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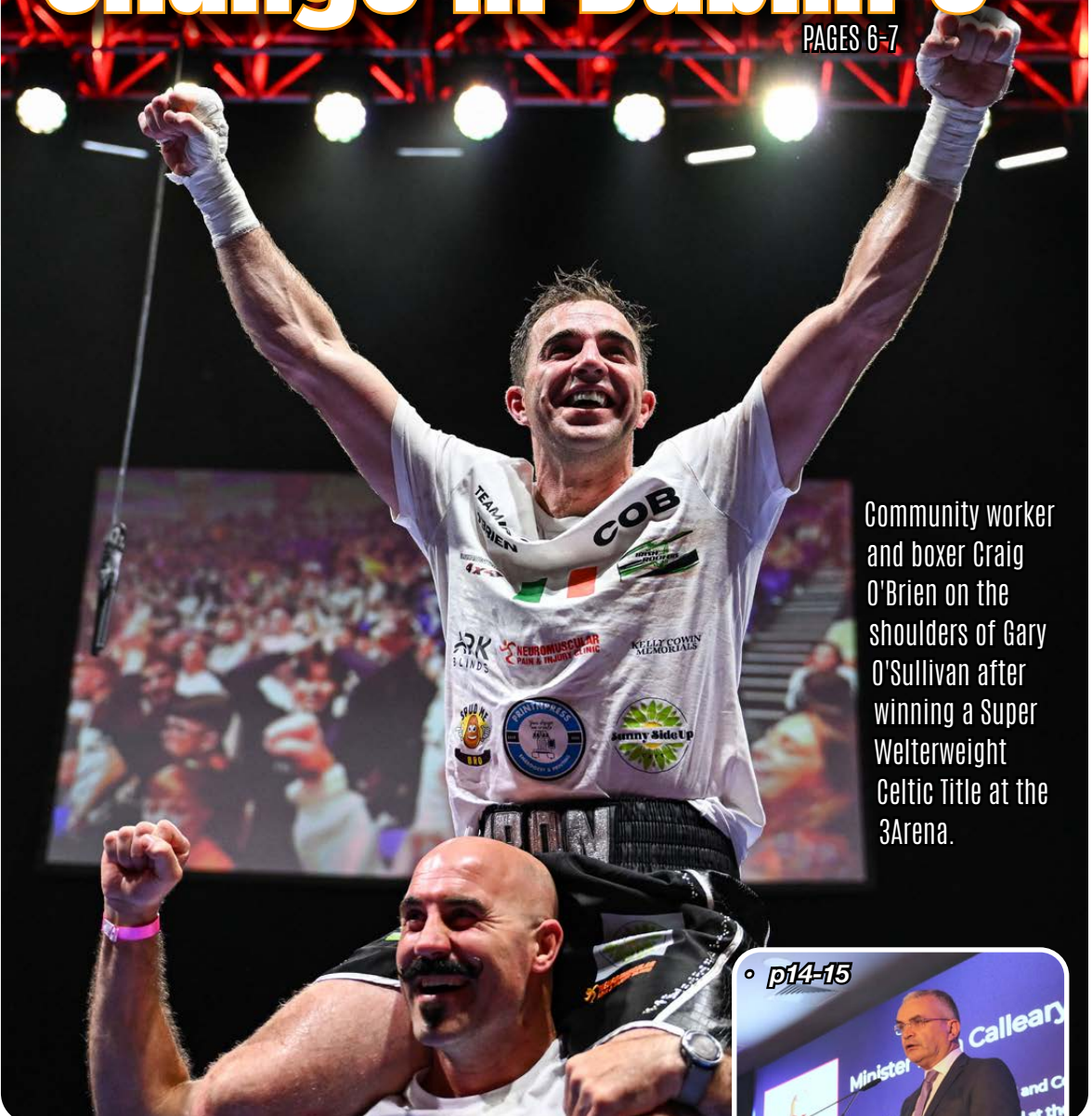


TRAVELLER-LED HOUSING DEVELOPMENT LAUNCHED

CRAIG O'BRIEN

Now Fighting For Change in Dublin 8

PAGES 6-7



Community worker and boxer Craig O'Brien on the shoulders of Gary O'Sullivan after winning a Super Welterweight Celtic Title at the 3Arena.

