

CHANGING IRELAND

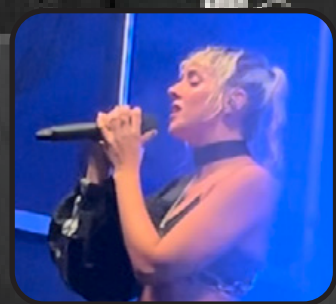
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COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT - EMPOWERMENT - COLLECTIVE ACTION - SOCIAL INCLUSION - www.changingireland.ie

Up De Flats!

Gemma Dunleavy
on why artists
should engage
in social
justice
issues,
where at all
possible

"My music was always about my area. The very first video I put out was to do with the struggle we faced."



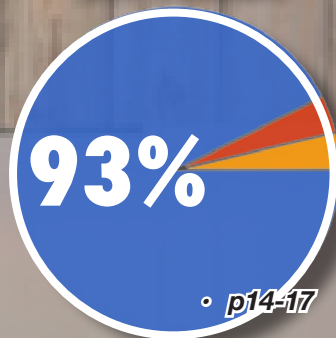
Gemma's great-granny was 'The Midwife of Monto', she continues to campaign for Terence Wheelock, and her community is "soil" to her.



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LIBERTIES PRIEST AND ACTIVIST

• Fr Michael Mernagh rowed with Haughey and was jailed for standing with Travellers



OF YOU ARE ACTIVE IN BOYCOTT & PROTESTS:

• Genocide and Irish civil society survey



• p15, 18-19

SICAP STORIES

• PLUS: Crucial funding retained

#SICAPStories



See how and why...

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- *Social farming works in Co. Kildare.*
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AND MUCH MORE.



Learn about the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme from community workers and people who changed their lives and their neighbourhoods through it.

15 stories in 5x 3minute videos.



FRONT COVER

Main photo: Gemma Dunleavy. Photo by Allen Meagher.

INDEPENDENT

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

ABOUT US

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

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

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

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

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

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

SUPPORT

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



An Roinn Forbartha Tuaithe agus Pobail agus Gaeltachta
Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht



MEET US ONLINE



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• John Feerick, CEO, Sligo LEADER Partnership, and Ryan Howard, CEO, SECAD, pictured at the SICAP 'In Our Words' showcase in Athlone



"It's a really big deal to change the name"

We are now **Limerick City Partnership** ✓

Bray & North Wicklow Area Partnership ✓

Local Development Companies Network ✓

~~PAUL PARTNERSHIP LIMERICK~~

~~Bray Area Partnership~~

~~ldn LOCAL DEVELOPMENT NETWORK~~

Visit changingireland.ie to read Owen Ryan's report on this and others stories you may have missed.



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SMALL CHANGES ARE IMPORTANT TOO

Sheriff Street to Liberties

Our lead story is an interview with Gemma Dunleavy from Sheriff Street in Dublin's north east inner city. She was reared in an area that has experienced waves of challenges and trauma. However, to her it is "soil" and she loves her community.

Universities should be calling her agent now to discuss fees for guest appearances, because she nails down what community, development, resilience and struggle is with the most beautiful words. In her interview, she talks about how anyone can become a volunteer or an activist. Meanwhile, through her lyrics and stage performances she gives voice to the plight of her own people and others.

Equally mesmerising and even more accomplished, as he has been on this earth a little longer, is Liberties priest Fr. Michael Mernagh. He is a community activist of the kind that troubles the authorities and, after run-ins with Charlie

Haughey, and the Gardai during evictions, he has powerful stories to tell.

Dolphin House

The ground-level transformation of the Dolphin House area of Dublin is fantastic to see. While there is now progress on regeneration, it will still take at least a decade and the interim measures – supported by SICAP – are "gold standard" as one interviewee puts it.

Bank accounts

It is concerning that small community groups are encountering difficulties opening bank accounts. Anything that puts off people from volunteering is an issue and I hope our highlighting of same prompts action in search of a solution.

Views on genocide

Our one-to-one interviews and online

survey resulted in broad agreement by those who took part. We did not fully expect that.

The survey also produced tips and advice for people wishing to play an active role opposing genocide. Many people saw boycotts as the most practical and effective means of responding.

Surprised

The pandemic's impact is mostly behind us, one would think. Yet, we discovered to our surprise, that some groups only returned late this year to in-person meetings. It prompted us to ask more questions (see back page).

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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DISCLAIMER

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

Senan Cooke honoured at first ever national social enterprise awards

BY ALLEN MEAGHER

Senan Cooke was presented with a Lifetime Achievement Award at the first National Social Enterprise Awards, held in Dublin in October.

Senan, originally from Kilkenny and a longtime dedicated member of the community in Dunhill, Co. Waterford, has been a champion of social enterprise for decades. He was among 20 winners from around the country to receive awards, at a ceremony in Tallaght Enterprise Centre.

In testimony given at the awards, Senan was recognised for being a social entrepreneur, a community worker, author, historian, hurler and proud GAA man. He was one of the founders of Dunhill Ecopark in County Waterford and his book - *'The Enterprising Community: A Bottom Up Perspective on the Capacity Within Communities to Regenerate'* - is still one of the best sources of information on social enterprise development in Ireland.

He is also friendly and most welcoming to anyone expressing the mildest interest in rural development and social enterprise.



• Senan Cooke (centre) receiving a Lifetime Achievement Award.

The overall winner of the Social Enterprise of the Year Award was Turn2Me, a mental health initiative that provides online counselling nationwide.

The awards were organised on behalf of the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht by a consortium of bodies involved in the social enterprise space. They are the Local

Development Company Network (LDCN), Social Enterprise Republic of Ireland (SERI), Irish Social Enterprise Network (ISEN) and The Wheel. The awards are supported by the Department under the National Social Enterprise Policy 2024-2027, to increase awareness of and showcase the sector.

For full details on winners, see page 31.

Contact Owen Ryan with your news!



Owen Ryan is a freelance journalist with Changing Ireland. From Crusheen, Co. Clare, he has over 20 years experience in journalism locally and nationally.

If you have a story for Changing Ireland's readers, email him today at: owen@changingireland.ie

Owen is the author of 'Fight of My Life', published last year, featuring many of Ireland's finest boxers, available at: <https://bit.ly/Amazon-Owen-Fightofmylife>

Training for community interpreters

A new 'Community Interpreter' initiative is being delivered by Galway Rural Development (GRD).

A community interpreter makes communication easier between people who don't speak the same language. You may come across a community interpreter in a community, healthcare, legal or public service settings. They help people who are not fluent in English, or culturally tuned in, to access essential services and participate in community activities.

The School of Languages, Literatures, and Cultures at the University of Galway, together with GRD, are collaborating on the mentoring support programme.

The initiative targets existing community interpreters who have undertaken training provided over the last two years by GRD.

As GRD's Donna Gleeson-Ryan says: "Providing training for community interpreters ensures quality communication is provided to our communities at a local level."

Congrats to Carrick-on-Shannon



Winner of Ireland's Tidiest Town 2025

Gill Moore to drive our social media



Gill Moore from Co. Kilkenny is to drive our social media from here on in, taking over from Helen Courtney. She takes up the freelance role at a time when access to trustworthy sources of information has never been more important.

With a background that includes many years teaching in Ballymun and working in overseas development projects, she now specialises in social media and in tourism. You can contact Gill at: gill@changingireland.ie

Singer

Gemma Dunleavy

"Community to me means soil"

Interview by Allen Meagher

You know when you hear Gemma Dunleavy sing about local and international injustices and her upbringing in Dublin's north inner city that she means it deeply.

The singer from Sheriff Street who rose to prominence with 2021 hit song 'Up De Flats' loves her community, is firmly rooted in it, and she spoke recently to Changing Ireland.

Her community has been constantly under pressure, most recently from gentrification, and her description of what community means to her should be included in community development textbooks:

"Community to me means soil. The soil that my roots are planted in - to me is my community. It's something that holds me tight, that gives me my sense of identity and places me somewhere in this mad world.

"It's so important for me to nourish and keep that community and to let it feed back to other people, because I wouldn't be who or where I am without my community. My community has faced much neglect and discrimination over the years.

"Community to me is the people within that place that literally, you know, kept the place warm with their hands, when it was basically a ***hole, when the government gave us no support. The community, the women in the area mostly, built up strong pillars around us to keep us all safe from the neglect and the discrimination we were getting from outside. So community for me is so important," said Gemma.

She explained why community means so much to her.

"I got it from my family, from my community; we grew up in each other's pockets. I grew up with my neighbours as (much as with) my nannies and my auntsies."



• *Singer Gemma Dunleavy. Photo by AM.*

"Community to me means soil. It holds me tight, gives me my sense of identity and places me somewhere in this mad world. It's so important for me to nourish and keep."

Many artists focus on their origins and Gemma is among the best of them.

"My music was always kind of about my area. The very first video I put out was to do with my area, and the struggle we faced. And I never wanted to do that, it was just like, me thought was, 'I'll put this out, and then I'll move on to the music', because that didn't feel like music

to me, because it was, it felt like a breath I had to release, you know what I mean? I'm still in that process of trying to get it off my chest. I don't feel like I have a choice in that."

She distinguishes between people with a stage to speak from and those who feel they have no voice – and she had advice for people who feel alone.

"Right now, I'm speaking from a point of privilege because I have a stage to stand on and I can tell a hundred, or a thousand, or ten thousand people sometimes, what the issues are. But it can be really hard, especially when you're going against the grain and when you feel like your voice isn't important, or you don't have a platform.

"It can be very disheartening when you're on your own and don't feel like you're heard. When you're in that position the best thing to do is find like-minded people and get together. A group only takes two people. And if you have two people you can go and do something, whether that's writing a letter to your local councillors, or creating a support group in the community," she said.

Her experience shows that communities such as hers are often taken for granted.

"You see what happens in areas like ours is - developers and stuff come in, councillors, people in the government come in, and we have put plants in meetings where we have actively heard the government and councillors who aren't for our area say, 'Oh you'll get away with planning permission here, because they don't know anything'.

She knows what people should do.

"The first thing you do is educate yourself. Form a group and educate one another. If you're sitting at home thinking - 'The state of this place, but I can't really just go and do stuff on my own and become an activist - like who do I think I am' - you don't need to be out fighting on the picket line. Start up something, whether it's a knitting group, a walking group –something with people from the area. Maybe it's tidying the streets once a week, something to get the people together, because you feel stronger then and you feel you have something worth fighting for.

"Anything that enriches or nourishes your community is going to give you strength and power, and they are things that people can't take

"We have put plants in meetings where we have actively heard the government and councillors who aren't for our area say, 'Oh you'll get away with planning permission here, because they don't know anything'."

away. Money can't take away that and that's what we really need to be doing - getting together and doing things together that make us all stronger and make our communities worth fighting for," she said.

While she feels that artists have a duty to speak up, at the same time she believes artists should not feel obliged to take on issues.

As she sang onstage in Limerick, "The fight for truth and justice is everywhere. The moment we relax and get comfortable and let the people in power walk all over us sets the precedent that these ****s can do what they want. And we can't let that happen."

In our interview after the show, she said, "I feel that as artists we have a duty to use our platform, but I also don't want every musician or artist to feel they have to make their art about that. They don't. Make art what you feel inside your belly, but if you're really taking in what's around you, it's hard for that not to come out.

"If you can find a way to make your art encapsulate a cause that you're serious about, then that's amazing. But it is hard to do that. You don't want people just getting up on stage and feeling like they have to talk about something that they're not aware of, or they might not be educated enough on it.

"But getting together with causes, such as playing at a local event - you're being there (matters)," she said.

She stressed that she would never want to make someone feel bad for choosing not to become involved in social justice campaigns. At the same time, there's no fooling her.

"I can smell, a mile away, when someone's being authentic or not. When you're from an area like Sheriff Street, you can smell a rat a mile away," she said.

Her family includes heroes who inspire her every day.

"Me heroes would be me two nannies. One was Mary. My other nanny's name was Darcy. I grew up sitting around the kitchen table with them yapping and talking and they really had a strong sense of justice in them," she said.

Going back one generation further, Gemma spoke about a famous relative who saved countless lives.

"Me great-grandmother Theresa

Dunleavy was an incredible woman. She was called 'The Midwife of the Monto', she was basically famous there," said Gemma.

Mrs. Dunleavy's unpaid work serving the most marginalised women of her era was locally renowned at the time, but has only in recent years begun to be recognised by historians.

As Gemma explained, "She became an honorary midwife in The Monto. The Rotunda has a plaque to her, because she delivered so many babies and saved so many women. She (also) saved many women from sex work and she rehomed babies. She was Ireland's first sex educator without ever going to college or learning anything. So she's my hero too. I can't let what she fought for die."

Her grandmother was one of the very few women to stand up to brothel keepers and the authorities and to stand by women when at their most vulnerable.

As Gemma remarked, "I'm very lucky to have those roots and that purpose in me."



• Gemma Dunleavy performing in King John's Castle, Limerick - Photo by AM.

“Anything that enriches or nourishes your community is going to give you strength and power, and they are things that people can't take away.”



Terence Wheelock

20 years on

into his suspicious death while in garda custody 20 years ago

Since his death in 2005, Terence's case was highlighted by many, including human rights group Amnesty International, the Irish Council for Civil Liberties, and local and national politicians.

An inquest in 2007 into Terence's death resulted in a split jury decision, however a subsequent investigation by the then Garda Síochána Ombudsman Commission declared that Terence was not mistreated in Garda custody. Nonetheless, family and supporters including councillors, TDs and senators continue to campaign for an independent public inquiry.

Among the campaigners is local singer Gemma Dunleavy who routinely uses her platform to highlight Terence's case in spoken voice performances.

