing more older people are now dependent on food banks.

"They are the people who should be enjoying the fruits of their labour, after all those years of work, and they're reduced to putting their hand out.

"It's like food banks have become mainstream," she added.

The cost of a shopping basket has shot up in recent years, along with utilities, and pension increases did not match inflation. She wanted to see the state pension increased again and called for mandatory retirement to be abolished.

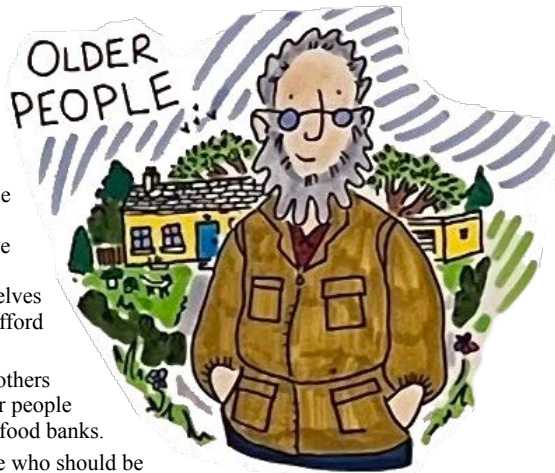
"People are now finding that they can't afford to live on a pension. They need to be allowed to choose to work for longer.

"Women are doubly at risk of poverty, because a lot of women would have gone back to work maybe later in life, maybe not worked at all," she added.

She said that older people – indeed everyone – should be able to access services in person or online, or both, but not exclusively online.

"People are excluded by having to go online to do everything. Think about someone that's 60, 70, 80, and all of a sudden they've got to go fill in forms – online. I struggled with that myself. It is one huge barrier for them. They need to have people that can actually talk and not machines.

"It puts them at risk, because they're going into shops and post offices and places like that to get people, members of staff, to help them to do what they need to do. It's very unfair," she said. "What people are saying is that they want more face to face services," said Liz.



• Illustration by Robyn Deasy.

Older people are becoming homeless... Women are doubly at risk... People can't afford to live on a pension... Food banks have become mainstream...



• Liz Dunne, Little Bray Family Resource Centre, speaking. PHOTOS:AM.



• Oisín O'Reilly CEO of Outhouse LGBTQ+ Centre in Dublin addressing the forum.



• Deirdre Kelly, principal officer, Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht, Liam Quinn, CEO, Waterford Area Partnership and John O'Toole, Department of Social Protection.



• Karen Kiernan, CEO of One Family; Katriona O'Sullivan, author and academic, Naomi Connolly, parent activist with One Family, and Carly Bailey, policy manager with One Family.



• Gerry Reilly, Central Statistics Office, at SIF2025 where he explained in detail how poverty is measured and recent trends in Ireland.

Senior Citizens Parliament co-ordinator Pat Mellon has solutions to rural poverty

BY SEAN HILLEN

Pat Mellon from County Wicklow grew up on the family farm in the Vale of Avoca, which he now runs, and he has firm views around poverty, which is especially harsh for older people living in rural areas.

For years, he worked in rural recreation, social inclusion and social enterprise and this has equipped him well for his current role as national co-ordinator of the Irish Senior Citizens Parliament (ISCP).

The national organisation has 200 affiliated organisations and 50,000 members advocating for the rights of older people and one of Pat's priorities is to improve the lives for seniors living in rural areas.

CONSISTENT POVERTY IS HIGHER IN RURAL AREAS

"Rural areas have a higher rate of consistent poverty which leads to social exclusion as people struggle to participate in community life due to financial constraints and limited access to services," he says.

"It's also less visible than urban poverty, making it harder to address. In addition, as we have seen recently with Storm Eowyn, government policies seem to favour semi-state bodies such as the ESB focusing on the bottom line rather than the power line, leading to the most vulnerable being completely isolated. Poor infrastructure such as lack of broadband and public transport hinder overall economic development in rural areas."

Fund communities more, increase Garda visibility and address anti-social behaviour

Rather than just criticise prevailing policies, Pat has his own ideas about tackling the challenges of rural living and lists them confidently as someone who understands the situation well.

"Fund community centres, social clubs and other initiatives that promote social inclusion and reduce isolation in rural areas," he says.

"Provide home care services, social activities and transportation assistance for older people to combat loneliness and isolation. Increase Garda visibility and support community safety programs to address concerns about crime and anti-social behaviour," he says.

"And encourage more



•• After 15 years of campaigning to see that retired workers have a voice when their pension income is being impacted, a bill to ensure this was moved in the Dáil in October, led by then TD Brid Smith. Pat Mellon (at back, tallest) represented the Irish Senior Citizens' Parliament as it campaigned with affiliated groups outside Leinster House last year.

"Fund community centres, social clubs and other initiatives that promote social inclusion and reduce isolation in rural areas," - Pat Mellon.

collaboration between government agencies, local communities and other stakeholders to develop and implement effective solutions," he adds

LOCAL, NATIONAL AND EU LEVELS

For Pat, the quality of rural life is but one aspect of his work at the ISCP, which he proudly points out is a "non-profit, non-political, non-sectarian, member-focused and member-driven organisation."

"Our work is to ensure that the voices of older people are heard at local, national and European levels. As we age, we become more aware of the issues that surround us and the inequalities that affect the aged sector," he says.

"The ISCP is one of the few organisations that actually puts the needs of its members front and centre," he claims.

He points specifically to the group's continuing work on issues such as lobbying for an Independent Commissioner for Older People, pension equality, homecare initiatives, pension entitlements of retired workers, retraining

opportunities for older people and means-tested social welfare, as well as home care.

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Appointed to his position at the ISCP just over a year ago, Pat has been married to Ann for 33 years and is father to two daughters. He is a man of seemingly limitless energy and enthusiasm and has been involved in community activities prior to this.



• Sharon Casey, was appointed the Irish Senior Citizens Parliament's membership officer in February of this year. She is pictured here (2nd from left) engaged in conversation at the Social Inclusion Forum, held in Croke Park, in May, with (l-to-r) Linda Walsh, County Kildare LEADER Partnership, Rita Shaughnessy, Galway City Partnership and Liz Dunne, Bray Family Resource Centre.

His experience includes being project manager for a Community Services Project (funded by the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht) overseeing sixteen staff members on three different projects, as well as a resource centre manager, his duties including presenting financial reports to the Board of the Glendalough and District Development Association and supporting business development, as well as employee training. He was also a rural recreation officer in county Wicklow and a social inclusion manager, where he helped clients access community medical, housing and transportation resources.

His previous positions also included being board chairperson of Wicklow County Tourism and board member of Wicklow Uplands Council. He helped develop south Wicklow as a walking tourist destination and the Blessington Greenway and also represented Fáilte Ireland at International Trade Shows and Ireland at the international Adventure Travel Trade Association Conference.