- ALSO INSIDE:**
- ZELENSKY MEETS COMMUNITY WORKERS
 - VOLUNTEERS UNHAPPY WITH CHARITIES REGULATOR
 - SCARIFF GETS FULL LICENCE



• Ballina hosts local development conference

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SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS



FRONT COVER

Main photo: Craig O'Brien celebrates on the shoulders of Gary O'Sullivan after winning his Super Welterweight Celtic Title boxing bout against Edward Donovan at the 3Arena in Dublin on September 20, 2024. **Photo by David Fitzgerald/Sportsfile.**



MEET US ONLINE



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'.

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WHO ELSE IS 'FIGHTING FOR CHANGE'?

Role model with a punch

Our thanks to Craig O'Brien for agreeing to be interviewed about his life, his work and his passion for connecting with and empowering young people in Dublin 8 as part of the Solas team. His 'Fighting for Change' programme is aptly named and Owen Ryan's interview with Craig (pages 6-7) will inspire many.

Surely it is unnecessary for bureaucracy to end so many opportunities

We often hear and sometimes speak of people experiencing disadvantage, marginalisation, structural inequality and so on. We say community development is about supporting groups of people who are "on the margins", who are "hard to reach" and who too often encounter "barriers to progression".

A significant barrier (page 12) for some people is that banking institutions cannot facilitate them in a straightforward manner

when they wish to open a bank account.

If the experience reported from one part of the country is - and I expect it is - replicated elsewhere, it means hundreds of people are missing out.

Banks need to recognise that not everyone has the latest smartphone, is digitally savvy, has good literacy skills and endless patience. Not everyone has a driver's licence or a passport and it is a bit surprising that Public Services Cards are not an acceptable form of i.d. For enlightenment there, we appreciate the reply from the Department of Social Protection.

Yet, how many others are denied opportunities because they have no bank account? What can be done? Can more be done for those willing to engage and return to the workplace who happen to not have a bank account? Questions to return to.

Community cafes

Community cafes (pages 10-11 and 26)

are busier than ever, but under pressure. Many may now require dedicated government funding support if they are to keep doing what they do so well. See pages 10-11. We dearly love our own one, probably the best in the country (of course we're not biased) - Moycafé - can't beat our bacon and cabbage!

Community workers meet President Zelenskyy

Our thanks (see opposite page) to Natalia Krasnenkova for her report from inside Leinster House when she and fellow Ukrainians, now serving as community workers here in Ireland, met President Zelenskyy. While displaced by the war and far from home they were visibly buoyed by his official visit to Ireland. It gives us hope for the future as we begin a new year.

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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Ukrainian community workers in Ireland put many questions to President Zelenskyy

Natalia Krasnenkova was among those who were front and centre during the official visit by the President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, to Ireland in December. She and Olya Marintseva, as active members of the Ukrainian community in Kerry and as community workers there, were invited to meet the president. Here she provides a first-hand account of that meeting:

By Natalia Krasnenkova

The first official visit of the President of Ukraine to Ireland was a significant event. Despite the intense schedule of official meetings, the President found an opportunity to communicate with the Ukrainian community.

Over 40 community representatives from all counties in Ireland attended the event in Dublin.

This gesture highlights the importance of the work and efforts of local development organisations such as NEWKD* and Ukrainian activists in supporting the community.

It was a very inspiring and warm meeting for Ukrainians. From the very beginning, the President proposed a dialogue format: we asked our questions, and he listened carefully, answered, and joked. Volodymyr Zelenskyy was attentive to the questions, humane, and sincere. The meeting lasted about an hour. Ukrainians had many questions for the President.

Unfortunately, I did not have time to ask the question about cultural diplomacy and countering disinformation. Now we are observing a wave of fakes about Ukrainians in Ireland, various provocations and hate speech on social media. It looks like a deliberate campaign to incite hostility between Ukrainians and the local population. The same information attacks are taking place throughout Europe, their goal is to discredit Ukraine and Ukrainians and incite hostility between communities.