Terence Wheelock's family and residents in his north inner city community continue to call for a public inquiry

"It's now been 20 years and the family are still looking for answers," she recited recently, listing the numbers associated with Terence's death:

"20 - the age Terence was when he left his ma's house to buy a paintbrush. 3 - the number of months he lay in a coma before he eventually passed away. 15 - the number of years his blood-stained clothes were hidden by the police force. 37 - the number of photographs taken of the injuries sustained by his body. 14 - the number of minutes they left him on the ground before picking up a phone to ring an ambulance. Zero - the number of public investigations and independent inquiries... It's been 20 years, imagine that, and still no justice. ...And they still have the audacity to say they did nothing.

"It's easy to blame certain people in society, easy to blame us for existing in the ghettos they made by design. And we all know a young fella who ended up in the back of the Mariah for wearing a tracksuit or having the wrong second name. ...But we're getting louder and we won't stop," she spoke-sang.

New challenge as state funding sees staff quitting grassroots community jobs

By Owen Ryan

It is now very difficult for Local Development Companies to fill new roles, while they face a significant risk of losing staff.

At the Wheel's 2025 summit in Dublin recently, recruitment and staff retention was ranked as the second greatest challenge facing participants.

That reflects a buoyant economy and bulging State coffers, which has meant that local authorities and the HSE have been recruiting, offering well paid secure jobs.

CORK CITY

That's great for the people taking up those roles, but it is creating headaches for people like Brenda Cahill, CEO of Cork City Partnership.

She says that retaining staff isn't a very big problem, but getting new ones is certainly a challenge.

"It is way harder than it was. We were very lucky recently with three posts, but before that we had advertised those posts a couple of times and not got traction. For at least the last two years, it has been very difficult. There has been a very poor response to adverts.

"Before, we might have got 30 applications and been able to shortlist seven or eight. Now we have been getting eight or nine applications and you mightn't be able to interview anyone," she said.

Organisations like Cork City Partnership just can't offer what is available elsewhere at the moment.

"So many jobs came on stream over the last couple of years, permanent and pensionable jobs, and we just can't compete.

"A lot of the new jobs with the HSE and the Council are permanent jobs, whereas we can't issue contracts like that. The salaries in a lot of

cases are higher than what we can offer."

On the positive side, Cork City Partnership hasn't found it hard to keep the staff they do have.

"Our retention rate of existing staff is very good. You have people there for more than 25 years. Once we get them in we don't have a problem keeping them, but getting them in is where we find the problem is. A lot of the development workers say they have terrific freedom compared to being with a state agency. It's a very different way of working and once we get people in they tend to stay with us."

In some cases, jobs are being filled by people with less experience than might have been the case previously, an inescapable consequence of the competition in the sector.

She says the relatively short duration of contracts that can be offered is also a serious disadvantage, when competitors for staff can offer what is effectively a job for the rest of an applicant's working life.

Ms Cahill says that some Development Companies have been left in turmoil by people leaving: "I know other companies have lost staff to local authorities and the HSE. We're trying to get people in, but some companies have lost a few staff, because the same jobs in the local authorities are permanent and pensionable, and off they go. And no one would blame them."

SOUTH DUBLIN

The situation is very similar for South Dublin County Partnership, according to CEO Simon Monds.

"When we don't have a greater than normal turnover of staff, it doesn't seem out of kilter, but there is difficulty in recruiting when roles arise. Staff tend to stay, because they love the work that's here. But then when a post does arise, it is getting more and more difficult to recruit people with the required competencies into those roles. That's the issue rather than lots of staff going to work with a local authority, or the HSE, or places like that," he says.

Mr Monds said they are doing everything they can to make staff want to stay.

"We have done a bit around our pay scales over the last year. We have some roles that are Section 39, they would have got the increases due, particularly the last one in the agreement, and we would have given that right across the organisation, regardless of the funding stream.

"We have quite a good



• Brenda Cahill, CEO, Cork City Partnership.



• Simon Monds, CEO, South Dublin County Partnership.

"A small number of people left here to work in statutory agencies but came back to ourselves or this sector. There is something about the work that people love."

In some cases jobs are being filled by people with less experience than might have been the case previously.

pension, there's a 10% employer contribution after six months. We have just brought in a blended working policy. We had a pilot for the last number of years that was applicable to a small number of staff, I think around 40% of staff have at least one day a week working at home. Where we have things in our power, we are looking at those.

"Later this year we will be looking to identify future potential managers, people who could move into leadership positions within the company. It's about investing in our staff. We are in the final stages of completing an educational bursary support policy. We have always supported people, but this will put it on a more formal footing.

"Anything we can do that will make it more appealing for people to stay and work here, we are looking at doing. Whatever is in our gift."

On the positive side, he feels that people take huge satisfaction from the work they do for South Dublin County Partnership.

"To be honest, most people that I talk to here love the work. There is a small number of people who left here to work in statutory agencies but came back to ourselves or this sector. There is something about the work that people love."

COUNTY LOUTH

Ciarán Reid, CEO of Louth Local Development CLG said that things haven't been so bad there.

"It could change, but at the moment we have structures in place and wider employee benefits beyond pay that are seen as beneficial. We tend to recruit from Louth and neighbouring counties. There are some from Dublin, but most are from Louth or Cavan, some from Armagh and other parts of the North."

He is well aware of the picture across the sector.

"It's not something that we are having to pay attention to at this stage, but we know there is a pattern across the country to staff going to the HSE or local government because there are opportunities with better pay."

Mr Reid says they are trying to do what they can to improve the proposition to staff.

"I think we have a strong organisational culture that listens to people and supports them. We have a good senior management team who work closely with staff and support them. There are good teams that work well with each other. We have invested in our property, in technology and mobility, we have home-working. There are a range of things that people see value in," said Mr Reid.



• Ciarán Reid, CEO, Louth Local Development.

BUDGET 2026

Community development to get €260m of €611m

€36m increase for Gaeltacht, Irish language and Islands

The budget for the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht will be €611 million in 2026. The announcement was made by Dara Calleary, Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht, and Jerry Buttimer, Minister of State, on October 8.

Of the total, €192 million will go towards Rural Development, €260 million towards the Community Development.

Under Community Development, €74 million is being allocated to SICAP and other social inclusion supports. This includes €13 million per annum for important community integration work, helping to support new arrivals.

Also, the Community Development funding will allow for:

- An increase of €4 million for the Community Services Programme, with its annual allocation increasing from €55.4 million to €59.4 million.

- Funding towards the development of a new RAPID programme with €5 million in capital funding for 2026.

- Additional €3 million in funding for the Community Centre Investment Fund, meaning €20 million for investment in 2026.

- An additional €3.8 million in funding for the PEACEPLUS Programme, bringing total funding to €11 million.

- Enhanced supports for a wide range of community development initiatives such as volunteering, and supports for the community and voluntary sector – with €23.1 million in funding available for this area. In addition, €5 million in funding is available for social

innovation, social enterprise, and philanthropy.

- Funding of €6.77 million for the Charities Regulatory Authority.

Funding of €159 million will be available next year for the Gaeltacht, Irish Language and Islands Programme, a substantial increase of over €36 million.

Minister Dara Calleary said, "This will allow additional support for existing schemes and facilitate the roll-out of a number of new initiatives. It will also enable the delivery of three key infrastructure projects: Inis Oírr pier, the Irish Language and Cultural Centre in Harcourt Street, and redevelopment of the Coláiste Lurgan site in Indreabhán as an Educational and Youth Hub for the Conamara Gaeltacht. These are transformative projects that, once delivered, will benefit both Gaeltacht communities and the language for years to come."

Under Rural Development, spending will include:

- Significant capital investment in rural areas through the Rural Regeneration and Development Fund (€60 million), the LEADER programme (€32 million), the Town and Village Renewal Scheme (€21 million), CLÁR (€12 million), the Local Improvement Scheme (€17 million), and the Outdoor Recreation Infrastructure Scheme (€17 million).

- Ongoing current funding supports for initiatives such as the Walks Scheme; Tidy Towns competition, Agriculture Shows, and promotion of remote working through the Connected Hubs initiative.

More coverage: page 26.

- ALLEN MEAGHER



• Dara Calleary, Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht, and Jerry Buttimer, Minister of State, on October 8.

Dolphin House rejuvenation

is “GOLD STANDARD EXAMPLE” of climate action work

In Dolphin House in Dublin, local groups, residents and community workers, helped by hundreds of volunteers and with funding from the Climate Action Fund, have transformed the urban landscape.

“It’s a gold standard example of community funding and community action on the ground, especially from a sustainability and local environment perspective,” said community worker **Cillian O’Donoghue**.

The collaborative efforts turned a barren weedy site into a glorious community garden and replaced a muddy pitch with an astro-turf – all completed in one day by 300 volunteers from a private sector company.

The importance of this work is that children are growing up in deteriorating old housing blocks owned by the state and slated for demolition, as part of a regeneration process that is taking decades to complete. The delays have prompted local groups to campaign for action and the landscaping is an interim measure, to enhance the outdoor landscape for all ages.

“From a climate action point of view, everyone has a right to a clean environment and clean air, a nice place to live, places for children to play, and places for people to sit and chat. So, this is an example at the micro-level on the ground of community climate action related to those rights,” said Cillian who was employed by Dublin South City Partnership (DSCP). He said the work was also linked to the UN’s Charter for Human Rights, and to EU and national policies on climate action.

“Everyone has a right to a clean environment, clean air, a nice place to live, places for children to play, places for people to sit and chat. That’s a universal human right and is linked to the UN’s sustainable development goals,” he said.

The project has “improved the general look of the area in terms of cleanliness and walkability and that links into climate justice”, said Cillian. Sitting on a park bench in a bright corner of the once derelict site, he pointed to pollinator-friendly plants, improved green spaces, recreational spaces for all ages, local vegetable growing, herb growing, allotments and a polytunnel.

To make it happen, the Dolphin House Community Association, in partnership with the Rialto Youth Project and the Dolphin House Homework Club, supported by DSCP, successfully applied for funding and then liaised with Dublin City Council and a company called SNBC Aviation Capital.

The rain fell incessantly on the day that 300 employees from the aviation company came to volunteer, but it never deterred them from their aim to create Dolphin House’s new community garden called ‘Croí an Phobail’ (the Heart of the Community). They left behind the new garden, a polytunnel, planter beds, flower beds and an astro-pitch.

“It was like watching a miracle unfold,” said the retired head of Barnardos, Fergus Finlay who serves as the voluntary chair of Dolphin House Regeneration Board. He sits on the board with DSCP CEO Una Lowry who also helped in the background to make things happen.

Fergus had contacted a company called Difference Days, which in turn lined up staff from the aviation company to carry out the digging,



• Community workers Manus Bree and Cillian O'Donoghue in the playground beside the new astro-pitch in Dolphin House. PHOTO: AM

By Allen Meagher

planting, turf-laying and landscaping.

The planners also listened to local voices. For example, two new shipping containers were provided to securely store equipment needed for the upkeep of the garden.

Overall, it was a joint effort involving local residents, local groups, staff from DSCP, Climate Action funding and, crucially, SNBC’s employees working in the pouring rain as volunteers.

As Cillian said, it was an excellent example of “community cooperation and action between the public and private sector and ourselves in the community sector and the partnership.”

Manus Bree has worked in the area for over a decade and is currently employed as regeneration project co-ordinator by DSCP. He said, “There was no really safe outdoor places for families and kids to use within the proximity of the estate and it was going to take years for the promised regeneration and new community facilities, park and playgrounds to be built. So we looked for interim measures.”

Two years ago, the community was successful in getting a new playground built.

“If you count children under 18, there’s probably four or five hundred kids here within the estate,” said Manus. Together with the new astro-pitch and community garden, and the repainted community centre, Dolphin House’s outdoor space is today well utilised.

“Now, we have recreational areas that kids and families can enjoy and they are well used,” said Manus. “The playground has been a huge success and has never been vandalised,” said Manus.

The transformative work was supported by DSCP throughout by the national Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP) and has been highlighted as an example of best practice in a national campaign this year to highlight the programme’s impacts.



• The rain never deterred 300 volunteers from an aviation company who gave a day to work in Dolphin House - Photo courtesy of Dolphin House Community Association.

“From a climate action point of view, everyone has a right to a clean environment and clean air, a nice place to live, places for children to play, places for people to sit and chat. So, this is an example at the micro-level on the ground of community climate action related to those rights.”



• Before v After - local residents Ann and Patricia enjoying the sunshine in Dolphin Community Garden - Croi an Phobail.

From bleak view to a blooming vision

When I visited Dolphin House last year ago it was not a pretty sight. I met friendly people living amidst a dreary, grey and concrete landscape - dominated by 70-year-old blocks of flats awaiting regeneration for longer than it takes for a child to be born and grow up.

We featured the grey-painted community centre on our front cover, along with a story covering the campaign by locals urging local and central government to make regeneration happen faster.

While I took photos, a child was sitting smiling atop the roof of the community centre, near a sign saying "Anti-Climb Paint". He had not climbed up there to be on the front cover of a national magazine, so I reluctantly cropped him out.

Children have played football on this roof and have even hauled up bicycles to cycle around. This is familiar to me as our offices were based for many years in a bungalow in Sarsfield Gardens, Moyross, where children frequently climbed the roof to run its length. Thankfully, the pitched roof made playing soccer and cycling impractical. I would politely ask them to carefully come down, explaining that it was hard to concentrate on work while worrying about them – and they always came down once asked.

In July of this year, when I returned to Dolphin House, I didn't see any children on any roofs. Instead, they were playing in the park and on the new astro-pitch and a couple of children took to guiding us around and volunteered to help with the camera-work. They were lovely kids and it was great to see a once-derelict, weed-strewn area completely transformed and the community

centre now shone like a painting from the National Gallery after artistic treatment by two volunteers Maddie and Samantha. People sauntered around in sunshine, in the park, on their way to bingo, or to call on friends.



Most of the flats still await regeneration, but in the interim young and old alike have a community garden to enjoy.