DO NOT OVERSTAY

Having seen what he terms "too many publicly-funded bodies exhibiting extreme governance issues where chairs and boards exist for their own egos," he's keen on greater oversight. "Any public funded bodies where chairs last more than five years or where unhealthy relationships exist between boards and auditors need much more public scrutiny," he said.

For those wishing to join the Irish Senior Citizens Parliament, email office@seniors.ie or visit <https://seniors.ie/>

THE WHEEL: Summit in Croke Park

Taoiseach: "I think it's one of the most noble things... to be a volunteer in such circumstances."

BY ALLEN MEAGHER

The Taoiseach, Micheál Martin, began his speech to nearly 600 attendees, many of them volunteers, attending The Wheel's Summit in Croke Park, Dublin, by speaking about volunteers working in Gaza.

"I've listened a lot in recent times to medical volunteers who work with various organisations (such as) Médecins Sans Frontières and others," he said. "Their testimony has been heart-rending."

He said the conditions the surgeons were operating brought home "the barbaric nature of the war that Israel is waging on the people of Gaza."

"And I think it's one of the most noble things to do in the world, is to be a volunteer in such circumstances. Volunteers with UN agencies, or volunteers with various non-governmental organisations who are doing their best to provide the basic necessities of life.

"Many (volunteers) have been murdered in pursuit of their duties on the Red Crescent side, and we should remember them, and we should be very conscious of the enormous sacrifices they and their families are making, which speaks to the value of community and volunteerism," he said.

On challenges facing communities here, the Taoiseach acknowledged the crucial role played by community organisations during earlier crises – such as when the pandemic struck, when Russia began its full-scale war against Ukraine and community



• An Taoiseach Micheál Martin, speaking on May 28.

PHOTO: AM.

Taoiseach spoke of remembering volunteers slain in Israel's war on Gaza, and of volunteers at home helping in pandemic, during storms, welcoming refugees, and the Government's future plans.

groups here reacted swiftly to welcome refugees fleeing that war and others.

RESPONSE TO STORM EOWYN

He recalled hurricane-like Storm Eowyn earlier this year and said the Government planned to develop a

system to better resource local community networks for future extreme weather events.

"It was a storm like no other in terms of the degree of isolation it created very, very quickly - in terms of absence of electricity, absence of water, but also connection in terms of the mobile system and so on,

and that sense of isolation created huge issues. And again different organisations on the ground came together to become a focal point for many people," he said.

"We will witness more extreme storms (and) we have to build up our infrastructural resilience. On top of that, we have to build up, what we might term a voluntary community resilience as well, that's sufficiently resourced, and that's something that we're going to continue to work on," he said.

FUTURE PLANS

The Taoiseach pointed to plans to invest €1 billion over the next ten years in the Shared Island Fund - which seeks to harness the full potential of the Good Friday Agreement to enhance cooperation, connection and mutual understanding on the island and engage with all communities and traditions.

He said: "It's the people-to-people connections I'm very interested in, community-to-community, non-political."

He also spoke about key priorities of the Government, including disability supports, access to school places, tackling child poverty and supporting the well-being of young people. "In the forthcoming budget I will be focusing on a very specific and targeted response to the issues of child poverty," he said.

Minister Buttimer opens The Wheel's biggest annual event

Jerry Buttimer, Minister of State for Community Development, Charities and Rural Transport, opened The Wheel's biggest annual event.

He spoke about how community organisations and charities give people hope and help to empower others.

He said, "A fair and just society doesn't just happen. It happens because of the partnership and collaboration between all of us.

"Last week, we had 10 years of marriage equality legislation. The world is changing and when you see what's happening across the Atlantic you might wonder should we all go home today, to hide under the duvet and forget what we do," he said. But that is not what our sector is about, he added.

"The world we live in is about diversity. It is about the breadth of work you do. It is about the

significant impact you make on the lives of many, many people."

"We must support each other in the creation of a fair and just society. We must aspire to an Ireland where we're all equal, where opportunity is given to all of us, where there is no barrier to participation in civic life. You advocate for people, from the smallest charity or community group to the largest.

"The work you do is critical. We measure some of it, some of it is immeasurable. Ministers come and go and minister Joe O'Brien was an extraordinary minister in my opinion and he brought a great drive to the department and I hope I can do the same," he said.

The minister credited The Wheel with bringing people together for 25 years, saying, "Charities and community development are very important to us as a country."



• After opening the summit Minister of State Jerry Buttimer was presented with a crafted wooden bowl by Jade Hogan, manager of Cork Craft and Design, pictured here with Inez Bailey, incoming chair of The Wheel.

PHOTO: AM.

"We must aspire to an Ireland where we're all equal ... (But) a fair and just society doesn't just happen... We must support each other."

Service providers need to connect with groups protesting on the streets

The audience at The Wheel asked: **How can we strengthen our advocacy, particularly when people are still afraid to stand up, even in a healthy democracy, and especially when there are pressing and urgent issues, like the situation in Gaza, where there has not been enough action?**

Alexandrina Najmowicz, secretary general of the European Civil Society Forum, urged service providers to connect with groups protesting on the streets.

She said, "There are diverse organisations that play roles inside civil society. We have advocacy groups, human rights defenders, service providers, and bold actors that are taking to the streets and organising social movements. I think all these forms are complementary. I think they need more connection.

"In my network, for example, we pay a lot of attention of connecting traditional forms of organisation of civil society with unorganised groups like social movements.

"I think it's really important to have both, you know, issue work and

to stay strong within the silos, but also have a more systemic approach. Because I think the most important thing is to keep our ability to bring change, not to constantly be running to cope with the changes happening around us. And in order to do so, we really need to be better organised, and in solidarity among ourselves," she said.

"The most important thing is to keep our ability to bring change, not to constantly be running to cope with the changes happening around us."

MULTI-ANNUAL FUNDING

RTÉ hit the jackpot, why can't we?

In her speech, **Elaine Teague**, CEO, Disability Federation of Ireland, focused on four words beginning with the letter 'c'.

"Let us communicate in a language people can understand," she began. "Language that my parents, family, the media can understand."

She urged organisations to speak about rights, dignity and inclusion as these things everyone understands.

"Let's celebrate our successes," she said. "We need to tell our stories, to talk about improving lives, to talk about the impact we have in communities.

"Let us co-create – this is when we come to the table as different but equal partners. Nobody at that table holds the position of power.

"We want commitment to sustainable funding for our critical work. We cannot continue where the funding does not meet the full cost of service delivery. It can be done. RTÉ hit the jackpot, they got multi-annual sustainable funding. RTÉ took a gamble, there was shock and outrage, political commentary and embarrassment. We'd like to skip all those parts and get to the part where there's a commitment," she said to chuckles all around.

She rounded off by reminding everyone present, including Minister of State Jerry Buttimer, "The C&V sector is massive. In 2024, over €10 billion was spent in our sector. The road ahead is scary, but it is ours to walk, and to walk together."