Questions we discussed included: A unified curriculum for Ukrainian schools abroad; Issues of European integration; The community's role in defending Ukraine's interests abroad; and the opportunity for Ukrainian athletes who found themselves abroad to represent Ukraine in international competitions. I am very glad that these important topics were raised.

I was lucky to have a brief conversation with the First lady Olena Zelenska, who is implementing the Ukrainian library project around the world. Specifically, yesterday she opened a Ukrainian shelf in the Trinity College library. We discussed the possible expansion of Ukrainian shelves in libraries across the country. Ukrainian shelves have already been created in two Kerry libraries — Tralee and Dingle — by NEWKD's Ukrainian team.

On his official page, Volodymyr Zelenskyy noted:

"A good and sincere conversation and a truly special visit — the first visit of the President of Ukraine to Ireland since the establishment of diplomatic relations after the restoration of Ukrainian independence. A strong signal that we are indeed building reliable relations with Ireland. And above all, the Ukrainian community here is important in this process. Thank you for this meeting and conversation. It is important that the voice of Ukrainians in the world continues to be tangible and strong for the sake of our State's strength."



• Ukrainian refugees now in community development roles in Ireland pictured with President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, in Leinster House on December 2.

For me as a community worker with the Ukrainian community and an activist, this meeting with the president was a recognition of our teamwork and an opportunity to be the voice of my community. For Ukrainians who are in Ireland due to a full-scale war, it is very important to have this connection with Ukraine and feel included in the life of Ukraine even 3,000 kilometres from our home.

This meeting inspires me to continue working for the community. I would like to note that we also always have the support of our SICAP manager Robert Carey and the entire NEWKD team.

(Natalia went on to pay tribute to the Embassy of Ukraine in Ireland for their organisational prowess.)

* Community workers are employed by North East West Kerry Development (NEWKD) and other local development companies around the State through the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme.

Meeting President Zelenskyy and wife Olena sparked joy



• Ukrainian community workers in Ireland, including Olya Marintseva and Natalia Krasnenkova from North East West Kerry Development, pictured in Leinster House on December 2.

An Irish community worker's view on Zelenskyy's visit to Ireland

SICAP manager Robert Carey from Kerry was in Leinster House when President Zelenskyy addressed a sitting of the Dáil and Seanad. He writes:

It was a privilege to be invited. In an era when there is a deficiency of brave politicians, President Zelenskyy is definitely a brave politician. He's a generational leader.

He thanked Ireland for providing refuge and for all the support. He also noted that Ireland is one of the few European countries that have battled imperialism for hundreds of years, before it got its independence, so there's a certain commonality with Ukraine.

It's important we don't forget that because we've had our independence for quite a while. It's important to keep Ukraine in the news. And it's important that community workers continue to highlight the injustices happening in Ukraine and ensure that people don't fall into the trap of thinking things aren't as bad as they actually are there.

For those of us who know members of the Ukrainian community, Ukrainians have given Ireland as much as Ireland has given Ukrainians, in my opinion.

Youth Worker Craig O'Brien

is fighting for change in D8

Craig O'Brien, a professional boxer with an Irish title who has been on a Katie Taylor undercard at the 3 Arena and would be familiar to Sky Sports viewers, now works with the Solas Project in Dublin 8. In his 30s and an educated and successful man, the North Inner City native is in a different place to his early twenties when he spent time in prison and grappled with addiction.

Interview by Owen Ryan

"We're based in Dublin 8, on the south side of the city," he says of Solas, an organisation that began in 1998 with a single volunteer giving an afterschool service for local children.

Around its catchment area the aftershocks of the heroin epidemic of the 90s are still felt and Solas is helping with the fallout a generation later.

"I'm in the TRY team, that stands for Targeted Response with Youths. We first started in 2017. There was a lot of addiction. Heroin had been a massive issue. People had kids in that time, and a lot of young people had been just left to roam the streets, causing havoc and anti-social behaviour," he said.

Putting 18-26 year olds on a different path

Eight years ago the response was far less well-resourced than it is today.