Regeneration will still take at least a decade, but encouragingly there is progress. In September, a new planning application was lodged with Dublin City Council and the community hopes for a positive response by springtime of next year. Separately, an application to the Department of Housing for funding to build 500 houses has been submitted and a decision is expected shortly.

- ALLEN MEAGHER

LOCAL VIEWS ON NEW PUBLIC GARDEN AND PLAY AREAS



Changing Ireland popped into the community centre just as weekly bingo was about to commence and everyone we met spoke positively about their community and efforts by visiting and local volunteers alike.

Mary Lynne (pictured top left) welcomed the development of the new garden and parkland area.

"It's great, especially when the weather is fine. The other day we had a children's fun day and it was great to see all the kids enjoying the fresh air and the new garden.

"It's a great community. Everybody comes from all over to play their bingo, their line dancing and their aerobics and to have a cup of tea."

Anne Delaney (top right) said, "It's the best place around, our community. It's got an awful lot of things, more so than anywhere else. Even up in Drimnagh they haven't got what we have. A lot of people come down here because of that - from here, there and everywhere."

Asked about the new garden, she praised the volunteers from the aviation company who helped with re-landscaping, saying proudly: "People from all over the world came and done that."

Patricia Warren (bottom left) said, "I was born and reared here and they do brilliant things for the kids, for the old folks, for everyone here."

She praised green-fingered local volunteers, such as hard-working Mick who keeps the new garden looking "stunning and beautiful".

For her part, our fourth bingo fan, **Bronagh Laffin** (bottom right) from Coolock, said, "I absolutely love this community, even though I'm not from here. I love the people and the friendliness. They gave me so much support."



Arrests, rows with Haughey and anti-poverty work in Ireland and South Africa; the priest who did it all

By Owen Ryan

Father Michael Mernagh laughs gently when he recalls being taken into custody well over 30 years ago: “We were arrested out in Firhouse, for supporting a Traveller family. We went out to support the family, a number of priests and nuns, and we were arrested by the Gardai,” he remembers.

It must have been a bizarre scene, as the Gardai came to take away the religious folk, who were looking to shelter a family who were being moved on.

“We were locked up in the cells for some time. The case was heard and the judge told us to go home and behave ourselves and he gave us the Probation Act. In his summing up, he said ‘We are all in the dock.’ In other words we are all responsible for the terrible conditions that Travellers are in on the roadside.”

Turning 88 this year, he has vast experience of community work, not just in Ireland but as far away as South Africa, while he also lived in Nigeria

In this country, he is a founder of the South Inner City Community Development Association (one of two organisations that later voluntarily merged to form The Liberties Community project) and he was the manager of an independent organisation that preceded the Combat Poverty Agency.

Poverty

A relatively deprived early life has led to him spending much of his life helping those in difficulty.

“It was just my background, I suppose, where I came from. We were born into poverty in a way. There were ten of us in the family down in Kilkenny and that had a big bearing on where you went and what you did. That was part of it. From then on my life really was in working with communities. Not as a church-based person, but as a facilitator. I had come back from Nigeria in 1969 and then I studied community development in Manchester.”

He served in the 1970s as manager of the non-statutory Combat Poverty Organisation (a precursor to the Combat Poverty Agency established in 1986) until it was closed down by then minister and future Taoiseach Charles Haughey.

“We were operating out of a building in Charlemont Street, it’s still there. Charlie Haughey decided to close us down. There was an angry meeting between the late Sister Stanislaus, himself and myself inside in the department.”

Haughey’s motivations for the closure were infuriating.

“We were angry about the whole thing. The reason he closed it was because he hadn’t set it up. It was closed for a number of years until the Department revamped it and reopened it, under the Department of Social Welfare. It was completely different then, it was a government operation whereas we had been independent.”

Of course, as an independent organisation, it was shining a light on truths that were uncomfortable for the Government.

“We had programmes all over Ireland, from Donegal to Castletownbere. All the time we were arguing about the fact that people’s rights were being denied and their voice was not being heard. It was a voice for the



• Fr Michael Mernagh speaking at The Liberties Festival.

voiceless. We had local committees all over the country. We were out on the islands, Arranmore and Inishboffin, all over the place at the time.”

He recalls being involved in activism in Limerick back in the 1990s that led to the setting up of a group called People Action Against Unemployment Limerick’ (aka the PAUL Partnership, this year rebranded as Limerick City Area Partnership).

“Professor Joyce O’Connor was the person mainly responsible. I had responsibility, with a guy called Patrick Commins, for the management. It was under Poverty III, a European programme,” he said.

Through PAUL he came to know Moyross which at the time had “very few facilities in it.”

“We had nothing on the South Side”

Recalling the establishment of the South Inner City Community Development Association, he says it was to restore some balance between areas divided by the Liffey.

“We had nothing on the South Side, the North Side had everything, Tony Gregory had done a deal with Charlie Haughey. We got together, we said everything is going to the north side, let’s get something for the south side. A group, mostly women, came together and formed the group, and then I joined it. It was established in 1982.”

Resources were scarce, but they pressed ahead. “It was hard enough. We had no money. What I said to the committee at the time was to do it properly and do some research on the needs of people in the area, from the cradle to the grave. That’s what we did and we published it. From there on we did an integrated programme, where we covered everything from the cradle to the grave. We had afterschool for children, from that up to services for the elderly.”

It developed an emergency call system, where the elderly could wear an alarm around their necks, and summon help if required, something that was brought to many parts of the country subsequently.

Father Mernagh says that his role as a man of God is entirely compatible with the work he has done in the community sector.

“It should go hand in hand. The Gospel is all about looking after those in need of care. Every word is about looking after the excluded. If you believe in the gospel you have to be a community activist.”

As well as working hard on programmes in Dublin, for 20 years until 2024 he was also involved in programmes in South Africa, and is still going over and back to check on their progress.

Community work today

Given his background he is well placed to answer fundamental questions, like what community development work really is.

“It is basically a local response, by local people, who form themselves into part of a community or a community. Basically, on a voluntary basis, to respond to the needs as they have identified them in their own communities. That’s what community development should be about in my view,” he says.

What would he say to young people getting into community work today?

“It’s a really good challenging job, or it should be. The big question is who is running or supporting programmes today. There aren’t that many today that you could say are well supported. You need young people above all to be well trained. We have a number of third level institutions for community development training, such as Maynooth. Young people need to be trained and then supported, that’s very important. You can’t leave them off on their own, they need the support of more experienced people.”

He says that communities across Ireland are different nowadays, and he is particularly concerned about those in rural areas.



• Fr Michael Mernagh, John Moffett, CEO of Misesan Cara, and Colin Wrafter, former ambassador to South Africa.

“Communities are changing so much now, they are so different, particularly in urban areas. The problem in rural areas is that communities are dying. In the west of Ireland there are bad situations where the young people are all leaving. The same thing is happening all across Europe. I’m from south Kilkenny, not far from Waterford. The pub in the village is more or less closed, no one goes in anymore. There’s a big change with young people. As far as I’m concerned the only thing keeping young people going is the GAA. The hurling and football is keeping communities going.

“You always want to be optimistic, but a lot of work will have to be done to keep communities alive. It’s not going to happen by accident. A lot needs to be done at this stage,” he adds.

Social workers and activists tell of late Sr. Stanislaus Kennedy’s influence on them

The death of Sister Stanislaus Kennedy led to many tributes and stories being told by social workers, activists, teachers who were influenced by her humility, humour and determination to fight unjust systems.

Social worker turned broadcaster Joe Duffy, writing on rip.ie, said Sr. Stan had changed his life when he was a young man at risk of missing out:

“1980... Expelled from TCD, I needed one placement to complete a social work degree! Everyone ran a mile except Stan in Kilkenny. We’ve always kept in touch - her mischievous sense of humour to the fore.”

Also writing on rip.ie, Deirdre Clancy wrote about how Sr. Stan helped an activist group that took a stand against the Iraq War: “Her kindness on that occasion to a group that was under pressure, often dealing with chaotic circumstances, while she was already helping the needy on a daily basis, struck me as extraordinary.”

Ruth, who worked in Focus Ireland, wrote: “I can say with certainty that Sr. Stan has been an inspiration to me throughout my career in Focus and moving into social work. She was a special woman who has left a positive mark on Dublin and the people she met.”

Another person who just used her first name, Aoife, said that Sister Stan had been “the key influence in my career choice as a social worker”.

Sr Stanislaus Kennedy 1939-2025



• Sr Stanislaus Kennedy founded Focus Ireland following her research into the needs of women experiencing homelessness in Dublin in the 1980s.

“Even as the life founder of the organisation, you cleared dishes and cleaned tables in the coffee shop, chatting with customers and staff each week. You were so genuine, humble and unassuming, with time for everyone,” she wrote.

Longford teacher Mary Killian stated that she had a massive impact on young people, especially through the ‘Young Social Innovators’ initiative. She recalled Sr. Stan saying “Be the change you want to see in the world”.

Pauline, who wrote that she is married to a woman called Brenda, and is a former Focus

Ireland worker, wrote:

“Stan, what an inspirational lady you were. So unassuming, modest, but so brave in fighting injustice and the systems that were the cause of injustice. A lady before her time and putting her head above the parapet when it came to marriage equality and was so kind in writing a piece for our wedding in 2017. I will be forever grateful to have worked with you and I learned so much from you. Rest in peace.”

One-To-One Interviews



Adrienne Murphy

What, if anything, should national umbrella groups be doing?

I'm not sure, I really wouldn't know what they are doing.

How best can small local civil society groups play a part (in opposing the genocide)?

There was a march here by the IPSC at the weekend, I gave them a bit of publicity on the radio. These marches and gatherings to say we are anti-genocide and we want the war stopped are important.

People can get in touch with their councillors, their TDs, to say 'not in my name'. We need to stand up and be counted. Every individual needs to do that.

Is there anything else you wish to say on this subject?

I'm saddened by it. It hurts my heart. I can't believe it is going on this long. There's a song by the Manic Street Preachers and there's a line, 'If you tolerate this, then your children will be next'. We're all tolerating this, nothing is being done, and we could be next. That's the way I look at it.

Adrienne Murphy volunteers as a presenter on Ros FM, a community radio station in Roscommon Town.



Kelly Earley

What, if anything, should national umbrella groups be doing?

Support the boycott and influencing the local community to make sure they are aware there are alternative products. Give people awareness and education around the boycott. Also, it's really important for community groups to speak about Irish neutrality and the impact of operations through Shannon.

How best can small local civil society groups play a part (in opposing the genocide)?

By having a unified approach and a standard response across the various groups.

Is there anything else you wish to say on this subject?

You learn about genocide in history class and school and you wonder what you would have done if you were there. Now people have the opportunity to answer that for themselves. Every community group, every organisation in the country, big and small, should act in a way that they will be proud of in 20 years time when the dust settles on this.

Kelly Earley is a writer from Coolock who has featured in this magazine and other publications.



Patricia McGrath

What, if anything, should national umbrella groups be doing?

I don't know if there's a lot more that can be done.

How best can small local civil society groups play a part (in opposing the genocide)?

Just keep highlighting it and raising awareness. The only way to stop all this horror is to stop making arms, but I don't think anyone in Ireland can do that. Just keep up the awareness and keep protesting.

Is there anything else you wish to say on this subject?

It's just beyond belief. I can't see where it's going to end. The people of Gaza are living in a concentration camp. The ultimate goal of Israel is to get rid of them.

Patricia McGrath is a lecturer, co-ordinator and researchers attached to UCC's centre for Adult Continuing Education.



Damien Walshe

What, if anything, should national umbrella groups be doing?

The larger national organisations need to show leadership by creating spaces for connection. There is a lot of really good work happening at a local level. There are some organisations that aren't funded doing amazing work. There should be a way of creating space for the community sector - locally, nationally and internationally - to continue to build a strong voice against genocide.

How best can small local civil society groups play a part (in opposing the genocide)?

Local community groups can encourage people to participate in actions (and to) put pressure on their politicians around the Occupied Territories Bill. Also, raising awareness about the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) campaign and staging local actions around supermarkets aimed at stopping produce from the Occupied Territories. We do have a historic track record, when the actions taken by the Dunnes Workers in the 1980s around the apartheid regime had a ripple effect. Economic pressure should be a key driver in bringing an end to the destruction in Gaza and longer-term peace and stability for Palestinians and for Israelis who oppose the genocide in Gaza.

Is there anything else you wish to say on this subject?

It's great to see *Changing Ireland* doing this, because it might create a conversation in community groups. I think Irish people have a natural affinity for countries experiencing the yoke of colonialism. It's good for community groups to think about the practical steps they can take.

Damien Walshe is the CEO of Independent Living Movement Ireland.

Survey respondent urges use of "language that is compatible with our recognition of Palestine as a state"

One respondent to our survey (pages 16-17) argued the case for what they called "clarity of language":

"It's important to consistently state that it is a war of occupation of the state of Palestine (given that Ireland has recognised Palestine as a state), and not say it's a war against Hamas.

"When we talk of genocide taking place in Gaza, it's crucial to say its genocide being perpetrated by the Israeli state. Just to be clear I'm not supporting Hamas, but am supporting the struggle for freedom of Palestinian people and their country.

"National umbrella groups could also challenge the media and all of us working in solidarity with Palestine and our government not to use language of the occupier Israel, but to be consistent with language that is compatible with our recognition of Palestine as a state.

One last point - it is men as well as women and children who are being murdered in Palestine. Let's name it always as such and not dehumanise or exclude men from statements. When we exclude men - when we constantly say 'women and children are dying - what does it say for how we value men's lives?'"

By Owen Ryan



Maria O'Dwyer

What, if anything, should national umbrella groups be doing?

I think it's to act collectively, just one voice, all of us under the one umbrella. We need one mass movement, but in the community sector that's what we're not good at doing. The Wheel might do something, the Children's Rights Alliance might do something, PEI, but why don't we all do it together? One day, one action, one voice.

How best can small local civil society groups play a part (in opposing the genocide)?