• PHOTO: AM.



IF I HAD A MAGIC WAND...

Three panellists were asked what they would do with the community and voluntary sector if they had a magic wand.

Alexandrina Najmowicz, secretary general of the European Civil Society Forum, replied:

"Well, while people are in competition for rights, for access to basic rights and dignity, this puts our democracy at risk because trust in institutions is at risk.

"What we need is to be able to trust (and) to do that, we need dialogue among us, we need to (talk) with the increasingly polarised communities, and we definitely need to (talk) with institutions so that we can change the current policies."

Elaine Teague, CEO of the Disability Federation of Ireland, said, "I would bring certainty around

funding requirements, because then we can deliver to the people that we support, we can deliver on our commitment to our communities."

Irish Times journalist **Emmet Malone**, a guest speaker, said, "I don't understand why there are certain elements of the Community and Voluntary sector that are not run by the state."

He said it was great that small organisations and community groups are flexible, because communities would otherwise be "waiting an endless amount of time for state supports".

If he had a magic wand he would "divide the sector into stuff that should be run by the state and take that into the state sector and I would properly fund the rest of it over the long term."



• Alexandrina Najmowicz, secretary general of the European Civil Society Forum, Elaine Teague, CEO of the Disability Federation of Ireland, and Irish Times journalist Emmet Malone.

Be mindful if a Traveller confides in you



• PHOTO COURTESY OF THE WHEEL.

John Paul Collins, a mental health awareness worker with Exchange House, a support service for the Traveller community, made an appeal to youth and community development workers when he spoke at The Wheel's Summit.

He said that community workers should be aware that if a Traveller opens up to you about their struggles, it is likely you are the first person they have confided in.

"Just be mindful of that," he said.

If it goes well for them, great. If not however they may not open up to anyone again, he warned.

PROMOTING INCLUSION

Traveller Pride evident around the country

This is but a sample of the events that took place across the country during Traveller Pride Week, held in May.

FINGLAS

Pavee Point Traveller and Roma Centre in collaboration with the Finglas Traveller Development Group arranged a Living History event for Traveller Pride.

A traditional wagon drove through Finglas, before pulling into Rosehill House, where there were demonstrations on tin smithing and breadmaking.

The barrel topped wagon used for the event was restored by a local group under the guidance of James Collins.

KERRY

Meanwhile Kerry Travellers Health & Community Development Project and Munster Technological University got together for an event entitled 'Empowering the Future: The Next Generation of Irish Travellers'.

It was held at the MTU Kerry Campus.

CORK

The Cork Traveller Pride Flag was flown on Cork City Hall. Meanwhile, in Ballyphehane Community Centre the Keenan Family Tree Project was launched, with an evening of chat and song.

The Rebel County Traveller Archive was launched at Cork Public Museum in Fitzgerald Park by Oein DeBhairduin from the National Museum of Ireland. It celebrates Traveller culture with photos, films and stories and was supported by the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission and the Heritage Council of Ireland.

KILKENNY

In the Marble City, the Kilkenny Traveller Community Movement presented 'Unfiltered – Kilkenny Traveller Lives in Focus', a powerful photographic exhibition capturing the lived experiences, culture, and community of Travellers in Kilkenny over the past 15 years.

MEATH

Meath Traveller Workshop held an evening of Traveller events on May 21, including a workshop entitled 'Cant is still cool'. It also featured music and storytelling.

GALWAY

Tuam held a huge range of activities for the week, from soccer and boxercise activities to Traveller Pride Awards and an open mic night at Bru Bhríde. On May 27 the first of an eight session wagon painting workshop was held, while drama workshops are taking place at Bru Bhríde.



• Travellers studying at UL taking part in Traveller Pride in Limerick. PHOTO: AM.

TIPPERARY

The Tipperary Rural Traveller Project held an event to give the public the chance to see a Traveller wagon and camp at the Spafield Family Resource Centre. People also got to see a tinsmith at work, as well as enjoying music, storytelling and a photo exhibition.

LIMERICK

Limerick Traveller Network, now five years a growing, held Traveller Pride Celebrations in Our Lady of Lourdes community centre. Attendees enjoyed song, dance, a heritage talk,

and food and beverages. Members of the network who are studying youth and community work in the University of Limerick also pointed to the challenges facing Travellers and how they aspire for their children to have a better future.

The speakers are campaigning for progress in relation to education, employment and accommodation. Limerick Traveller Network project is an independent group. It receives support from Exchange House Ireland, the PAUL Partnership and the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht.

The book Russia bombed for sale in Kerry

Ukrainian journalist and author Natalya Korniyenko took part in an event during Listowel Writers' Week to promote her book 'Words and Bullets', a publication that had to be reprinted before it could even be loaded into vans for delivery. Russia hates this book - it bombed the publishing house just after 50,000 copies had been printed.

Undeterred, and with support, Natalya had the book reprinted and she was in Kerry - with copies - in June to speak about the book's contents at an event organised by North East West Kerry Development.

The books sold steadily during the event which was attended by around 70 people, both Irish and Ukrainian.

'Words and Bullets' is a compilation of interviews by Natalya with Ukrainian writers and fellow journalists who, confronted by Russia's war on their country, took up arms or volunteered to support the Ukrainian army.

She took questions about the book's contents from Robert Carey of NEWKD who asked her about the



• Author Natalya Korniyenko with Robert Carey in Listowel. PHOTO: AM.

sacrifices made by cultural figures in times of war, and the importance of culture and writing not just to national identity, but for the human condition.

She said that nobody in Ukraine is writing fiction at present as the reality is so much worse than can be imagined. However, writing

and art are very important even during wartime.

Natalia spoke about the death of a number of the writers whom she interviewed in the book as a result of Russian aggression.

The book is not yet translated into English, but over 20 of the interviews can be read online at:

Nobody in Ukraine is writing fiction at present as the reality is so much worse than can be imagined.

<https://lnkd.in/eFGyKr3U>

You can also find out more about the book here: <https://pen.org.ua/en/slova-i-kuli>

NEWKD community worker Natalya Krasnenkova organised the event with the support of Listowel Writers' Week.

DUBLIN: Volunteering

Bernie Roche proud yet mortified to be Community Volunteer of the Year

BY OWEN RYAN

South Dublin's Bernie Roche was named Community Volunteer of the Year at the Local Authority Members Association (LAMA) Awards for her tireless efforts to improve her local area.

Bernie is the secretary of Rathfarnham Village Tidy Towns, and she has been involved in a number of environmental groups in recent years.

"I would always have been involved in committees, but I started to get involved in the environmental side of things before Covid. I've always had an interest in nature, thanks to my Dad. I met up with people in the Dodder Action and it took off from there."

As well as the Dodder Action Group and Rathfarnham Village Tidy Towns, she helps out Stepping Stone Forests:

"A chap called John Kiberd heads that up, they put little mini woodlands in schools and public areas. It involves work with the council and the biggest thing we have done is plant 8,000 trees in Dodder Valley Park over the last two years. That was an adventure in itself."