"The TRY team started with one worker for eight hours a week and it just grew from that. At the moment there are four full time workers. In 2022 we merged with the Solas Project, under the Justice Department, because the funding was coming from there, and we became one big team."

While Solas works with children who would still be in national school, its TRY team is for those aged around 18 to 26, many of whom are involved in low level crime, and the aim is to put those young people on a different path.

"A lot of them would be involved in the drug scene and what we do is go out there and build relationships where they're at. It might be in the flat complex, we go in have a chat,



• Craig O'Brien at work with Solas.

build a relationship. There might be open dealing going on while we're there, but because they're not referred and they don't just show up at our door, that's where we build the relationships. That's where the work gets done."

Small things can be important to young people

When they do start to build a connection with the young people, Craig and his colleagues often help them to do small things in life that are important to them.

"Off the back of that, when we build the relationship they might want a piece of work done, that could be a CV, it could be a theory test, it could be job applications, it could be making a doctor's appointment. They could be in court and they get involved in programmes, we give them a letter to say they're attending. It's right across the board."

Programmes are run that reflect the young people's interests, and hopefully give them an outlet away from the pitfalls that are all around

them on the streets outside their homes.

Fighting for Change programme

One programme that Craig runs reflects his own passion, boxing, which played a huge role in his journey away from addiction and towards education and work.

"I run the Fighting for Change programme, which runs for six to eight weeks each year. Each week there's a boxing session and you'll bring in a person who has faced adversity in their life. We've brought in Thomas Carthy (Dublin boxer), Kiefer Crosby (MMA fighter), Willa White (comedian), we've brought in people who have been in the Paralympics. They all tell their story about facing adversity and coming out the other side of it."

Much of the programme takes place at Paschal Collin's Celtic Warrior Gym, with part of the idea being to broaden the horizons of the young people, who often have little life experience.

"It's taking them out of that environment into new surroundings, letting them meet new people, see new faces. All they know sometimes is the one or two mile area that they live in."

People with lived experience

Growing up and as a young man Craig saw very similar problems to those the young people he now works with are facing, and it obviously gives him an advantage in the role.

"I'm 35 now, that was me ten or 15 years ago. I was one of those young people in the flats. There are one or two of the older ones in the flat complex who would know me. A lot of them would know my boxing background, so it is so much easier for me to build a relationship with them. There's young people who have been in the same situation as I was in.

"People with lived experience are probably best placed for this sort of work, if that makes sense. Obviously you need your education, but I tend to build the relationships so much quicker with the young people."

Addiction hid barriers

Craig says he had to come out of addiction himself before he really understood the barriers that were in the path of himself and those who grew up around him, and he says those in Dublin 8 also have to negotiate the same kind of issues.

"I didn't know until I went to college that we grew up in poverty. Our area is disadvantaged. In Dublin 8 it's a lot similar, they only know what they've grown up in. Not many of them venture outside of the area they were born in. They're caught up in the same things. They don't have positive role models if that makes sense, they're not seeing the wider picture of what work does and what it gives you."

"People with lived experience are probably best placed for this sort of work."



• “I didn’t know until I went to college that we grew up in poverty,” said Craig O’Brien, seen here graduating from UCD.

“I’m in the TRY team, that stands for Targeted Response with Youths. The aim is to put young people on a different path.”

money there or something like that. It’s like a business the way they structure things there, and he went and did something for a few quid, got arrested. He’s now in custody.”

“It is hard to take them out of the environment. You get some bits of work done, but they tend to fall back into what they know.

“I go and visit him now in prison. I’ve a great relationship with him. He was literally at the turning point, on the cusp of turning and at the last minute, he fell back involved.”

away from it. He’d probably go in to the flats now at 4pm, whereas when I met him first he was there full time. Eventually I built a relationship with him, we got him back training, I was going to Crumlin Boxing Club with him most mornings. On the back of that he has done his theory test, he has done college courses. Like me he was in an amateur boxing club when he was a kid but fell out of it, and my background sort of gives him the belief that he can do it.”