By boycotting certain products and services, the AirBnBs, the Coca Colas, don't supply them in community cafes.

I'm really surprised how little flying of the Palestinian flag we see as an act of solidarity. You see it at the big events, but if you're in communities and at meetings how often do you see it? Something as small as that is significant in terms of solidarity. Plus, it spurs people to ask questions, no more than the Pride flag, people may ask why it's there, and you tell people.

Is there anything else you wish to say on this subject?

We have the technology to watch it happening, but we also have the know-how to stop it and the power to stop it, but we're not doing that. Emaciated children, dead families, these awful images have become the norm. How has that happened?

Maria O'Dwyer is the national coordinator of the Prevention and Early Intervention Network.



Declan Costello

What, if anything, should national umbrella groups be doing?

What is happening in Gaza is horrific. What's happening in Sudan, what's happening in Yemen is horrific too. There is a need to focus on Gaza and other issues, but it also needs to be borne in mind that is not their core role.

How best can small local civil society groups play a part (in opposing the genocide)?

Raise funds, raise awareness, try and influence public opinion. Encourage the State to keep taking the steps it has and maybe do a bit more.

Is there anything else you wish to say on this subject?

Ireland punches above its weight. As a formerly oppressed and occupied country, it can comment on things like this. It doesn't sound the same coming from a former colonial power. Israel doesn't want to stop, it wants to continue doing what it is doing. It's hard to see it stopping overnight.

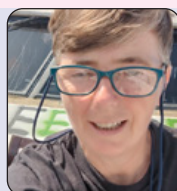
By continuing to talk about it and keep it on the agenda, we can make a difference. It may have negative effects on Ireland, taking a stand, but you have to be on the right side of history.

Declan Costello is a development worker with Offaly Local Development Company.

PPN WORKER ALMOST REACHED GAZA

Sarah Clancy, a community worker based in Co. Clare, was among an Irish contingent sailing to Gaza with aid in September who were abducted in international waters by Israeli armed forces. She and hundreds of other volunteers were eventually released.

Sarah is the co-ordinator of Clare Public Participation Network, having previously held roles with SpunOut, Amnesty International Ireland and the Galway One World Centre.



• Sarah Clancy.

EU backs Kildare communities to show it how best to integrate refugees from Ukraine



• Jill Robinson, Co Founder of Helping Irish Hosts, Councillor Angela Feeney and Jennifer Luke, Community Liaison Helping Irish Hosts.

In early October, a new EU-funded pilot project was launched in North Kildare, bringing together local communities, employers, and Ukrainian refugees. It is the only Irish project selected for this Europe-wide programme, which aims to explore practical approaches to refugee integration.

Co.Here (officially titled Community Connect under the EU's Social Innovation+ programme) will build on three years of lived community experience from Helping Irish Hosts, evidence-based research from UCD, and ethical technology from international partner Pairity.

Together with refugees and local communities, the partners will develop and test a new path to meaningful and mutually beneficial integration.

The project will run for one year across Maynooth, Kilcock, Leixlip, Celbridge, and Straffan, gathering evidence to inform local authority practice and national policy on refugee integration.

"Welcoming newcomers brings real opportunities, but it also creates challenges for communities under pressure," said Dr. Graham Finlay, Research Lead at UCD. "With Co.Here we want to understand, through evidence, how communities and newcomers can find common ground and build the kind of belonging that lasts."

Jill Robinson is a co-founder of Helping Irish Hosts, which was established when huge numbers of Ukrainians were coming to Ireland in the early months of the Russian

invasion.

Speaking about the project, she said, "At its heart, Co.Here is about joining the dots between real people and real experiences. It builds on lived community experience and applies technology to make those efforts more practical, connected, and lasting, for everyone involved."

Welcoming the launch, Kildare county councillor Angela Feeney said it was "such a positive initiative" to explore practical, real-life approaches to integration.

"It's a model of good practice, taking a partnership approach to solving everyday problems. At its core is listening to lived experience, looking at what is already in place in our communities, and using technology to help communities and newcomers connect. It is by working together that we achieve more. Ni neart go cur le chéile."

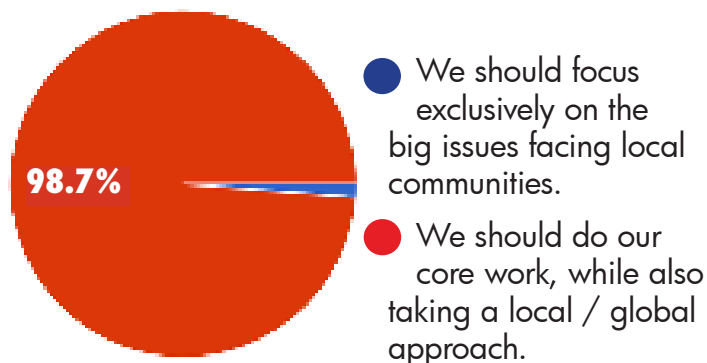
Over the coming year, Co.Here will invite Ukrainian newcomers, local residents, community groups, and employers in North Kildare to take part. Participants will be matched with opportunities in learning, work, education, health, and social life, while also sharing their insights on what helps people feel at home.

People in North Kildare are invited to join the pilot project, including refugees, local residents and host families, employers, clubs and community groups. To find out more, email: maryna@helpingirishhosts.com

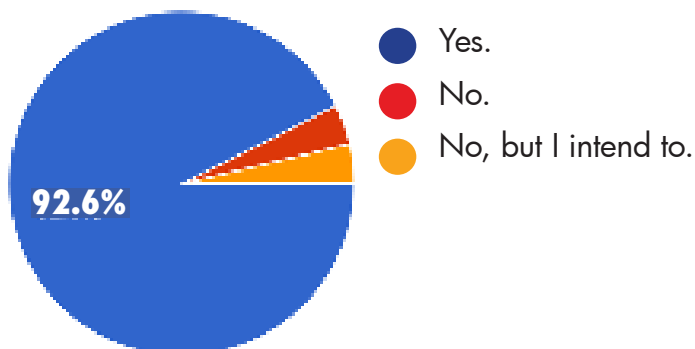
- BY OWEN RYAN

IRISH CIVIL SOCIETY AND GENOCIDE:

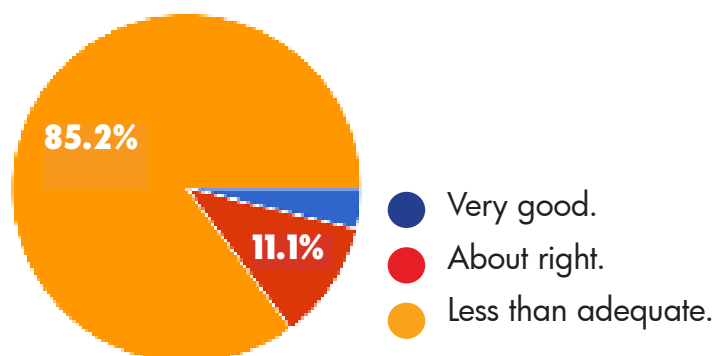
1. As a worker or volunteer involved in community development in Ireland do you believe:



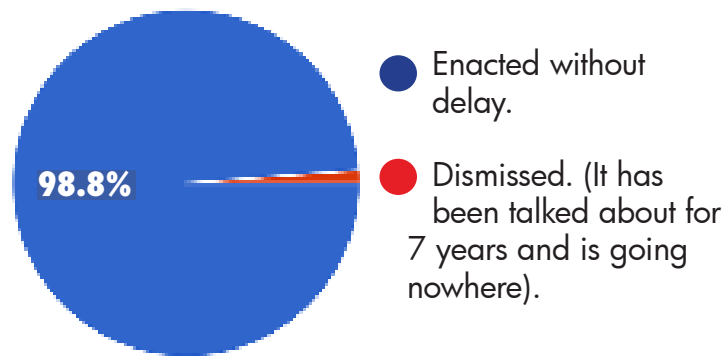
2. In response to the genocide in Gaza, have you taken part in any boycott, vigil or protest?



5. How has the Irish State's response to the genocide in Gaza been?



6. Should the Occupied Territories Bill (seeking to ban trade with Israeli companies illegally occupying parts of Palestine) be:



15 ways local groups can oppose Israel committing genocide

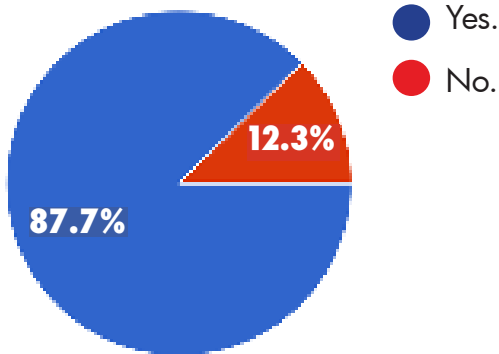
We asked: How best can small local civil society groups play a part in opposing the genocide?

Most respondents called for protests and/or boycotts, along with calls to increase local awareness about the international Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) campaign and to continue to lobby the Irish government.

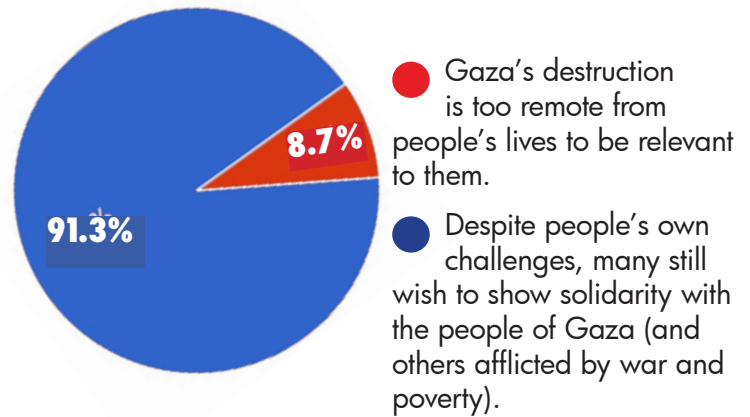
These are 15 representative comments from 55 responses to the question.

- Show solidarity.
- Pressure the Government to act, including to enact the Occupied Territories Bill.
- Focus on practical supports also at local level, in particularly for Palestinians who find themselves seeking asylum in Ireland.
- Lobby TDs and councillors.
- Change only happens when those in power are forced to make changes. We should be using more disruptive techniques.
- Boycott all things Israel linked.
- Weekly vigil highlighting the genocide in Gaza.
- Organise the delivery of information to communities through leafleting, organising speakers, offering to visit schools.
- More visible action, more spaces for conversation, more working to challenge and tackle far right voices which seek to demonise Palestinian people.
- Help local people to understand the common ground they have with Palestinians. Inequality emerges in scarcity, functions in separation and results in powerlessness. Civil society groups support wellbeing which emerges in flow, functions in togetherness, and results in choice (based on teaching of Miki Kashtan, convergent facilitator).
- Petitions. Vigils. Contacting politicians. Use social media to inform people about local ways to take action, boycotting.
- Make sure everyone understands the dangers of fascism and racism.
- Lobby the Government for boycott measures and implement local boycott measures.
- Hold events with Palestinian speakers, artists, activists, witnesses.
- Reach out and support groups and co-operatives on the ground in the West Bank.

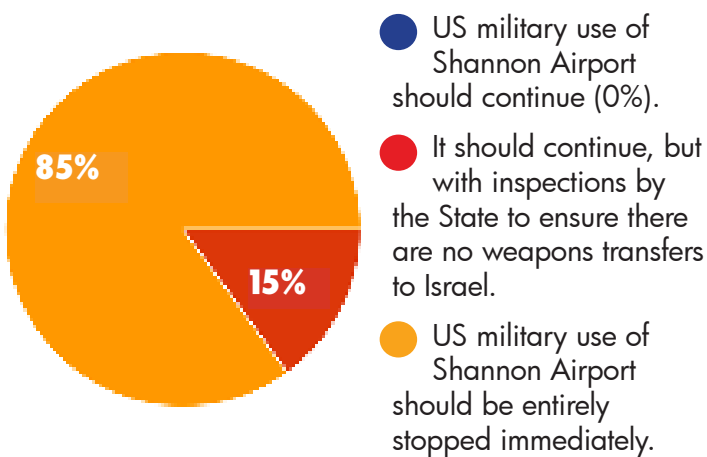
3. Has any organisation you are involved with acted in solidarity with or in support of Palestinians?



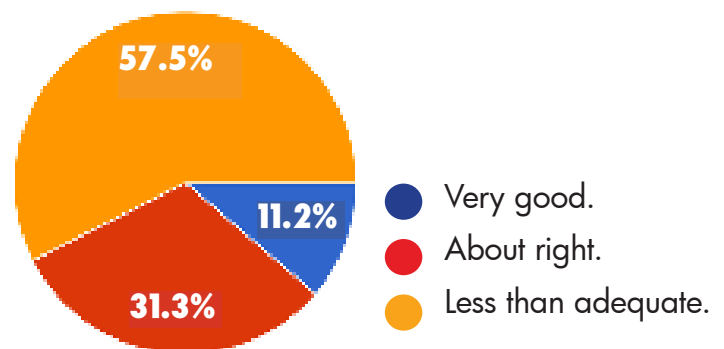
4. Working with people in marginalised communities facing day-to-day struggles, do you find?



7. Regarding the transfer of arms through Ireland, do you believe:



8. Has leadership by the Community & Voluntary Sector in Ireland in response to the genocide in Gaza been:



Is there anything else you wish to say on this?

We asked people at the end of the survey: **Is there anything else you wish to say on this subject?**

These are 15 comments chosen to best represent the 42 responses we received.

- List maybe 10 practical things that community development workers/communities can do, no matter how small. People need hope that they can make a difference in some small way.
- What happens in Gaza is important for everyone everywhere, because the erosion of international law make everyone less safe. We are back to Might is Right. Gaza holds up a mirror to society and it's an awful reflection.
- The community and voluntary sector, apart from some notable

exceptions, has been very weak in its response to the genocide. Why is this?