Bernie is also involved in Willbrook Litter Mugs, Ballyroan Garden Group, and other "bits and pieces" around where she lives and the work keeps her very busy.

"I'd be out every weekend and a couple of days a week. Doing things with local schools or tidying up around the village, or planting. Trying to keep the place looking half decent, getting people to appreciate where we live - we are blessed to be here, there is so much greenery around. It's (important) to appreciate and understand what will be lost if we don't look after it," she said.

Now retired from the workplace, her voluntary commitments having filled her days.

"It's pretty much a full time job. It'd be up to 30 hours a week, but you wouldn't do it if you didn't enjoy it. I've made an amazing network of friends from it."

She has huge enthusiasm for what she does and for doing what she can for her local environment.

"I love it, there's nothing better and you meet such great people. I don't know if you've ever come across Dodder Action, but when you see those people in the river hauling out mattresses, you couldn't but



**Local Authority
Members
Association
Award winner**

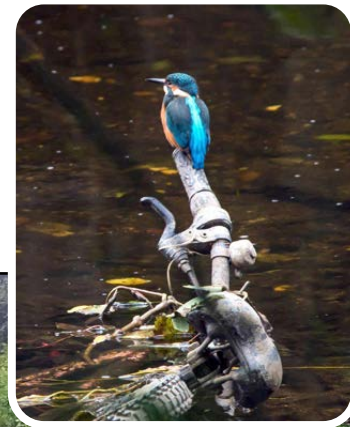
"It made me very proud, but they could have picked out any of the people that I work with. Once I got over the mortification, I was kind of chuffed."

want to get your boots on and get in and help out. The Dodder is just amazing, and it's free. That's what keeps you coming back to it, there's magic in it.

"People pay to go on these meditation courses, but you can just sit still in nature for five and ten minutes and look at what's around you... It's free but it's priceless," she said.

A very modest individual, she was stunned to receive the award.

"I was completely taken aback, I have to say. I'd prefer to just do the grunt work and let someone else do the glitter. It made me very proud, but at the same time they could have picked out any of the people that I work with. Once I got over the mortification, I was kind of chuffed I have to say," she said.



• The Dodder Action group at work - follow them on Facebook.

COMMUNITY FINANCE

Multiplier effect

Community Finance Ireland (CFI)'s third Social Value Report indicates that for every €1 invested, the multiplier value is €4.85 in terms of social and economic value. Since it was established CFI has provided over €129m in social finance to groups. For more information, visit: <https://bit.ly/CFIsocialvalue3>

LOCAL ENHANCEMENT PROGRAMME 2025

Over 5,400 projects funded

Almost 4,500 community organisations will receive small grants, funding over 5,400 individual projects through the Local Enhancement Programme 2025.

Details were announced in June by Dara Calleary, Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht, and Jerry Buttimer, Minister of State with responsibility for Community Development and Charities.

Minister Buttimer said, "The Local Enhancement Programme is about giving a helping hand to our local groups and clubs, who are the building blocks of Irish community life. With over 5,000 projects approved the number of communities and people that these grants will benefit is vast."

Minister Calleary said, "The impact of the Local Enhancement Programme is considerable, and it allows community groups to carry out the invaluable work they do on behalf of others in local areas throughout the country."

The Local Enhancement programme 2025 was launched in November 2024 with funding of €7 million.

COMMUNITY RECOGNITION FUND

€17 million to 212 projects

€17 million will be invested to deliver 212 community projects throughout the country via the Community Recognition Fund.

Announcing details in June, Minister Dara Calleary said:

"I am very happy to be making a further announcement under the Community recognition Fund which will build on the 349 projects previously announced under the 2024 scheme. The announcement today will mean that over 1,450 projects have now been awarded funding under the Community Recognition Fund in just over two years."

Citizens' parliament engages community voices in search for ways to strengthen democracy

BY ALLEN MEAGHER



• Niall Mahon (left) and Con Cronin (right) will present the recommendations of the Citizens' Parliament in Brussels in February, 2026, are seen here with Moya Ni Cheallaigh, a fellow citizen parliamentarian.

Four sittings of a National Citizens' Parliament on Media and Democracy were held over spring in Mary Immaculate College in Limerick, as part of a European project to hear ideas from citizens on ways to protect the media as it is integral to supporting and saving democracy.

In all, 20 people gave up four weekends to sit, discuss and make recommendations to be considered alongside those from citizens in ten or more cities across the continent.

"This has never been more important than now as misinformation, disinformation, alternative facts and radical polarisation of society are on the rise," said Jude McNerney, who co-ordinated the project along with colleagues Dr Rosemary Day and Kathy Cush.

Next year, two Irish participants (pictured above) will travel to Brussels to join concerned citizens from other countries while presenting their chief recommendations to MEPs and members of the European Commission.

The EU is involved because some of the resolutions, if adopted, will require international regulation and legislation.

Among the resolutions are a call to oblige large online platforms to reinstate fact checking and to

provide simple, effective routes for citizens to report factual errors and have corrections made in a timely fashion.

Other recommendations made in Limerick are for local and national politicians to consider and will be presented to Limerick City and County Council and to the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Arts, Media, Communications, Culture and Sport in the autumn.

The citizens' parliament recommends for example the establishment of town hall style engagement events along with more opportunities for journalists to quiz politicians in public settings.

"The media are the only way for citizens to find out what is really happening in the locations of power and the National Citizens' Parliament has called for Ireland's media regulator, Coimisiún na Meán (CnM) to establish regional committees with accessible representatives so that citizens can easily avail of the services they provide to the public," said Jude.

The parliament also wants CnM "to raise the awareness and capacity of people to find their way in the abundance of media that surrounds us every day. In short, they are calling for media literacy for school children and for adults of all ages and stages," said Jude.

The citizens' parliaments are a

key element of the project. Mary I College also reached out to media professionals for their views, interviewing editors and journalists from print media, radio, and television. Jude said, "All of the Irish media will have been contacted at some stage by this project to take part, through interviews or surveys."

Changing Ireland was among those glad to contribute on a day dedicated to hearing voices representing minority communities. Speakers who addressed the parliament that day included lecturer Dr Sindy Joyce, a member of President Michael D Higgins' Council of State and a powerful advocate for fellow Travellers. The parliament also heard from Dr Lylian Fotabong who conducted PhD research on the question 'How are Africans portrayed in Irish media?'

The National Citizens' Parliament of Ireland was funded by the EU through their HORIZON scheme as part of a three year research project called MeDeMap – short for Mapping Media for Democracy. While most countries' citizens' parliaments were held in their capital cities, Ireland stood out for having a regional city host the project.

More details can be found at: <https://www.mic.ul.ie/MeDeMap?index=0>

Award for 100% energy-sufficient community centre saving €14k p.a.