Sociology and policy

“I went and did the level five and on the back of that there was a diploma, I did well in that, started getting used to the assignments, started getting used to the education, started liking it. On the back of that there was an opportunity to go to UCD to do a degree in sociology and social policy. There were four or five of us who went on and done it.

“While I was there they spoke about work experience. I contacted my friend who was in the TRY project. I had my background and a couple of them were into boxing, I did some padwork with them, I was getting to know them and know the area. I stayed doing the college work, doing the volunteer work a couple of hours a week. When I completed the degree there was an opportunity to start with the TRY team and that’s the way it went.”

Drugs trade is “alarmingly professional”

He says that the local drugs trade works in an alarmingly professional way, and that many of those who he encounters are very capable, but their potential is being put into the wrong avenue.

“They have shifts in there, the way they work is like an enterprise. These young fellas are very clever, but it’s about taking them out of that environment.”

And sometimes those who have the potential to leave it, and who may even be on the brink of doing so, fall at some of the final fences.

“I had a young person five months ago, good brain in his head, he started his own clothing brand, he had a load of clothes coming that he was after getting made abroad. He was still dabbling a bit, getting a few quid here and there.

“I left him one evening and two hours later he was caught up in an incident, he went through someone’s house after being told there was

Solidarity run for one young person

He says it is important to take pleasure in “little wins” and the fight always continues.

“We had a young person who was going through psychosis a couple of months ago. He got to be 100 days sober, we got him into Aiséirí down in Tipperary, he did six weeks down there, he came out and we gave him a load of support. He was 100 days sober two weeks ago, we did 100km of a run between us for him. But at the moment you can see him falling back into the trap, which is hard. But we can only do what we can do. We can only put it in front of them and support them.”

At the moment he is working with another young man, a keen boxer, and Craig feels his own example does show him the possibilities.

The young man is training twice a day and is making progress, although Craig knows his transition isn’t complete.

“He probably hasn’t fully come

Craig’s redemption

His own redemption came after spending time in prison and in addiction as a young adult, before he returned to education and ended up a graduate of UCD, with experience and training to make a valuable contribution to society.

“I didn’t anticipate going to college and qualifying after four years. I didn’t set off that way. I had my own background of being caught up in addiction, I had my cousin Wayne who passed away through alcohol in 2018. My brother was on hard drugs, but he’s sober since November of last year, he’s out running, he’s doing jobs and all, it’s amazing.

“A friend of mine had started the TRY project, and maybe I looked up to him a little bit, he was after doing a Level 5 in addiction studies for drugs and alcohol. Now I was after leaving school at 13, but this wasn’t a full on course, it was part time, you go up, you engage, learn about drugs, what it does to you, harm reduction, the wheel of change, how people go back into addiction. You learn about how your area might be perceived by other places. It just opened my eyes.”

Boxing requires “huge discipline and constant effort”

Of all sports, professional boxing requires huge discipline and constant effort, and those are traits that Craig feels helped him get out of the situation he was in when he was a poorly educated young man, who was just after coming out of prison and who had an addiction issue.

“I never knew where I was going to end up, but I was consistent. With the likes of the level five, I showed up and did it. The diploma, I showed up and did it. The degree, I got the bus over every day and did it in UCD. You just don’t know where you’ll end up. I’m sort of in a good position at the moment where I have options,” he said.

Boxing career



Dublin boxer Craig O’Brien has amassed a 15-3 record since turning professional in 2015, after having put a troubled early life behind him.

In 2017 he took the first belt of his career, winning the Boxing

Union of Ireland Celtic Super Welterweight title against Alain Alfred.

The following year he defeated Jay Byrne, taking the Irish title in a Dublin derby at the National Stadium in a fight that was

televised on TG4.

Also in 2018 he tasted his first defeat as a professional, losing out to the highly rated English fighter Anthony Fowler.

In 2024 he boxed on a Katie Taylor undercard and recorded a memorable victory against Edward Donovan at the 3Arena.

He was injured for much of 2025, but hopes to make a ring return in 2026. He is coached by Pascal Collins (a brother of former world middleweight champion Steve) who has also coached fighters such as Cork’s Gary ‘Spike’ O’Sullivan, Mayo’s Ray Moylette and Wexford’s Craig O’Brien.