- Leadership from trade unions and umbrella organizations has been less than adequate.
- Community development does not stop locally - it needs to look beyond. Thinking it stops locally is a lazy perspective and contradicts any human rights speak you may utter.
- I am curious as to whether organisations in the C&V sector in receipt of larger sums of government funding are more restricted in voicing their support.
- Highlight all Israeli products so as people can stop using and buying them.
- I am only involved in a small way. I cannot give more time to it as I work a lot. I feel torn in two

trying to have enough of my own life to sustain myself and remain a competent help to others. But that's how it is. And that is a first world privileged problem.

- Symbolic gestures do matter.
- Money talks. BOYCOTT!
- Thanks for the opportunity to contribute.
- As an FRC we have agreed to abide by the BDS campaign.
- Some community leaders have been very strong, others completely silent. We can and should do more in the face of genocide.
- This is a struggle for humanity. We can't afford to be silent.
- Civil society organisations need to stand up and add their voices. People hate "seeing it on the news", but many have no channel for their distaste and so disengage. It's a duty

of civil society to call it out, along with the other systemic injustices like housing and health.

ABOUT THE SURVEY

Sample size: 82 respondents.

Target audience of Community and Voluntary sector workers and volunteers. Conducted online in September.

Given the sample size, the survey's margin of error is approximately 11%. Nonetheless, the findings are stark.

Respondents could provide their names in confidence or fill out the survey anonymously. Around a fifth of respondents provided their names.

A test-question was included to counteract bots.

NATIONAL SICAP SHOWCASE IN ATHLONE

Day of celebration for target-busting programme launched over 10 years ago

BY ALLEN MEAGHER

Almost 250 community volunteers, leaders, development workers, national agency representatives and civil and public servants gathered in Athlone on October 2 for a conference called 'In Our Words'. It showcased the powerful impact of grassroots community work supported through the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP).

The highlights were inspiring stories of individual and community empowerment, inclusion and transformation from people told by the people at the heart of those stories, those with lived experience of the value of the work.

As a speaker from Dublin who experienced homelessness, heroin addiction and being a lone parent put it: "I qualified three times over for SICAP support." Now she and others run a project that helps others in her community to overcome life's challenges and find employment.

Others from around the country who spoke told similar stories of triumph, with support, over hardship, poverty and difficult circumstances.

Keynote speaker Dr Niamh Sheridan from Togher in Cork said the event "confirmed how deeply we care for each other, and how committed we are as people, to creating a just society for all of those who live in our wonderful country".

"Ireland has a long history of impactful community development," she said.

Minister of State Jerry Buttimer

"Our country is a better place because of you"

- Minister of State Jerry Buttimer

opened the conference and he stayed, listened and participated through the full day. Having responsibility for Community Development and Charities he paid tribute to all



• Eileen McHugh, founder and CEO of Hair Together had people in tears when she spoke at 'In Our Words' event.



Social Inclusion & Community Activation Programme

involved, saying: "Our country is a better place because of you."

"Today is about more than just the programme, it is about real people, real stories and the real impact of receiving SICAP supports," he said. "By sharing your experiences, you are empowering others to learn, adapt and take meaningful action."

Some of the speakers had the audience as well as themselves in tears telling their stories.

You can hear most of the stories told at the showcase event by scanning the QR codes on these pages which leads to Changing Ireland's YouTube channel.

Speakers told of individual and community empowerment and of helping others that face similar challenges to those they had to overcome. Working collectively, some have also set up highly successful social enterprises.

You'll never guess what songs they sang!



Scan to find out!!



• The Chorus Connection Choir from Co. Offaly. Scan to hear them sing!



• Mark Ahern, Westmeath PPN, Ruth Powell, Dublin City PPN and Ray McMahon, Mark's personal assistant, in front of an exhibition of posters showcasing SICAP in action countrywide. The posters were produced by Changing Ireland in collaboration with the Department and staff of local development companies.



• Celeste Khosa - one of the guest speakers - and Maria McHale, posing in front of Changing Ireland's SICAP poster exhibition at the 'In Our Words' event.

Attendees and speakers, Oct 2, Athlone - SCAN FOR SPEECHES.



• Minister Jerry Buttimer spoke at the showcase event.



• Mary Fogarty co-founder of The Cottage in Co. Tipperary presents a report on community cafes to Minister Jerry Buttimer.



• County Kildare LEADER Partnership community worker Sabrina Whelan who spoke at the showcase, pictured with colleague Linda Walsh, social inclusion manager.



• Mary Corridan, Dublin North East Partnership, and Triona O'Sullivan, Liffey Partnership, enjoying a cuppa in Athlone.



• DRCDG SICAP team members at the 'In Our Words' showcase event: Edel Healy, Jane O'Connor, Áine McCole, Rory MacGregor, Deirdre Kelly, Siobhán Burke-Gallagher, Marie Hennessey and Enda Cahill. The balloons seen in the background were supplied by Bridget Bowe of bowecreativeevents.com



• Miriam Spollen, founder of Connection Arts Centre.



• Pobal staff pictured with Minister of State Jerry Buttimer in Athlone: Maria McHale, Maria Farry, Kellyann McGrory, Minister Buttimer and Juan Carlos Azzopardi.



• Barbara Kearns and Jacinta Finnegan, founders of the Little Redo Like New project.



• Isobela Cuilin speaking at 'In Our Words'.



• Tracey Pearson speaking at 'In Our Words'.



• Biddy Connors from Shuttleknit in Co. Wicklow.



• Damian Quinn from Galway Rural Development.



• Keynote speaker Dr. Niamh Sheridan from Togher Family Centre.

Clondalkin is responding to drug-related gang intimidation

By Owen Ryan

DRIVE
Drug Related Intimidation & Violence Engagement
An interagency response in Ireland



The word “Drive” in the project’s name stands for Drug Related Intimidation and Violence Engagement.

There are 14 drug and alcohol task forces in the country and Trevor Bissett, co-ordinator of Clondalkin Drug and Alcohol Task Force, believes that the worst impacts of drug use are still disproportionately felt in the disadvantaged areas served by the task forces. However, new approaches are helping families in one area. In Clondalkin, The Drive Project aims to support people suffering from drug related intimidation and violence. It is, says Trevor, a serious attempt to help people in a difficult situation, people who may owe significant sums to unscrupulous, violent dealers. It sounds like the kind of service that other communities also need.

As Trevor explains, “Community projects are there to give support; they’re able to support the person individually. It’s not a great situation, if you have a huge drug debt, but at least if you are talking to someone about the issue, you might be able to get some perspective on it and some support around it.”

The word “Drive” in the project’s name stands for Drug Related Intimidation and Violence Engagement.

YOU DON’T HAVE TO RING THE GARDA STATION

“They will refer you to a guard and there are certain protocols. If you are worried about being spotted with a guard, they are supposed to meet you in plain clothes - there are a lot of things like that, that they have agreed on. I think you get a mobile number, so you don’t have to ring the police station, that means someone else in the police station doesn’t pick up the phone to you and it doesn’t become public knowledge or whatever. There are less ways that the information could get out, and that can help put people’s mind at rest.”

“The whole point of it is that you get the guards on board. That has been approved right up to the Department of Justice, whereas previously it was very hard to see where the connection was between the drug elimination protocols and any kind of legislation. It’s much firmer now, there’s a lot more buy in from the guards,” he says.

He says the project also has the potential to shine some more light on issues that are very much in the shadows.

“There’s a data capture piece as well. A big thing about drug debt intimidation is that while we know it’s an issue, we just don’t know the scale of it. There is a reporting piece that Family Support are doing anonymously on it, just to get an idea of the scale. That could drive change around legislation and it might attract more funding. I think they are rolling out Drive Liaison people to make sure it gets implemented properly.”

PEOPLE HELPED WITH HOME SECURITY

In Clondalkin some people have been helped with the provision of security for their homes.

“We have got some funding from South Dublin County Council, and I know Tallaght are doing this as well; providing a little safety package. There might be a security light if someone comes knocking at the door. Camera doorbells have been given out as well, so people don’t have to answer the door, they can look at their phone to see who it is, just in case.”

While drug debts are one very serious issue associated with the deadly business, there are others, and Drive also works to provide support to those affected.

“You might be interfering with someone’s trade or something, and that may lead to intimidation. It might not be drug debt intimidation, it might be another form of intimidation. If there are lads dealing at the end of your road or outside your garden, that can create a really stressful situation for people. Then the idea of reporting it to guards doesn’t appeal to a lot of people, because they may know who did it. This system will probably approach that in a better way.”

DRUGS HAVE ALSO GONE ONLINE

When people talk about business moving online, they’re generally referring to things like the sale of clothes or groceries, but drugs have also gone online.

“There are huge changes in drug dealing, because of the internet for a start. There’s huge drug dealing happening on Instagram, on Telegram, lots of other messaging apps. Then you have this new scenario with young people on scooters.

“In our areas, there are certain spots where you’ll be able to get a deal. But if you can’t get there the lads will jump on a scooter and deliver out to you. We’ve heard lots of things from the guards. They’re expensive, these scooters, the kids aren’t buying them by themselves.

“It’s quite young males generally using them, going off getting these scooters and getting attracted to this drug dealing lifestyle. I think the technology has really facilitated a new form of drug dealing. Between scrambler bikes and scooters it has become much more mobile.”



He says the project also has the potential to shine some more light on issues that are very much in the shadows.



Drive Project

“PLAIN AS THE NOSE ON YOUR FACE”

He says that the fact of children being exploited by drug dealers is “plain as the nose on your face”, but just because it is being seen doesn’t mean that it is not very challenging to tackle.

“I think from a justice point of view, it’s difficult to do anything about it. That thing of young people being exploited and being dragged into it has always been there, but it has changed in that they are being brought in at a much younger age. There is a lot of concern about grooming now. You hear about kids getting trained on bikes from 10 or 11 years of age and being brought into it that way.”

REACH KIDS BEFORE THEY ARE TEENAGERS

He feels that greater resources need to be provided to reach these young people, who fall onto the very margins of society before they become teenagers.

“The issue isn’t to be punitive or to get the guards after them. It’s more about how do you identify these kids, how do you then get people to work with them. We haven’t got the resources, the youth services haven’t got the resources. These kids are very hard to engage. There have been some specialist programmes in some areas, really assertive outreach but we don’t really have the resources. That’s a gap that we have seen in the area. We applied for some justice funding last year, but we weren’t successful, but we’ll keep looking at those kind of things.”

DRUG THREAT KEEPS EVOLVING

The Clondalkin Drug and Alcohol task force was established in 1997, and the challenges it has seen have changed dramatically since then.

“Thirty years ago I don’t think we had mobile phones. That kind of stuff has definitely brought massive changes. Opiates, I think that’s something that by and large taskforces and communities really responded well to, and that the Government really responded well to, overall, although there were some failings there. There are other things that have evolved, the new psychoactive substances in the 2010s, all the head shops and stuff. There are all these global developments as well, the globalisation of the drug trade. That started in the 70s and has continued to evolve. It just keeps evolving.”

ONLY 2 OF 14 TASKFORCES ARE DUBLIN

There are 14 drug and alcohol task forces, 12 in Dublin, one in Bray and one in Cork.

While drug use has grown exponentially over the years, Trevor says the worst impacts are still disproportionately felt in the disadvantaged areas served by the task forces.

“There are a range of factors, early school leaving, high youth dependency ratios, underemployment, loan parenting. There are a lot of factors that leave some areas at more of a disadvantage if you end up with a substance use issue.

“The social capital thing, some people are much more able to access stuff. There’s private treatment. You would often hear of people being able to access treatment at Pat’s, because they have private health insurance. Most people who come into our services wouldn’t even know where to start with private health insurance or anything like that.”

Find out more about The Drive Project here:

clondalkindrugstaskforce.ie/drive-project/

Popular ‘No Shame Board Game’ gets young Travellers talking



• The board game comes in standard size for playing on a table and in giant size for outdoors. Photo courtesy of Involve.

Recently, Changing Ireland reported on the board game Letter Lingo, created by community workers in Co. Leitrim, and now much in demand. Equally of note, the award-winning No Shame Board Game, launched in 2022, is helping young Travellers to talk about their mental health.

The boardgame was devised by teenagers taking part in the No Shame Traveller Youth Mental Health project.

“The idea is to facilitate free flowing conversation about mental health, without young people even realising it,” said youth worker Patrick McDonagh.

“As you work your way around the board, there are three types of cards you can get. One type are scenario cards, based on scenarios that young people face in their teenage years. You also have positive affirmation cards, and if you read them out loud, they give you a good feeling about yourself. You also have emotion cards, to teach people about different emotions, and to help them express themselves. There are also ‘Five Ways to Good Wellbeing’ cards and if you get all five you win the game,” said Patrick.

There are black dots on the board, which represent dark times in life, and if a player lands on one they miss their next turn.

On the scenarios discussed, Patrick said, “If someone asks you to smoke, what do you do? Or, if you get accused of stealing stuff even though you didn’t, what do you do? You need help with your homework, but no one seems to listen, so what do you do? Each scenario has three answers.”

The No Shame Board Game was created by a group of teenagers from Trim, Co. Meath, with support from Involve - a youth, community and communications organisation working mainly with members of the Traveller community. The boardgame was recognised at the Traveller Pride Awards 2022 and the Education and Training Boards National Awards 2023.

From playing the game Patrick feels it is very helpful to young people:

“It is all about having fun while talking about your mental health in a free-flowing, non-judging way, while discussing real life scenarios that teenagers face, learning about the ways to good wellbeing and naming emotions.”

The No Shame project has also developed ‘The No Shame Podcast’, which features the voices of young Travellers.

There are now eight episodes available in ‘The No Shame Podcast’ series - available on [Spotify](https://open.spotify.com/).

The No Shame Campaign’s second National Youth Mental Health Conference, held recently in Athlone, brought nearly 100 attendees together to address stigma and promote online empathy among young Travellers.