BY ALLEN MEAGHER

A community centre in Co. Meath has shown other centres the way when it comes to energy efficiency, carbon reduction efforts and saving money. Actions taken over the years have saved the centre €14,000 per annum on energy costs while reducing emissions by 14 tonnes of CO₂ annually.

Dunshaughlin Community Centre manager Gerry O'Connor, delighted with a recent award win, contacted Changing Ireland on behalf of the centre which is now 100% self-sufficient in terms of energy usage, between the hours of 8am to 6pm.

The centre – 25 years in operation – is open for over 100 hours per week and offers a community gym, sports hall, dance studios and a community hub. It also provides the PE facilities for the adjacent Dunshaughlin Community College during school term.

As it expanded over the years, it also sought to reduce its energy usage, starting back in 2012 when, with support from Meath Partnership, it hired consultants to conduct an energy audit.

“The subsequent report quantified our annual electricity usage at 80mw and gave a list of recommended actions to reduce this usage and to reduce our CO₂ emissions. The Centre at the time was open 80 hours per week,” said Gerry who also serves as a county councillor.

“Over the years we have used these recommendations as finance allowed to reduce our usage. We implemented measures such as LED lighting, sensor lighting in seldom used areas, switching off sockets / screens, gym equipment, and so on, at close of business,” he said.

“In 2023 we conducted another energy survey. We were now opened for 100 hours and had added a 2000 square foot extension. The measures we had implemented had worked, with our energy usage reduced to 64mw per annum.

“We applied for the Climate Action Fund through Meath County Council last year and were granted funding for 110 Solar Panels and a 50kw three phase inverter. These have now been installed, and we are 100% self-sufficient currently from 8am until 6pm, with excess energy being exported back to the grid. The system will reduce our emissions further by 14 tonne of CO₂ and our energy costs by €14k per annum,” said Cllr. O'Connor.

The centre was formally recognised for its efforts at the Meath Chronicle Community and Sports Awards held on May 22, winning the Green Project of the Year Award.

Dunshaughlin Community Centre is supported by the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht, through Pobal which administers the Community Services Programme and the Community Centre Investment Fund.

The centre was opened in 2000 by President Mary McAleese and will be celebrating 25 years of supporting the local community this October.



• Solar panels on Dunshaughlin Community Centre's roof.



• Dunshaughlin Community Centre was delighted to win the Meath Chronicle's Green Project of the Year Award. Pictured: John Irwin, board member, Oliver McKenna, chairperson, and centre manager (Cllr) Gerry O'Connor.

Dunshaughlin among 369 centres to benefit from the Community Centre Investment Fund

Over €25 million is to be invested in 369 community centres and projects in the latest tranche of funding under the Community Centre Investment Fund (CCIF).

The latest announcement was made on March 11 by Dara Calleary (pictured right) Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht, and it follows on from funding announced last November for over 400 facilities.

Close to €110 million has now approved under the fund since it was set up three years ago.

Among the beneficiaries this year is Dunshaughlin Community Centre which receives €57,657 towards the upgrade of a lift and to complete necessary roof repairs. It is one of 12 community centres and projects in County Meath which will share €886,219 for improvement and refurbishment works.



UISCE CLISTE: Cherry Orchard footballers are drinking more, saving money, saving the planet

BY OWEN RYAN

A study into how increasing safe public drinking water and tailored education can improve the health of people living in disadvantaged areas, was launched in April. The 'Uisce Cliste: Healthy Hydration for Dublin' report tells how better access to free high quality drinking water in public spaces changes habits and awareness about the importance of drinking water.

A secondary aim was to explore how well an Uisce Cliste project with Cherry Orchard FC, in Ballyfermot, where the report was launched, helped to reduce plastic and aluminium waste. The club now has smart water fountains and players now use club-branded reusable bottles.

Cherry Orchard FC also received Uisce Cliste recommendations for their tuck-shop, educational materials and nine face-to-face education sessions for children, adolescents and adults.

Following this, hydration-related knowledge and habits improved among children and parents by 17% and over 900 litres of water were drunk during the short study period. Startlingly, there was a 97% reduction in usage by players of single use plastic bottles, aluminium cans and coffee cups.

Launching the report, Jennifer Murnane O'Connor, Minister of State at the Department of Health, said, "This report reinforces that



• The Uisce Cliste project team with Jennifer Murnane O'Connor, Minister of State at the Department of Health.

access to clean drinking water is not only a basic right, but a powerful lever for improving public health. Through authentic community collaboration and targeted interventions, we can support education and find solutions to community challenges. With evidence-based policy we can enhance the built environment to make healthy choices much easier in order to improve health, reduce waste and advance health equity across disadvantaged areas."

Stephen O'Brien, underage chairperson at Cherry Orchard FC said he was proud of the Uisce Cliste project because the practical measures "allowed us to make a

real impact on the health of our members."

Joanna Kelly works with Dublin City Council as its local development officer for Cherry Orchard Ballyfermot and she was Uisce Cliste's project leader. She said the report shows "the real impact of working directly with communities and stakeholders to design meaningful, evidence-informed interventions. It highlights how public realm improvements, combined with education, can drive positive long-term health outcomes in our neighbourhoods."

The research for the report was conducted by Dr. Grace O'Malley, Dr. Desire Naigaga, Dr.

Angela Hickey, Dr. Lisa Mellon and Prof. Suzanne McDonough of RCSI University of Medicine and Health Sciences. The project was a collaborative effort between RCSI University of Medicine and Health Sciences, Dublin City Council, and the Sláintecare Healthy Communities Programme, as part of the Dublin City Healthy Ireland Strategy 2022–2025, funded by the Department of Health.

To find out more, visit: <https://healthyhydration.eu/>

* You can read the 46-page Uisce Cliste report here: <https://bit.ly/UisceClisteREPORT>

There was a 97% reduction in single use plastic bottles at Cherry Orchard FC because of Uisce Cliste.



• The above was placed on the walls above urinals in Cherry Orchard FC's toilets.

Free public water should be available everywhere, argues Grace O'Malley

BY OWEN RYAN

There are very serious impacts from not having access to high quality free drinking water and more needs to be done in this area, according to Dr Grace O'Malley, senior author of the 'Uisce Cliste: Healthy Hydration for Dublin' report* launched in April.

"It's known worldwide that access to drinking water is a social determinant of health. If (people) don't have access to free, high quality drinking water, it can affect the kidneys, heart health, learning and mood. Also, we substitute water with other drinks that aren't as healthy, especially as they are advertised all the time and pushed on children," she said.

As part of the study, Cherry Orchard FC and Ballyfermot United FC received water fountains and reusable bottles.

Dr O'Malley feels that such things should be commonplace across the country: "These are public health features that should be available everywhere, and in many countries they are, but in Ireland the access to free drinking water isn't great."

She was heartened by Uisce Cliste's impact on young players and adults with Cherry Orchard FC.