Traveller-led housing officially opened in Galway city

Co-launched by CENA and Galway City Council

Tuesday, November 11, 2025, was an historic day for Galway city. It was the day that Galway's Catherine Connolly was appointed President of Ireland, but it was also an historic day for showing the country new ways for Traveller Accommodation to be built.

The official launch of five new Traveller homes – in an area now called Bóithrín na Saoirse - is the result of a new collaborative approach to delivering Traveller-specific accommodation, one that places Traveller voices at the heart of the process.

The development was led by CENA Approved Housing Body with support throughout from Galway City Council. The name Cena is the Cant word for home.

Speaking at the official launch, Traveller and local resident John Ward said, "Our life has changed completely and this is the way forward for Travellers, places like this."

The launch was performed by Éamon Ó Cuív, former communities minister and former deputy chair of the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Key Issues affecting the Traveller Community, and by Cllr. Alan Cheevers, Galway City's Deputy Mayor.

Cllr. Cheevers said he was "delighted to see the opening of this new development, which is the first of its kind in Galway City." He said, "These new homes represent not just bricks and mortar, but stability, respect, and opportunity for families to thrive."

Mr. Ó Cuív said he was also "delighted" the project had come to fruition. He said, "When CENA set up, I really thought it was a good idea. Obviously they need the funding and the support of the statutory agencies and the advice and the sites and all the rest, but it does give a buy-in that is key to how we should go forward."

"I look forward to other local authorities following what Galway has done here in working with CENA to get everything into place to provide more housing," he added.

Brian Dillon, CEO of CENA Approved Housing Body, said, "The homes here, and especially the process involved in their development, provide a pointer to future provision of sustainable Traveller accommodation that recognises identity and distinct culture."

The homes were already occupied by families although not all attended the launch.

Lavish praise for Galway City Council is still not something you easily find among Travellers in Galway and the word "Rahoonery" - where the new homes were built - comes from "the suburb of Rahoon in Galway where residents expelled Travellers from their camp by force in 1969".

Nonetheless, as Mr. Ó Cuív, seen as a strong supporter of the Traveller community and of the Traveller housing body CENA, said, "The opening today is a seminal moment".

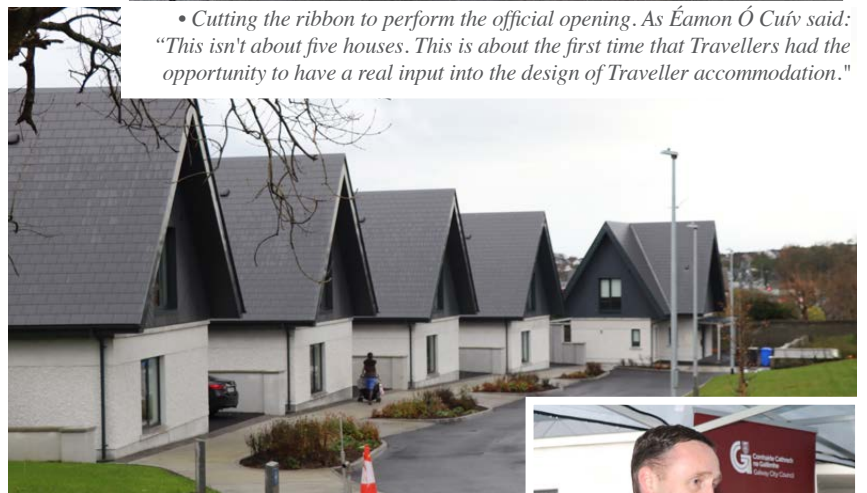
It was indeed remarkable to see the buildings completed and occupied and was a proud moment for all involved, particularly the residents, CENA and Galway City Council, but also Desiun Architects and Pat Loftus Construction.

"I look forward to other local authorities following what Galway has done here in working with CENA" - former communities minister Éamon Ó Cuív

By Allen Meagher



• Cutting the ribbon to perform the official opening. As Éamon Ó Cuív said: "This isn't about five houses. This is about the first time that Travellers had the opportunity to have a real input into the design of Traveller accommodation."