For more information about the No Shame Traveller Youth Mental Health project: <https://www.facebook.com/NoShameYouthProject>

You can also follow the project on TikTok.

- OWEN RYAN

You also have emotion cards, to teach people about different emotions, and to help them express themselves.

IN BRIEF

Little Free Libraries are stirring curiosity



• *Athenry's Little Library.*

Little Free Libraries are now to be found dotted around the country, giving people the chance to freely take or leave books, but where are they coming from?

The Little Free Library is a global phenomenon that began in the US state of Wisconsin in 2009 when the late Todd Bol built the first Little Free Library outside his house.

A schoolteacher himself, Todd felt the movement he founded could have a global impact.

Over the last few years, Little Free Libraries have opened up all over this country – such as in Templeglantine and in Bruff, Co. Limerick, and in Carrick-on-Shannon, Co. Leitrim. Recently, a new Little Free Library opened in the town park in Athenry, Co. Galway.

Erin Maglione was involved and said the idea began as a chat among friends.

“The public library here is great, but it’s not open every day. This is an easy thing to do to promote community involvement,” she said.

Erin said fellow volunteers Joe Duff and Eamon Madden upcycled an old utility box for the library, while it was painted by Tanya McGarry.

“There are little creatures on it reading books about Athenry. It’s fun to look at,” said Erin.

For more on Little Free Libraries visit: <https://littlefreelibrary.org/> or check out the Little Free Libraries Ireland Facebook group.

Minister Dara Calleary said support for “forgotten” areas such as Ballinacurra Weston will be increased



By Allen Meagher

• *All smiles at Our Lady of Lourdes Community Centre! A local volunteer, Maurice Quinlivan TD, Minister Dara Calleary, Kate Clifford, Darren Wallace, Senator Marie Byrne, Gerry McCormack, Yvonne Galvin and Cllr Dan McSweeney.*

The Limerick city community of Ballinacurra Weston was “forgotten” in the past by the state, said Dara Calleary, Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht, when he visited the area in June. While he could not undo the past, he said the community had the government’s support today.

Recent feuding in the area between criminals has seen people suffer injuries and put Limerick back under a national spotlight.

Minister Calleary was welcomed to Our Lady of Lourdes Community Centre in Ballinacurra Weston by co-managers of the centre Kate Clifford and Yvonne Galvin, by Senator Maria Byrne, Maurice Quinlivan TD, local councillors, volunteers from the community, community workers, community gardai and Limerick City Council officials. Members of Limerick Traveller Network (which rents office space in the centre) were among many to make their concerns known.

Addressing the gathering Minister Calleary said, “I know there’s a frustration. I can feel it, that this community has been forgotten. And I’m not going to tell you I can wave a magic wand and reverse that.”

Responding to concerns, he said, “I will give you a guarantee”, and he thereby committed to working with Senator Maria Byrne who serves as the chairperson of the community centre’s board, and with Maurice Quinlivan, TD, and Willy O’Dea, TD, among others “to try and start putting building blocks in place that might be able to help.”

“We’re not going to change it overnight, but we are going to be working on it,” he said, indicating he intended to discuss the area’s challenges with cabinet colleagues, especially in the areas of housing, children and youth.

“We’ve had some good chats upstairs with about how we do it,” he said of talks with local community leaders. He said that he and his

“Absolutely, there are challenges, but you’re not letting them be the story of Ballinacurra-Weston”

officials were looking into creating a new national programme that would support communities such as Ballinacurra-Weston.

“I don’t want to over-promise, but absolutely, as we begin the work of looking to see what that new community programme looks like, I’ll be thinking of Our Lady of Lourdes a lot,” he said.

The area has some of the highest levels of deprivation in the country, alongside King’s Island also in Limerick city, and its challenges were never properly addressed through Limerick regeneration.

It also has strong community spirit, evident on the day the minister called by to lend support. He complimented all involved in community development in the area.

“Absolutely, there are challenges,” he said, “but you’re not letting them be the story of Ballinacurra-Weston. They’re not. This is the story,” he said to applause.

While the minister did not have a cheque book on this occasion, he did present a plaque to Community Employment Scheme supervisor Karen Hannon commemorating 30 years of CE locally and nationally.

Earlier, the minister had welcomed over 200 delegates to Ireland’s second National Outdoor Recreation Conference which took place in the Radisson Blu Hotel, Co. Limerick. He travelled on to visit a project in the county that benefitted from regeneration funding through the Town and Village Renewal Scheme.



• *Dara Calleary, Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht, was welcomed to Ballinacurra Weston in Limerick recently.*

GABRIEL O'CONNELL Believes Local Development Work Should Not Go Out To Public Tender

INTRODUCTION

Gabriel O'Connell has retired as CEO of Monaghan Integrated Development after working in the community and voluntary sector for 26 years. He gave a fascinating interview to **OWEN RYAN** recently, including advice for policy-makers and all who believe in the importance of community development.



For instance, Gabriel does not see the need for commercial tendering for the services delivered by local development companies on behalf of the State. He also reveals how his work influenced his own journey through life, what he is currently reading and why he likes Clint Eastwood.

What are you reading at the moment or what social media do you use most?

I am currently reading a broad range of social media posts by Jeffrey D. Sachs and I am looking forward to reading his three New York Times bestsellers: The End of Poverty, Common Wealth - Economics for a Crowded Planet, and The Price of Civilization.

What is the last film or series you saw that relates to your work/passions?

Gran Torino is about a teenager who tries to steal a prized 1972 Gran Torino from a disgruntled, prejudiced Korean War veteran (played by Clint Eastwood). I also am a big science fiction fan. I love Star Wars.

Who do you most admire?

Martin Luther King Jr.

What are the top four issues in Ireland today?

Housing.

Inequality – too many young people don't see a future for themselves.

Integration – global turmoil, wars and now economic isolationism and climate change are leading to significant numbers of people being displaced and needing to find new futures in far off lands.

Misinformation and disinformation.

Nationally we need more... (list four things):

Housing – of all kinds.

Greater education around social media and the need for people to factcheck sources.

Greater involvement of our young people in community development and in political life.

More proactive and urgent work towards Net Zero.

Nationally we need less... (list four things):

Political rhetoric around housing.

Misinformation and disinformation – very damaging for social cohesion and community.

Less young people being disenchanted with society and their future prospects.

By Owen Ryan

Less backtracking on climate targets – everyone must do their bit.

What are the top two challenges for the coming year facing Monaghan Integrated Development?

Firstly, the current funding model does not best facilitate local innovation. Currently core management costs must be apportioned across every programme we deliver. This leads to significant workloads and inefficient use of staff time. Management of Local Development Companies nationally need to have core costs covered separately from programme funding. The Government needs to directly fund core management costs.

Secondly, there can be a lack of integrated development planning at national level. Local Development Companies are well connected into the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht for community-led local development planning, but what about other departments?

I would add a third challenge. I don't believe there is a need for commercial tendering in the services delivered by LDCs on behalf of the State. LDCs have been acting an 'extended arm of the State' in delivering programmes in local communities on a non-profit basis for decades. Tendering processes have stifled local partnership approaches – where key agencies feel reluctant collaborating in a competitive bid situation.

These tendering cycles make it very difficult to maintain key programme staff who experience significant job insecurity despite being employed with an LDC for many years or even decades.

The Government must find another way to commission these community programmes.

What is the best thing that Monaghan Integrated Development has achieved in the past year?

I would be reluctant to point to one best I think, rather I'd point to the value of the integrated approach to service delivery in our work – this is often overlooked.

What is the trait you most admire in other successful community groups?

Resilience and passion of boards and staff.

What motivates you?

Seeing people progress in work and life is my main motivation.

What do you consider to be Monaghan Integrated Development's most under rated virtue?

Despite periods of significant change and funding uncertainties - we still deliver. Our drive to achieve the very best outcomes for our communities is unwavering.

If you could change one thing about how the Government supports and funds the sector, what would it be?

I'd like to see the provision of core funding for management of LDCs, encouraging more social innovation in our activities – allowing us to respond more proactively to local needs.

"It's very frustrating"

- Huge issues for small groups in opening bank accounts

BY OWEN RYAN

Spare a thought for Walkinstown Number Two Sister Shed, who have been trying to open a bank account for close to two years, without success.

Sister Sheds are places where women can come together, and where they hopefully empower each other and provide support for one another.

The aims are basically about making a positive difference in the community, but the Walkinstown version has been hampered by bureaucracy; something that community groups around Ireland are becoming familiar with.

"We've been working on it for a year, going on two years, and still no joy," says spokesperson Yvonne Traynor, of the long running efforts to open a bank account.

The group is very active, but what they can offer is limited because the lack of a bank account makes it impossible to get grants that would be otherwise available.

"We have gone away, we have done voluntary things, we could do bingo, we could do bowling, we could have someone in to talk about self-defence. We pay an amount of money every week, it covers teas etc, and we save it up. But because we haven't a bank account, we haven't been able to get grants or anything at all," says Yvonne.

"The first year we were up and running there were three signatories required, and it went as far as Compliance. I'm a former bank official so I would know a fair bit about opening up a basic bank account and things like that. I also worked in merchant banking so I know quite a bit about Compliance as well. Our chairperson who was to be a signatory on the account died very suddenly, which was very traumatic for us all. We had been in the middle of applying for an account, but when she died instead of them changing the paperwork, we were sent back to the bottom of the pile again.

"We're now in the middle of it, this one, that one, the other one needs to sign. It's absolutely ridiculous considering we are a group of women who literally want to store our funds. We're two years up and running and we still have no bank account," says Yvonne, clearly

WHAT'S THE STORY?

- **Experience:** Even volunteers with a background in banking struggle with the bureaucratic demands on voluntary groups.
- **Death:** Banks do not make it easy when a group suffers a bereavement among members.
- **Deterrent:** This is not the type of thing that volunteers sign up for, yet it has to be done.
- **Change:** Banks keep changing their paperwork.

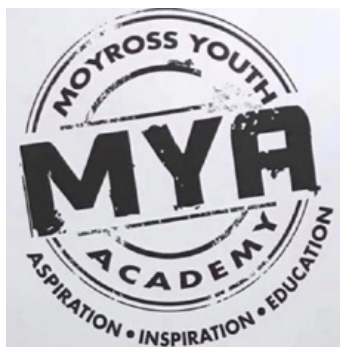


• Members of the Walkinstown Number Two Sister Shed is a very active group, but they cannot open a bank account.

exasperated with the situation.

The offering would be significantly better if they could get grants, she says, while they know from other Sister Sheds what would be possible if they could open an account and thereby access grants.

"We hear what they have done, and what we cannot do, and it's very frustrating. Everything we have done is through our own effort and some of us are out of pocket because of it."



"It's absolutely ridiculous considering we are a group of women who literally want to store our funds.

We're two years up and running and we still have no bank account."

- Yvonne Traynor.

MORE BUREAUCRATIC

Andrew O'Byrne of Moyross Youth Academy said that while they enjoy a very good relationship with their own bank, they are aware of how onerous things have become.

"We're now a CLG, a company limited by guarantee. That change happened with the Companies Registration, a name change from 'company limited' to CLG, but we didn't change it with the bank, because we didn't need to. But then when we tried to open a new bank account we had to change all of the accounts because of the name change. All the paperwork had to be redone, and by the time we had done that, the paperwork had changed for opening a bank account, so the original forms we had filled out had to be changed."

In general, Andrew feels that society has become "a lot more bureaucratic" than was once the case.

"It's not just banks, it's everything. We're lucky we have a voluntary board and we got professional support when we needed it.

"We registered to become a charity and there was quite a lot of work in that. It all takes time and effort, and it's not the type of thing someone signs up to when they want to help out a charity; next thing you find yourself sitting in on webinars and going through all these money laundering, assets and identification pieces so that you can be a signatory on a bank account."

Volunteers are kept overly busy just trying to deal with protocol, let alone the voluntary work they want to do, he feels.

(Continued from previous page)

"There's a charities regulator, a charities governance code, and there's a huge amount of work involved with that, on top of doing what it was you set out to do. The days of somebody saying 'I've an hour a week to give you', or 'I'll do a Tuesday evening or a Thursday afternoon'; it's become a bit more complex now."

UNREASONABLE TO VOLUNTEERS

Cillian O'Donoghue of the Community Development Team at Dublin South City Partnership said he has seen groups have more and more issues with banking.

"Over the past year and a half, it has definitely become more apparent with a specific cohort of groups that we work with. We work with loads of different community groups: sports clubs, youth services, all kinds of community groups - but the stuff around governance requirements and having a bank account is affecting more informal and smaller community groups like an active retirement group, older ladies who meet up for bingo once or twice a week, men's sheds, things like that."

There are far more hoops they must jump through to access funding, he feels, and that is especially true for older people, who may not be as digitally literate.

The level of inconvenience being put on volunteers is unreasonable, he feels.

"We're trying to help these groups, to get them a few quid and you're held back sometimes by the governance requirements of the funders. I do get that the likes of the Councils and Pobal are big organisations dealing with a lot of money and they want to know where it's going and how it's being spent. But the flip side of that is the groups on the ground might struggle to get the money, which 10 or 15 years they would have got fairly handily. It meant they could run an event, or get refreshments for an event, or pay rent for a hall. It's harder than it should be for them to access funding."



• Cillian O'Donoghue.

Banks bound by regulations, while Department and Pobal not alerted to issues



Two of the country's main banks said that making things simpler for smaller groups to open accounts is not something that is within their gift.

A spokesperson for AIB said that it must comply with all regulations, while it said it does try to provide assistance.

"AIB welcomes applications for accounts from Unincorporated Entities such as associations, societies, clubs and charities. As is the case for all financial institutions, AIB is required to comply with all legal and regulatory requirements when it comes to the onboarding of new customers. Applications are considered on a case by case basis and anyone with any queries or who requires additional help with their application can call into any of AIB's 170 branches."