"I am particularly interested in child health, and (seeing) an increase in the children's knowledge of the science around dehydration is really important. Generally when children say they are thirsty they are already dehydrated, their thirst mechanism doesn't develop until the second decade of life. Lots of children will say they are hungry, but it's actually thirst they are feeling. When they say they are thirsty they're actually dehydrated at that point," she said.

COLOUR OF URINE CHARTS HELPED IN REAL TIME

The Uisce Cliste approach is very practical.

"One of the things that we did was provide urine colour charts, basically a sheet to put up in the toilets and it has colour grading of wee. It teaches someone how to look at the colour of their wee and tell in real time if their body is sending them a signal that they need to drink more water. That very practical measure helped (a lot)," she said.

Dr O'Malley was "really shocked" by how heavily soccer players relied

on bought beverages instead of water. Usage of single-use plastic bottles and aluminium cans has fallen to nearly zero.

"Cherry Orchard were really behind the project in terms of reminding the members to use their reusable bottles and they talked to visiting clubs about not bringing plastic onto the site," she said.

Around the same time as Cherry Orchard FC was trying this new approach, on the national stage the return reuse recycle scheme for plastic bottles and aluminium cans was introduced.

"From talking to the club they felt that a combination of all the reusable bottles, the water fountain, the education, and a redesign of the tuck shop – plus the coaches and the managers being behind the project - impacted how everyone was doing things on the ground."

"The really positive thing was the atmosphere that the project created. In Ballyfermot United Football Club they have a fountain now and they want the hydration education."

She feels it is important that everyone can easily access free, high quality drinking water away from home.

"Every child, every teenager and adult should be able to access free drinking water and not be having to think about purchasing it when they are out and about."

Generally when children say they are thirsty they are already dehydrated, their thirst mechanism doesn't develop until the second decade of life.



• Dr Grace O'Malley.

"Every child, every teenager and adult should be able to access free drinking water and not be having to think about purchasing it"
– Grace O'Malley

5 health issues from not drinking enough water daily

1. Headaches often accompany a state of dehydration and are a common sign of mild to moderate dehydration. Drinking only water while experiencing a headache rather than sugary drinks can help.

2. Weight gain can be an issue. Studies show that drinking the right amount of water can give a significant boost to one's metabolism and many wellness experts advise drinking more water to lose weight or to keep it off.

3. Constipation is often a result of not drinking enough water and not eating enough high fibre foods.

4. Moodiness may be caused by lack of water. Some research has shown that even mild dehydration can lead to neurological changes that affect our ability to focus and can cause irritability.



5. Not drinking enough water can lead to dehydration, which manifests in the skin as dryness, flakiness, and a dull complexion.

HUMANS OF DUBLIN CITY COUNCIL

BY OWEN RYAN

As part of Dublin City Council's Inclusion and Integration week in May, it hosted a photography exhibition featuring the diversity of its own staff. This is probably a first for local authorities and the idea could easily be taken by others, or by community organisations, or by any entity in fact.

The exhibition entitled 'Humans of Dublin' was held in the Civic Offices and it provided a fascinating glimpse into the life experiences of 12 council staff members by telling their stories of inclusion and integration.

It was created by Hungarian Peter Varga who moved to Dublin aged 19. He is an author, photographer and creator of the social media phenomenon, Humans of Dublin.

Among those featured is Yoga (Yogi) Lakshmi Chandrasekhar, a research officer with Dublin Region Homeless Executive who says she learned hard work far from Dublin.

"I grew up in Tamil Nadu, India, raised by parents that were important in shaping the person I am today, but my grandfather was the one that took it a few steps further. He was a proud public servant and I used to spend a lot of time with him as a child. He taught me the values of hard work and integrity before I could even write my own name. By the time I was ten, I was his professional partner, helping him with pension paperwork for villagers. While other kids played, I was writing official letters - and people even paid me for my work. Talking about positive child labour."

She said that something inside her "clicked" when a friend mentioned moving to Ireland, and working for the Council changed her life in very positive ways.

"When I got the job at Dublin City Council, it became more than just work. It became my sanctuary. My first boss in Dublin City Council, Jamie, didn't see me as 'just an intern'. He treated me as someone with potential, even before I saw it in myself. He pushed me to take up space I had once been afraid to claim."

Also featured is James Bradley who works in housing, community services and regeneration.

James grew up facing severe learning issues:

"I was born with congenital hydrocephalus, a condition that made learning incredibly difficult. Growing up in Ireland in the late 70s, I was labelled a 'slow learner', bullied, sidelined, and told I'd never amount to anything. School was a daily struggle. I was mocked and physically and verbally abused. By 15, I had barely started secondary school and felt completely defeated. The Rehabilitation Board deemed me "unsuitable" for further education."

However, Preston College in England offered support for people with the challenges he faced, and he went from strength to strength there, becoming a very educated man.

"Each success was a victory over those who had written me off. The journey wasn't smooth, but I never stopped pushing forward," he said.

He has now had a 25 year career with the local authority.

"I found my place in Dublin City Council. I rose from a clerical officer to a staff officer role, working in Claims and Housing, where analytical thinking became my strength. I have good friends and a job I love. My greatest asset is persistence. I focus on what I can do and not what I can't. A learning disability doesn't limit your potential. Lack of self-belief does."

Speaking about the exhibition, Peter Varga said, "Behind every large organisation, there are people like you and me, with lives just as complex, challenging, and layered. We often forget this when we're navigating policies, processes, or public services.

"Empathy has the power to shift how we see institutions (and) this project is my way of saying: look closer. There's always a human story behind the work," he said.

While the exhibition was open to staff only, 'Changing Ireland' got a look in and you can see and read four more accounts from staff who told their stories on Humans of Dublin's Facebook and Instagram pages.

To see Peter's work across the capital visit: <http://www.humansofdublin.ie/>



• Yoga (Yogi) Lakshmi Chandrasekhar works as a research officer with Dublin City Council's Region Homeless Executive.



• James Bradley works with Dublin City Council in housing, community services and regeneration.

"I focus on what I can do and not what I can't. A learning disability doesn't limit your potential. Lack of self-belief does." - James Bradley, Dublin City Council.

Course boosts wellness, empowerment and leadership in city communities

BY OWEN RYAN AND ALLEN MEAGHER

The CWELL programme, a University of Limerick diploma designed by communities for communities, is providing training for people interested in helping the areas they live in.

"The acronym CWELL stands for Community, Wellness, Empowerment, Leadership and Lifeskills. Those were the themes that came out in the initial collaborations with the parish. They became the core of what CWELL is about," said Eileen Hoffer, a community engagement facilitator with UL.

It began in St Mary's Parish and has expanded to include other regeneration areas of Limerick, and Eileen says it offers a lot to people who are often already involved in the community.

"It's a two year undergraduate diploma aimed at people already active in their communities. In a lot of communities people would be involved in several different organisations, you'd have the usual suspects involved in lots of things," said Eileen.