• ABOVE: A full view of the front of the new homes - they all feature yards out back. RIGHT: Leonard Cleary, CEO of Galway City Council, speaking at the official opening.



• Cllr. Frank Fahy, John Ward, local resident and CENA member, and Brian Dillon, CEO of CENA.

Cavan over-55s to benefit as local development company to start building houses

Housing is one of the defining issues of our time, and Cavan County Local Development (CCLD) is going to do what it can to help.

It is looking to set up an approved housing body, which will provide housing to older people and certain disadvantaged groups in its catchment area.

Terry Hyland, the local development company's CEO, said:

"We are in the very early stages. We are in the process of setting up a company to look to become an approved housing body. The way we look at it, we provide services to the most disadvantaged in our community, so why couldn't we provide a roof over their heads as well?"

On who it will look to provide housing for, he said, "Our target groups will probably be over 55s and disadvantaged cohorts such as people with disabilities or young people coming out of care; those will probably be our three focuses. Our plan is to work with Cavan County Council and to take those cohorts off the social housing list. Also working with Tusla as well."

Deciding to move into property development isn't necessarily very simple or easy, and Cavan County Local Development first did a lot of research.

He feels that there is an obvious link between what his organisation does and what providing housing would mean.

"It's in our constitution to tackle poverty, to promote social inclusion. If we were providing housing to the people that we are supporting on a daily basis we would really be providing a wraparound support service for those people. That's the model we are looking at.

"A lot of approved housing bodies out there can provide a roof over people's heads, but they probably don't have the capacity to provide services, whereas we can provide programmes like SICAP, Healthy Communities and Tus, all of these other programmes that we deliver. We won't just provide a roof, we'll be able to cater for their economic and social needs as well."

Local development companies going into the provision of housing is a new idea, and Cavan's experience will be followed closely by others.

To read more about this endeavour and to continue reading Owen Ryan's interview with Terry Hyland, visit: changireland.ie

Older people being made homeless 'is very solvable, very quickly'

BY OWEN RYAN

While an increasing number of older people are experiencing homelessness, the State has the capacity to make progress on the issue fairly quickly, once the nettle is grasped.

That's the view of Ber Grogan, executive director of Simon Communities, which held a conference in Galway on the issue in Galway on September 26.

In the last five years, the number of people aged over 65 experiencing homelessness doubled. It rose from 122 in 2020, to 249 in June 2025.

Yet, Ber believes it is still at a level where a lot can be done and a severe crisis can be prevented. If the will is there.

"Over the last couple of months the homeless figures have kept increasing. People can feel hopeless and despondent, but we are really trying to put a spotlight on the number of over 65s in emergency accommodation," she said. The numbers remain "a very small, manageable number right now," said Ber.

Organisations working directly with people tend to become aware of emerging problems first, she said, and their perspective should inform decision making. She said that if the views of Simon are taken on board, an emerging issue can be headed off.

"We've seen it previously with family homelessness and with young people-18-24 year olds. That's why we're trying to raise this now. It is manageable. It is very solvable, very quickly, and that's what we're asking Government to do, and it's the reason we're putting it in the spotlight. Instead of thinking about over 16,000 people in emergency accommodation we're saying here is a really small cohort of people, this is what you need to be looking at now.

Most of the older people experiencing homelessness do not have some of the complex issues that often haunt younger homeless people.

"If people are over 65 entering homelessness for the first time, they may have more physical health or accessibility needs, but they are less likely to have any of the additional more complex needs that you might have if you are experiencing homelessness long term. You maybe don't have those additional mental health needs. It is literally about affordable accommodation."



• Ber Grogan, executive director of Simon Communities.

"It's going to become a bigger issue because we know that less people will own their houses or have mortgages paid off," she said, adding that when the Government is forward planning it needs to take housing security into account as well.

On the broader question of homelessness, she says there are actions that can be taken.

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

"During Covid was the first time we saw a dip in the numbers of people experiencing homelessness, so we know that the flow of people into homelessness can be stopped. But for whatever reason there is a reluctance on the Government's side to bring back in those measures that are needed.