It was a fairly similar story from Bank of Ireland.

"All banks are subject to Anti-Money Laundering (AML) and Counter-Terrorist Financing (CFT) regulations in Ireland, mandated by the Criminal Justice (Money Laundering & Terrorist Financing) Act 2010 and regulated by the Central Bank of Ireland.

"This includes 'Know your customer' (KYC) obligations for the financial services industry which require banks to collect and maintain identification documentation on all account holders. These requirements are in place to make it harder for the financial system to be used to hide the money made from crime, and for individuals or organisations to fund terrorism.

"These requirements also apply



when setting up accounts where there are multiple account holders."

A spokesperson for the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht said it had not had any complaints about difficulties regarding the opening of accounts.

"This is not an issue that has been raised with the Department by anyone in the Charitable and Voluntary sector to date.

"Where groups are experiencing difficulties with opening bank accounts, they should contact the Department and we will provide advice. Alternatively, they may wish to direct their query to the Department of Finance, who have responsibility for banking."

Pobal also said it didn't know of any issues around opening accounts.

"To date we have not been made aware of any organisations applying for programmes that we administer having trouble opening a bank account.

"However, opening bank account(s) is an operational matter for the individual organisations, and it is not in Pobal's remit to engage with banks on behalf of volunteer organisations.

"Regarding compliance requirements, Pobal implements the regulations/circulars as issued by government and we continue to work with government departments and organisations to make programme requirements as manageable as possible," it stated.

SICAP reports launched by Tánaiste and Minister Buttimer

Minister of State Jerry Buttimer explained on September 15 that he "loves" (see video) the government's Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP).

Speaking alongside Tánaiste Simon Harris at the launch held in The Little Flower Hall, in Bray, Co. Wicklow, he highlighted the programmes achievements.

The key findings in the annual report include:

- 2,368 Local Community Groups were supported in 2024.
- 1995 individuals, 6% of the overall caseload, progressed into employment in 2024.
- 260 Community activists or community groups were supported in 2024.
- 473 Social Enterprises were supported by SICAP in 2024.
- 32,490 individuals were supported in 2024.
- 53,133 Children & parents were supported in 2024.
- 96,520 non-caseload individuals attended events sponsored by SICAP.

In many cases, the report shows how community workers and volunteers who implement the programme, again helped it to exceed its targets.

Also launched on the same day in Bray was the 'New Arrivals Research Series' which consists of three reports that explore the role SICAP has played since 2022 in addressing barriers to inclusion experienced by asylum seekers and refugees.

All of these reports are available for download from: <https://www.pobal.ie/>



• Minister of State Jerry Buttimer and Tánaiste Simon Harris in Bray, Co. Wicklow. Photo: AM.

For and against Budget 2026 amidst concerns for children in poverty

Budget 2026 received a mixed response from the community and voluntary sector.



While there were positives, Irish Rural Link says it is concerned about the level of funding allocated to Rural Development (€192 million) and Community Development (€260 million).

“Although these represent increases on last year’s budget, they may not go far enough,” it said in a statement.

Explaining why the increase was still insufficient, it noted that:

“Many community and voluntary organisations are already grappling with rising costs, with auto-enrolment pension schemes and increases in the minimum wage coming into effect in January 2026, they will continue to struggle. As a result, much of the additional funding will likely be absorbed by these costs, leaving limited scope for meaningful development in rural areas.”

CHILDREN'S RIGHTS ALLIANCE

The Children’s Rights Alliance (CRA) was positive about supports announced that will “sow the seeds for real change on the rising child poverty levels”.

“However, the lacklustre action in some areas leaves the Government with a long road ahead if they are to realise their own child poverty target,” said the CRA’s CEO Tanya Ward.

She praised the decision to raise the amount going to people relying on social welfare to support their children. She also welcomed a commitment that further measures on social welfare will come in future budgets.

“It is very positive that the social welfare package announced today comes with the commitment of a ‘multi-year’ programme. These supports need to be increased over the course of successive budgets.”

She also feels that the

Government has taken a very positive step towards addressing disadvantage in education by investing in a new DEIS plan.

However, she was less positive about the measures included in relation to early years education, saying: “Budget 2026 cannot be heralded as a child poverty budget without ramped up investment in this area.”

On child protection and welfare, she also said more needs to be done.



Social Justice Ireland criticised Budget 2026 for not offering enough to social welfare recipients.

“The failure to index social welfare payments to wages, and to adequately increase the weekly rate copper-fastens already widening income divides,” it stated.

It accused the Government of prioritising the hospitality sector over commitments made to vulnerable groups such as carers, children and households in poverty.

“Almost 1 in 6 children (190,000) are living in poverty in Ireland. Budget 2026 did not contain the measures that would tackle child poverty,” it stated.

The Salvation Army, which provides 250,000 bed nights per year in its six homeless centres across Dublin, also claimed that the Government had put other interests ahead of needy children.



“We’re fully aware that a problem of this scale cannot be solved overnight,” said Erene Williamson, who works for The Salvation Army’s homeless services. “We see the Budget as a completely missed opportunity to finally turn a corner on this nightmare for so many people, particularly the thousands of children affected, and to help some of our most vulnerable in society.”

More coverage: page 9.

- BY OWEN RYAN AND ALLEN MEAGHER

LEITRIM HEARS SOLUTIONS

Best practice in addressing child poverty, storm resilience, community safety and more



• A swan in beautiful Carrick-on-Shannon, Co. Leitrim, cleaning its plumage days before the town was named Ireland’s Tidiest Town for 2025. PIC: AM.

Over 100 staff and volunteers striving to serve communities heard examples of best practice in addressing child poverty, in mapping community resources, and in preparing for future storm events.

The fourth National Networking Conference for Local Community Development Committees (LCDCs) was held on October 15, in Carrick on Shannon, Co. Leitrim, and attendees also received updates on national guidelines on the operation of the LCDCs and the latest on the new community safety partnerships.

The opening address was given by Bairbre Nic Aongusa, assistant secretary general of the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht which organised the event.

Joseph Gilhooly, CEO of Leitrim County Council, welcomed everyone to the Wild Rose County,

while his colleague Vincent Dwyer, director of Services, spoke about the need for all counties to be more resilient with the prospect of future storms.

Speakers also included Ruth Smith, co-ordinator of Tipperary Public Participation Network, Fiona Crotty from Tipperary County Council, Gráinne Berrill, the director of the National Office of Community Safety, and Justin Gleeson, director of the All-Island Research Observatory in Maynooth University. Updates were given by department staff members Deirdre Kelly, PJ King and Kieran Moylan.

Attendees were also informed about plans for a public awareness campaign to be launched in the coming months to promote the work of LCDCs.

In due course, the conference presentations will be made available on the Department’s website.

- ALLEN MEAGHER



• Chris Gonley, CEO, Leitrim Development Company, and Ann O’Donnell and PJ King from the Dept. of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht.

Community Development Committees in 2025

Attendees at the annual networking event held in Carrick-On-Shannon on October 15.



• Paula Donovan, Offaly Co. Co. staff member with volunteers Robert McDermot, chairperson, and Deirdre Arnold, vice-chair, of Offaly LCDC.



• Kieran Moylan principal officer (right) with departmental colleagues who helped organise the conference in Carrick-on-Shannon, Co. Leitrim.



• Bairbre Nic Aongusa, assistant secretary general, DRCDC, in Carrick-on-Shannon, Co. Leitrim.



• Ciarán Reid, CEO, Louth Local Development, Eugene Conlon, Louth LCDC, Gráinne Berrill, National Office of Community Safety, Carol Murphy, Louth LCDC, and Finbar Gethins, Louth LCDC.



• Marie Nicholson and Kelly Slattery from Galway.



• Ruth Smith, co-ordinator of Tipperary Public Participation Network and Fiona Crotty of Tipperary County Council co-presenting.



• Maria Nugent, Edel Clancy and Lorna Maxwell, director of community, South Dublin County Council.



• Speakers included: Fionnuala Curry, co-ordinator Wicklow CYPSC, Vincent Dwyer, director of services, Leitrim County Council, Justin Gleeson, director of the All-Island Research Observatory, Deirdre Kelly, principal officer, DRCDC, and Joseph Gilhooly, CEO of Leitrim County Council.

Waterford group seeking new name found Irish worked best



• Liam Quinn speaking at the rebranding launch in September.

What was Waterford Area Partnership until late September, is now Buíon Phort Láirge. The name change reflects an organisation that has rebuilt and expanded from a crisis situation earlier in the decade. They also switched from English to Irish in their name rebranding – although their strapline remains in English.

The rebranding is part of moving on from issues of the past when the organisation went to the brink of closure after serious governance and financial issues were identified. Mr Quinn, who was not himself involved at that time, said that things have moved on significantly since then.

“We have grown quite a bit, taken on new programmes, we have probably doubled in size in terms of our staffing. We have probably earned the trust of a lot of the funding departments and agencies that would have been involved with the Partnership down through the years.”

Moving to a new name helps reflect the new energy within the organisation he feels.

So, why the switch to Gaelige?

“Buíon is an old Irish word, which means a band or a group of people coming together to work in partnership. That’s buíon,” said Liam.

“We hadn’t planned to, but we were trying to reflect in some way what a local development company does. The more we looked at Irish words, we found many that would reflect what we do.

“While ‘Buíon’ is a word not familiar to many Irish people let alone non-Irish people we work with, our strapline in English (Supporting People & Communities) tries to encapsulate what we do, which is support people and communities,” he said.

"I'VE SEEN HUGE ALLYSHIP AND

"It's a story I'm quite sad isn't

BY OWEN RYAN

Close to the end of Pride, CEO of Dublin's Outhouse LGBTQ+ Community Resource Centre Oisín O'Reilly, says there are reasons for both worry and optimism in the community.

On the negative side, he says that a hardening of attitudes to the community internationally is a huge concern.

"The environment that we are working in, with all of the wider geopolitical shifts, has really changed the context for the work. Particularly in supporting individuals and engaging in community development. There is a huge amount of fear and anxiety and worry prevalent within the LGBT community here in Ireland, particularly for trans and gender non-conforming people. That part of our community has been really targeted by bad faith actors.

"We look across to the US and things look scary. Then we look at what's happening in Hungary, where they passed constitutional amendments to ban Pride and criminalise LGBT people. That sense of fear of it arising here has changed the environment that we're in, the issues that we are working on and the types of support that people really need," he said.

Chastened by the Trump administration's targeting of companies that pursue a DEI agenda, much of the corporate backing for Pride has evaporated.

While that could be interpreted as a worrying sign of the times, Oisín doesn't see it like that.

"I think there's a little bit too much on the 24% and not enough on the 76% who have stuck with us. There's a good news story there. Friends of mine were challenging me last week and saying there were less rainbow flags or rainbows on social media, and they're not wrong. But what I've seen is that the companies that we work with, in late January and early February, when they saw what was happening and what the impact would be for our community, they asked what they could do.

"I said, 'Look, we're actually going to need more help now'. What most of them said was that they wouldn't spend money on telling people about the good things they're doing this year, and the money we would normally spend on that we'll give to you to run more programmes or add more services or what have you. I've actually seen huge allyship and



• Campaigners on Capel Street in front of Outhouse as they celebrated 'The Power of Communities' for IDAHOBIT on May 17, 2025. PHOTO: Outhouse on Facebook.

solidarity happening and it's a story I'm quite sad isn't being told."

OUTHOUSE CAFE GOING WELL

More generally, it is a challenging financial climate, with organisations like Outhouse having to get to grips with very high inflation since 2022.

"With social enterprises, there's an element of us all being under pressure with the inflation of the last number of years. We're trying to ensure that our services and what we provide remain accessible to those that really need them, but things still have to wash their face and there needs to be a little bit in the rainy day fund in case things go wrong.

"We have made some really big investments into the community cafe, here in Capel Street. That's kind of the flagship part of the social enterprise and that has performed exceptionally well. We were very lucky that we were able to take a strategic risk by hiring a hospitality services manager and then that a member of our own community,

who has worked in hospitality all of her life, had recently sold her own businesses and was looking for a new and very different challenge. We have seen massive strides being made not just in the quality of what we've been able to provide to the community, but also the response in terms of revenue has been really, really strong.

"We're very heartened by that, particularly as the international funding and fundraising environment for LGBT work isn't the best, at the moment. It's not all doom and gloom, but there are storm clouds on the horizon and we have made sure the social enterprise has been working really, really well over the last year."

GARDA SUPPORT NOT A GIVEN

This time ten years ago the community was basking in the afterglow of the marriage equality referendum, which had passed in a landslide. However, he says that the number of homophobic attacks has been rising in more recent years.

"While we can walk down the aisle

"D SOLIDARITY HAPPENING"

being told" - Oisín O'Reilly

holding hands, we're still looking over our shoulders. The vast majority of hate crimes and hate incidents affecting the LGBT community happen in Dublin, by virtue of the population being based in this part of the country. Those are up again and they have been up every year for the past number of years."

Getting appropriate support from the Gardai isn't a given, he adds.

"We've had some really difficult experiences when members of the community have gone to the gardai to report those. There are great guards, but they are also under pressure and sometimes when people go into stations those things aren't taken entirely seriously. But when people come to organisations like ours and tell us, we know where the guards working hard on our community are. We can get people who understand the issues and the sensitivities and the fear and the anxiety that comes with it," he said.



• Oisín O'Reilly, CEO of Dublin's Outhouse LGBTQ+ Community Resource Centre, pictured in the café. PHOTO: AM.

development, to youth work, to mental health provision, other types of health care that are needed for trans people and for others. Now there is a road map for the next four years as to how Government is going to progress on those priorities," he said.

That's available through ourselves."

Outhouse also has meeting rooms and other spaces available for use by organisations that share its values.

"Solidarity between us all is really needed at the moment," Oisín concludes.