The course consists of eight modules with much of the second year focused on a community based project.

"There's a lot of group work, learning by experience. There are essays and lectures, but the vast majority of it is group work. It's quite imaginative in how things are taught and assessed," says Eileen.

She feels it really helps to further develop the potential of people already invested in their communities.

"What CWELL does is enhance what people have already. Some people find it really transformative and they find it affirming. We have a rule in class that you can't say 'only' or 'just' because the students who are attracted to CWELL sometimes don't realise how much community experience they have and the level of skills they have. I think CWELL helps to bring that out as well as giving them new skills and knowledge."

CWELL has its own magazine* and graduate Jackie Condon is heavily involved in getting it to print every two months.

"I'm part of the editorial team with Tracey Gleeson. Maura (Adshhead) is the programme director and Eileen is also involved in it. I'd



be the main reporter and really I'm a conduit for community workers to showcase things that are going on in their communities. I am also the envoy that goes out and asks if they would like to have what they are doing featured in a magazine.

"There are an awful lot of people doing a lot of hard work behind the scenes and it very much goes unrecognised. It's nice for the groups to have a voice. Also, students can contribute if there is anything going on in their area. It's my job to pull it all together," she says of the publication.

Jackie loves to see the energy and commitment of the various community groups in the area. "It is both humbling and encouraging to see all of the positive work going on throughout Limerick."

'CWELL Magazine' is distributed across Limerick city.

Jackie says the most important thing is telling people's stories in a positive way.

"I just want to do justice to the people about whom I do the features. Once they're happy about how they have been portrayed and their voice is heard, then my job is done."

The most recent edition featured a women's shed, a men's shed, green electricity, model railway building, and the performance of a play which made the front cover. Called 'Club 27' the play was written by CWELL student Sharon Brommel who was studying two courses at once: She wrote the play while also attending a script writing course.

"The community is a big part of this project as I combine the two things I enjoy most, working with people and writing," Sharon told CWELL Magazine.

* You can sign up to 'CWELL Magazine' by emailing Tracey.Gleeson@ul.ie



• LEFT: CWELL graduate Jackie Condon. ABOVE: CWELL magazine.

"We have a rule in class that you can't say 'only' or 'just' because the students who are attracted to CWELL sometimes don't realise how much community experience they have."

Island Gardening



• CWELL students Caroline O'Connell, Debra Franklin, Jacinta Kelly and Debbie Bourke with Mary Hughes (a community worker with the Empowering Communities Programme – 2nd left) at the launch of their community project Island Gardens.

Among the projects that CWELL students engaged on this year was one with residents on King's Island, Limerick, to revive a community garden.

The project involved collaboration with community gardener Rebecca Hussey, Limerick Civic Trust, Limerick

Growing Communities, Sláintecare Healthy Communities, and the PAUL Partnership's Empowering Communities project.

The aim was to turn the Island Gardens into a welcoming and inclusive space for everyone.

NO NAME CLUBS ARE THE ENVY OF TEENAGERS COMING FROM ABROAD

BY ALLEN MEAGHER

The surprising thing about No Name Clubs is not so much their unusual name, but that there are not many more of them in a country trying to point new generations towards healthy lifestyles and away from alcohol, drugs and pubs.

There are 21 No Name Clubs in Ireland today and perhaps the miracle is not alone that they have survived now for 50 years, but are gradually growing in number. The clubs engage 15-18 year-olds in fun weekly activities and longer term projects in areas they choose themselves.



Ethan Jordan (pictured above) enjoyed in his youth being a member of a club in Claremorris, Co. Mayo, and he sees a bright future: "Last year we had up to 500 members registered across the whole country so we've good reach."

To date, over 11,000 people have benefitted across the country from being club members.

The organisation, which Ethan volunteered with for years and now works for full-time nationally as a support officer, has a new strategic plan and they will open more clubs once they can recruit more volunteers.

"We're looking to hear from volunteers, anyone aged 18 to 80 or 90, people who are willing to make a difference in their community," he said.

The aim is to establish more clubs to support more young people on a weekly basis, and for every five volunteers who step forward they create space for 20 young people to join as No Name Club members.

One of the appeals of clubs is that they are aimed primarily at young people wishing to enjoy themselves without alcohol.

"We don't condone the use of either alcohol drugs or any other substances. We're trying to hear to support young people to enjoy themselves without needing other substances," said Ethan.



• Winners celebrating at the No Name Club Youth Awards held in May.

Many clubs run discos, themed balls, quiz nights, health talks, talent shows, organised trips, fundraising and outdoor activities such as kayaking. Members get an opportunity to gain self-confidence, learn new skills and make lifelong friends around the country as they take part in national events such as the national youth awards.

Teenagers who come from abroad and become members wish they had such clubs back home.

"There are an absence of youth clubs in some countries. We have a lot of members now who come from Erasmus backgrounds who are here from the likes of Spain and Germany. Quite often they say 'We only wish we had something like this in our own country when we go back,'" said Ethan.

"We're very fortunate ourselves this summer in July we're bringing 10 young people on an Erasmus exchange to Croatia," he added.

"We want to make sure that young people continue to be heard," he said, introducing Changing Ireland to two club members.

Each club is run by volunteers and they received funding last year through the HSE and the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth. The three founders behind No Name Clubs were a priest, a famous hurler and a garda. To find out more about them, to volunteer, or to start a club in your area, visit: <https://nonameclub.ie/>

Finally, if you're wondering about the name, apparently the founders when discussing what to call their new initiative remarked that if they didn't come up with a name it would be a no name club. And so they settled, ironically, on that as the name.



• Dungarvan No Name Club members get ready for the sea in April.



• Cormac Walsh who spoke to Changing Ireland is seen on the right with two fellow No Name Club members at the launch of their national strategic plan earlier this year.

We have club members from Spain and Germany who say 'We only wish we had something like this in our own country'.

Club members like no alcohol aspect

Changing Ireland spoke recently to two members from Claremorris No Name Club.



Pearse Diskin (pictured above) told why he keeps returning to the club: "All my friends are there and everyone that I talk to is there. And you can do so much."

He said No Name Clubs are good places to get to know new people.

"And everyone that you talk to doesn't drink alcohol. It's just a very good environment, because it teaches you not to drink alcohol when you're older," he said. "Nowadays more teenagers are starting to get addicted to alcohol and drugs and all that stuff. No Name Club really helps you stop doing that, and the more people that you're friends with that don't do that, it helps you not do that when you're older," he said.



Another member Cormac Walsh (pictured above) described walking into a No Name Club: "When you walk in the door of the local centre, the first thing you do is you sign your name on the book, you meet with the adults (volunteers) and you say hello and then you walk down and everybody kind of spreads themselves out across the club. There's different things for everybody to do. And you can go talk to people that you know or people that you don't know. You can do whatever you want, really."

Cormac said that their club has a pool table, a Playstation 4, a Nintendo Wii, and an air hockey table, as well as board games and couches to relax in and socialise.

"There's anything and everything really. Go for it," he said.

Galway groups launch toolkits to boost inclusive employment



• Staff and participants in the WorkAbility programme - Amy McGrath, programme mentor, Ali Loughnane, Maggie Woods, programme co-ordinator, Brian Clancy, Esther Koroma, Eanna O'Cosgora and Lisa Madden.

Employers in Galway city and county are to benefit from the launch today of new employment toolkits to assist companies and organisations to recruit, retain and respect those with disabilities in the workforce.

The toolkits were launched simultaneously in Galway city and county today by Hildegard Naughton, minister of state with responsibility for disability.

Speaking in Galway city, Minister Naughton said, "Projects funded under the WorkAbility Programme incorporate a strong focus on employer engagement, raising employers' awareness and building their capacity to recruit, retain and progress people with disabilities in their workforce."

She commended all involved in developing the toolkits saying they had "risen to the challenge of the programme in a very relevant and unique".

The toolkits highlights practical ways that employers can benefit from a more inclusive and innovative workplace.

Both publications were funded through the Department of Social Protection's WorkAbility - Inclusive Pathways to Employment Programme. It previously supported the launch of a toolkit designed for County Roscommon.

Changing Ireland attended the city launch organised by Galway City Partnership where the Mayor of Galway, Peter Keane, urged everyone present to recommit themselves to inclusion. He described the toolkit as "a fantastic achievement" and said Galway County Council "stood foursquare behind everything you're trying to do in Galway City Partnership".

The toolkit launch was attended by many with direct experience of hitting barriers to the workplace. They described not only

their experience, but the loss to businesses and society in general when people's potential is denied.

Lisa Madden was one who shared her workplace story.

"Meeting with the team on WorkAbility has given me a strength I didn't think I had. I can stand up for myself particularly in work situations and even have been able to take on extra hours," she said.

Maggie Woods of Galway City Partnership encouraged employers to use the toolkit,

"Being part of this programme, you are building an inclusive workplace and this is also a strategic advantage. Employers who hire individuals with disabilities are guaranteed to see increased productivity, creativity, and employee loyalty."

Summing up its value, she said the toolkit "provides practical, step-

• TOP: Maggie Woods of Galway City Partnership and Mayor of Galway, Peter Keane at the WorkAbility toolkit launch. PHOTOS: A. Meagher.

"Employers who hire individuals with disabilities are guaranteed to see increased productivity, creativity, and employee loyalty."

by-step resources to help you implement inclusive hiring practices. Whether you're just starting or looking to enhance your efforts, this guide will support you every step of the way."

Programme partners in the development of the city's toolkit include Galway City Partnership, Galway Chamber of Commerce, Galway Roscommon Education & Training Board, EmployAbility Galway, Access for All and Brothers of Charity Western Region.

The Workability - Inclusive Pathways to Employment Programme is co-funded by the Government and the EU.

The toolkits are available from Galway City Partnership (email - info@gcp.ie / tel. 091-773 466) and through FORUM Connemara (email - info@forumconnemara.ie / tel. 095-41116).

- ALLEN MEAGHER

BALBRIGGAN WINS AWARD FOR WELLBEING MAP

BY OWEN RYAN

The Balbriggan Great Places and Spaces Map was the winner of the best mental health initiative at the Local Authorities Members Association (LAMA) awards.

The initiative was driven by Thrive Balbriggan which describes itself as a community-led project “to create a happy and healthy place to live by conducting projects and events aiming at improving mental health and wellbeing”. It has been up and running since 2021.

We spoke to Thrive chairperson Joe McKenna about the map and the award win.

“We needed something more Balbriggan-centric to put a real identity on the project. We kind of rammed our heads together to see what we could do and came across a wellbeing map for Wexford, for the entire county, appealing to children. It was a really cool idea, a massive project covering the whole county. The places were colour coded (based) on how they made people feel,” he said.

His group decided to try out the same idea in Balbriggan.

“We did a survey over a number of months for people to tell us where in Balbriggan made them feel energised, made them feel at peace, made them feel at one with nature, made them feel relaxed. We got hundreds of responses, fed them into a database and we came up with a selection of the top places in the town,” said Joe.

Once they knew what to include the next step was to package it in a way that would capture the imagination. The town’s art scene is growing in recent years so they put the word out that they were looking for an artist to design their map.

“We ended up with a girl called Lauren Fernandes who was really fantastic. We picked her because we wanted it to be really child-friendly. We wanted it to catch the eye of young people. If you have a map and it looks exciting and kid friendly, they are going to make their parents or grandparents take them there.”

It soon became apparent to Thrive Balbriggan that they had succeeded.

“We noticed that we weren’t the only people handing out this map. Other people were handing it out. We said to ourselves then ‘This thing is doing exactly what we wanted it to do’. We were never thinking about awards, but Fingal County Council had supported the map and they nominated us for the LAMA award which we won and that was great.”

Joe feels there are a lot of things on the map which people might take for granted or almost forget due to their familiarity.

“Ardgillan Castle is on it, as a natural spot that is very relaxing. Things like the library are relaxing, the Lark Theatre in Balbriggan which won a new building of the year award last year. That’s there

“You have to love where you live, but you have to make where you live lovable. Our aim was to get people to notice all of the things around them that they maybe don't appreciate enough.”



• You can't beat following best practice: Balbriggan's award-winning map was modelled on an idea they got from Wexford.

for people's wellbeing. You have Bremore Castle as well, you have the sports clubs.

In his day job Joe works as a team leader delivering the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme for Empower, a local development company supporting communities in Fingal, Clonsilla, Mulhuddart and Balbriggan.

“We had this message at the start that you have to love where you live, but you have to make where you live lovable, in a certain way. Our aim was to get people to notice all of the things around them that they maybe don't appreciate enough. That's where it went and people were saying 'Oh, I forgot that was there'. People new to the town didn't know that some of the things even existed.”

The map will be updated in the future.

“The town of Balbriggan is going through a huge regeneration and this map is something that we could update down the line. It's sustainable as an idea, because it will become dated and we will need to do it again. The fact that we have had such success this time means that next time we will probably get more support,” he said.

Thrive Balbriggan is one of a threesome of projects supported by Mental Health Ireland. There is a neighbouring project in Swords and Thrive Connemara was launched in Clifden last year, with plans for more in other places.

You can follow Thrive Balbriggan on Facebook and Instagram: [@ThriveBalbriggan](https://www.facebook.com/ThriveBalbriggan)

To learn more about Thrive nationally, visit: <https://www.mentalhealthireland.ie/project/thrive-ireland/>



• Seamus Quigley (centre) project worker for Empower accepts the LAMA award on behalf of Thrive Balbriggan, with (on left) Rafe Costigan, senior community officer with Fingal Co. Co. and (right) Anne Marie Farrelly, CEO of Fingal Co. Co.