- More information on Outhouse is available at its website www.outhouse.ie.
- A previous article on what Outhouse provides is available on page 15 of the link: <https://www.changingireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Issue-79-Winter-2022-2023-pubd-Jan-32p.pdf>
- Also, our video tour of Outhouse with Oisín can be viewed at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1xv4Csa_QsU

POSITIVE GOVERNMENT VIBE

More positively, he says there were a lot of positive things in the Programme for Government, agreed by the coalition earlier in the year.

"There was a question mark about whether the Government felt the LGBT box was ticked in terms of policy, we were asking ourselves that. The sector came together to run a joint campaign called Vote With Pride, which was about clarifying the key issues and what we needed to see.

"Now looking at the Programme for Government that was agreed in January, so many of those issues have been recognised. It's no guarantee of action as we all know, but I take great heart in the recognition that the job is not done.

"In early June, the Government launched the second national LGBT inclusion strategy, that's a whole of Government strategy, looking at a whole host of issues, from healthcare to housing to community

AFTER THE 2015 REFERENDUM

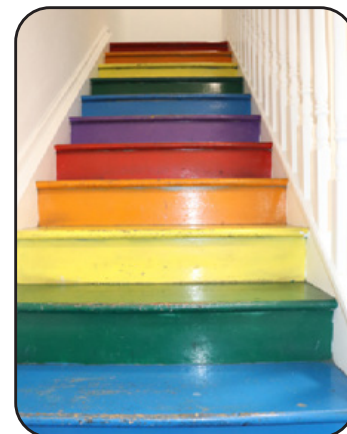
Some may have felt that the LGBT struggle had concluded with victory in the 2015 referendum, but he says that has not been the case at all.

"It was a wonderful thing that we as a country and a society did. But in some ways it was the end of the first chapter. We only decriminalised homosexuality in 1993 and we can't solve all of the issues in 30 years. It's just not realistic when we have social constructs and belief systems that are thousands of years old. I suppose that sense that it was the end of the journey was maybe a bit of a naive perception. It was great, we had done something wonderful, but there's an awful lot more to do."

OUTHOUSE OFFERS TRAINING

Outhouse will continue to make its contribution to that work in the heart of Dublin, and he is keen to stress it can help other organisations.

"I'd like to let other organisations know that, if they are struggling with issues around LGBT inclusion, we offer training. It could be about including LGBT people in work, or meeting LGBT communities where they are at, or how to respond to the rise of hate and extremism in their own communities and contexts.



• The steps up from the gig venue basement in Outhouse.

MÁIRÍN Ó CUIREÁIN IS NEW CEO OF THE LDCN



• Máirín Ó Cuireáin.

Máirín Ó Cuireáin formally commenced work this week as the new CEO of the Local Development Companies Network (LDCN). The umbrella body represents not-for-profit local development companies across the state.

From 2008 to 2019, Máirín was the CEO of the Robert Emmet Community Development Project (recently renamed the Liberties Community Project) in Dublin. Prior to that she worked for six years in Ballymun – firstly as a volunteer support worker and later in the then Ballymun Partnership, managing community development supports.

As such, Máirín has considerable knowledge of the local and community development sector and has seen it evolve over recent decades. She knows the impact the sector has on social inclusion and economic development within communities.

Máirín has a Higher Diploma in Community and Youth Work from NUI Maynooth, a Bachelors degree in Agricultural Science from UCD and an MBA in Sustainable Leadership from TCD.

From 2019 to recently, Máirín served as the Dublin Development Officer with Waterways Ireland.

Máirín takes over the role from Dr. Carol Baumann who led the network for three years and saw it expand, including a rebranding earlier this year – it was previously known as the Irish Local Development Network.

The companies it supports engage in community development and social inclusion work, employment training and placement, supporting social enterprise, environmental and climate justice initiatives and much more. They reach out to communities and individuals.

You can read our July interview with Carol at [changingireland.ie](https://www.changingireland.ie)



Úlla, Dúlra agus Pobal:



INTRODUCTION

Throughout 2025, a project called Úlla, Dúlra agus Pobal - meaning 'Apples, Nature and Community' unfolded in Cloughjordan ecovillage in Co. Tipperary. The project was supported by the Irish Environmental Network and five events were held, online* and in person, to look at how heritage apples connect with history, with local communities, with local food businesses, and with the arts. The project finale was an festival called Féile na nÚll which took place on September 20th in Cloughjordan ecovillage.

Here, **Oliver Moore**, one of the organisers, explains about projects happening involving community apple orchards elsewhere - in Monaghan town, County Clare, Limerick city and Ballymun.



* The webinars can be viewed on the website thevillage.ie and a publication based on the discussions has also been produced - all about apples of course.

Monaghan has created a Dispersed Urban Orchard

How do you make the most of a town with lots of nature, but which is literally all over the place? Monaghan town has lakes, rivers, canals, and Ireland's most-visited Coillte forest nearby.

Locals came up with an idea to turn gardens into habitat corridors, as Emer Brennan from Monaghan Tidy Towns explained: "Much of the land breaking up the habitats had been built upon with housing estates of various sizes. However, those housing estates all had gardens, and back gardens too. So, we came up with the idea that, with the co-operation of local residents, we could develop spaces for apple trees all through the town."

In 2015, residents were offered low-cost native apple trees from Irish Seed Savers. Families planted them in their own gardens, creating a "Dispersed Urban Orchard" (DUO) across the town, which is great for pollinators, said Emer.

The project drew up a map showing participating households and it quickly gained momentum, winning the All-Island Pollinator Award in 2016. Since then, DUO has expanded into housing estates, GAA clubs, and schools, embedding biodiversity in everyday community spaces across Monaghan town.



Reconnecting people to orchards

By Oliver Moore

19 Clare churches turned into biodiversity havens



Launched in 2023, the Nature Clare Church Biodiversity Project is an initiative that encourages churches in the Banner County to return 30% of their grounds to nature by 2030, following a call by bishops for more to be done for biodiversity. The project is led by Clare County Council's biodiversity officer Barry O'Loughlin and is supported through funding from the National Parks and Wildlife Service.

Working with the dioceses of Killaloe, Tuam, Limerick and Killaloe, the initiative has engaged 19 churches (17 Catholic, two Church of Ireland) across Clare. The work involves planting fruit trees and setting up nest boxes for swifts, barn owls, and bats, pollinator-friendly planting, bird feeders and educational signage.

Communities have come together to deliver this – involving parishes, schools, farmers, and local groups such as Tidy Towns and Men's Sheds, along with BirdWatch Ireland, Irish Seed Savers, and the All-Ireland Pollinator Plan.

Training has been central and it covers orchard planting, pollinators, bats, and bird ecology - equipping priests and parishioners to sustain biodiversity efforts long-term.

The project has become a national model, inspiring similar initiatives in seven other counties. As Barry O'Loughlin, Clare's Biodiversity Officer, said, "Church grounds are central to community life and by restoring them for nature, we also restore awareness, skills, and collective stewardship."

Limerick rediscovers its apple heritage

Cracking Light Productions creates socially engaged art that connects people and the environment. Their first orchard project, Appletown, in 2023, was connected to efforts to facilitate a just transition towards decarbonising Limerick by 2050.

While embedded with Limerick Civic Trust, they worked with 120 community employees managing 90 acres of green space, rediscovering the city's heritage as once home to 1,640 acres of orchards. Two mini-orchards of heritage apple trees from Irish Seed Savers were planted, reconnecting community and landscape.



Ballymun dreams up orchard songlines

In 2024, Orchard Songlines with Axis Ballymun composer Tom Lane and poet Jessica Traynor engaged 14 young people to map Ballymun's past and future through memory, music, and song.

The project created four original songs and planted a new orchard of heritage apple trees. As Maeve Stone of Cracking light puts it: "The trees will hold the songs, and the songs will sing the story of the place."

What are heritage apples?

Autumn is a great time for apples, and there is a revival around heritage apple trees and the uses they can be put to. So, you may ask: What are heritage apples?

They are old, traditional varieties of apple trees that are grown for their varying tastes and their cultural and biodiversity value and they are different to the varieties sold in supermarkets.

Social Enterprise Award Winners 2025

The overall winner of the Social Enterprise of the Year Award was Turn2Me, while a Lifetime Achievement Award was presented to Senan Cooke - see page 5 for more. The winners in the other categories were as follows:

Climate and the environment:

Winner: CycleUp Textiles supported by Roscommon Women's Network.

Runners up: Leave No Trace Ireland and Education for Sustainability.

Training, Work Integration, and Life-long Learning:

Winner: Connections Arts Centre.

Runners up: Generation Ireland and Rise at the Cove.

Startup:

Winner: AnamVR.

Runners up: HUGS Community and Beyond Surviving.

Buy social:

Winner: Rise at the Cove.

Runners up: LIFT Ireland Foundation and Spraoi agus Spórt.

Social Finance:

Winner: CareBright.

Runners up: Centre Longford and Rise at the Cove.



• Linda Ledger and her husband Leon from St Munchin's Community Centre which won a runners-up award in the Community Facilities/ Infrastructure category.

Health and Wellbeing / Services for Children and Older People:

Winner: Turn2Me.

Runners up: Spraoi agus Spórt and LIFT Ireland Foundation.

Community Facilities/ Infrastructure, Arts and Heritage, and Local Development:

Winner: Common Knowledge.

Runners up: St. Munchins Community Centre and Creative Spark.

Retail, Hospitality, and Professional Services:

Winner: Duhallow Community Food Services.

Runners up: The Bluestack Special Needs Foundation and The Green Kitchen and Garden Shop (Walkinstown Green).

The pandemic left a mark on rural Ireland

- Amazingly some groups only returned to action this year

BY OWEN RYAN

Meetings, once almost always an in-person affair for all sections of society, changed dramatically in the pandemic, suddenly becoming entirely virtual affairs.

Community groups and organisations up and down Ireland found their means of communication cut very suddenly. Most adapted quite quickly and largely successfully.

But five and half years since Covid emerged the dust is still settling to some extent.

That's certainly the case for Tullamore Toastmasters who held their first fully in person meeting since the pandemic in September.



• Charles Malone (centre) with fellow members celebrating 30 years of Tullamore Toastmasters.

“Hybrid meetings were very handy for me because I’m a farmer. If I had a cow that was going to calve I could stay at home and still go to the meeting.”

CARDS, BINGO AND SOCIAL DANCING SLOW TO RETURN

The Tullamore experience raises an interesting question more than three years after the Covid restrictions were lifted and the end of a bleak period in history arrived:



• Anne Cassidy, social inclusion manager with Galway Rural Development.

What was the lasting impact of the pandemic on community groups?

Anne Cassidy of Galway Rural Development says that she feels social groups were a bit slower to return than committee based organisations.

“Community activities, where there might have been bingo on, or cards, or set dancing, those kind of things seemed to take a long time to come back, if they came back at all. This is anecdotal, but that’s what I would say struggled to come back, compared to the Men’s Shed or the ICA or the Tidy Towns, those groups that come together to do stuff.

“Yes, those did take time to get

going again, but I didn’t really hear of many losses. More things like people organising community activities like cards or bingo or social dancing; those seemed to be more likely not to come back or to be very slow about coming back.”

She understands why certain things didn’t return, as people re-evaluated things.

“If two or three people were responsible for organising, maybe they asked themselves ‘do I really want to go back?’ Also they may have been older, or the momentum was gone. Those were the things I would say struggled more in my experience. The groups seem to have survived.”

“Now there are a lot of new groups forming.”

However, she feels there have been a number of new groups have sprung up in rural Galway: “Now, there are a lot of new groups forming, and coming to us looking for support. There is no shortage of groups in most areas, I would say, there is a lot of stuff going on.”

LOST VOLUNTEERS

Fergal Conlon of the West Cork Development Partnership feels that different types of groups changed in different ways and he feels volunteerism took a hit for a while.

“I didn’t notice it too much in social groups, things like Active Retirement. I noticed it in delivery groups; things like community associations, your sports club, your

committees, the ones that would be running stuff as opposed to socialising. They were struggling to get volunteers to get involved.”

He feels that people broke long standing habits and didn’t return to them very easily.

“For me, it wasn’t a fear of Covid, it was just that people had got out of the habit, as simple as that. I suppose people got used to different things. Your average committee person would be attending a meeting two or three times a week for different committees they’d be on, and it was a way of life for people. A very rural way of life in particular, you’d have so many great community stalwarts, and that habit was lost.”

“Many people are looking to do part time courses now, and that reflects a wish for connection.”

However, he says that a tendency towards community involvement did come back slowly, and now things are somewhat like they were: “In terms of the community development piece, I haven’t heard any reflection on Covid for a while, which is a good sign.”

He says there are many people looking to do part time courses now, and that this reflects a wish for connection.

“These hobby classes, such as learning gardening or photography, whatever it might be; there’s a huge demand for them. There’s a fierce amount of people doing those. And that’s a sign of people getting out and about and socialising, and there’s an appetite for it.”

He has also noticed that communities are coming together to respond to crises in a new way.

“After Storm Eowyn there is this idea of community readiness, to address emergencies. You see soup kitchens, charging banks, places like that particularly when there is no electricity. Covid is related to it, Storm Eowyn, even Ukraine, there is this idea of community readiness and responding to things,” said Fergal.

DELIVERING CALVES DURING ONLINE MEETINGS

For some time they had gone with hybrid meetings, but they felt they were left with no option but to cut those out.

“There wasn’t a connection with the people online. There were two different meetings; people online was one meeting and those in the room was another. When you were doing a speech you didn’t know where to look; at the people in the room or at the camera,” says spokesman Charles Malone.

People were drifting away from the club and they felt cutting the online dimension was the only way it could endure.

“It was a hard decision. We have members in America, but numbers were declining and we felt the only way for the club to survive was to go back to in-person. So far it looks like we’ll have four new members, even though we are losing three.”

Charles personally benefited from the hybrid options, but he realises the change is required.



• Fergal Conlon, social inclusion manager with West Cork Development Partnership.