"There is kind of an acceptance that the numbers are going up every month. There's no use in just pushing back with excuses, we need real action to happen."

To raise awareness, the Simon Communities of Ireland ran a week-long campaign across the country in September to raise awareness.

We spoke to Ber after Budget 2026 and she was pleasantly surprised by some aspects included in the Government's new housing plan.

"It has a focus on older people and accessible and appropriate housing, which is really, really welcome, and I wasn't really expecting it. I am hopeful that they have been listening to us, because it is something that we have been raising a lot over the last six months or so."

She says the focus is timely, as the numbers of older people experiencing homelessness are

"definitely continuing to increase".

From June to October, 18 more people aged over-65 entered emergency accommodation and the problem is accelerating.

"If they want to get a handle on it there is going to need to be action within the first six months of next year that will make a tangible difference. It will be interesting to

see what happens with the actions in the housing plan. There are some specific actions around prioritising older people so we will be able to monitor that year on year."

She is concerned that while the cohort has been identified as a priority, the funding to support them could be taken from additional services, rather than entirely new funding being provided.

"There is a slight worry that instead of having additional resources to deal with everything, that money will just be moved around. We hope that is not at the expense of anyone else experiencing homelessness," she said.

Nonetheless, she feels that the acceptance that the problem needs to be addressed is very positive.

"I think it shows the power of advocacy and shining a spotlight on trends."

"Definitely the right conversations are happening at the moment and it'll be part of my job to follow up and see how is that translating into numbers around accommodation for older people."

Crowds hitting COMMUNITY CAFES...

Soaring inflation has hit everyone in the pocket, but community cafes, which offer discounted meals to disadvantaged communities, have really felt the hit.

KILEELY



• Mary Fogarty from Loughmore Cottage met Minister Jerry Buttimer at a conference in Athlone, in October, and presented him with a copy of the National Community Cafés Impact Report. Photo by AM.

SOUTHILL



• It can be hard to find a table at times in community cafes. Pictured above: the Hill Cafe in Southill Hub before all seats are gone.

A new group called the National Community Cafés Action Group wants state funding for members

While a census of community cafes is unavailable, there certainly are hundreds of them across the country – and they are struggling to keep prices low and stay operational.

The National Community Cafés Action Group is a new group, formed in January, and it has been lobbying the government for funding. It represents 27 community cafes in ten counties and in July it visited Leinster House to officially launch an impact report.

Community cafes operate as independent social enterprises offering services to communities that would otherwise not be available.

They help to train and upskill local people, help with integration (for a great example from Tralee, see page 26) and they introduce people to community centres where they may then avail of other services and supports. They help people experiencing food poverty and today community cafes are busier than ever.

The action group, led by The Cottage in Loughmore, Co. Tipperary, has called for the establishment of a dedicated support scheme to help cover operational costs for their members.

They note that the budget for the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht includes “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.”

The action group hope some of this funding will be allocated to their request for approximately €1 million to support their 27 cafes.

Of course many more community cafes may also require support.



“We are victims of our own success. Two years ago we had to register for VAT, the cafe was doing so well.”

The Hill Cafe at the Southill Hub in Limerick city is feeling the brunt of the savage inflation of recent years, according to spokesperson Aisling Lohan. While footfall has increased, it has led to increased costs.

This year, it had to increase its prices, not to reflect inflation, but to keep the taxman happy.

“We are victims of our own success. Two years ago we had to register for VAT, the cafe was doing so well that the sales were over the threshold. That meant we had to either absorb that cost or increase prices, so we did a price increase, but basically it just goes to the taxman. It’s quite frustrating.”

“Our cafe operates as a loss leader, you know the way Dunnes and Tesco sell things at a lower price - it brings people into the organisation. If we increase the costs any more we’d price out people from the community that we’re here to serve, it wouldn’t work.”



The cafe was fortunate to receive a badly needed financial boost in 2025 when it applied for and was approved for €10,000 to help cover the costs of its chef/manager role.

She feels the cafe plays a huge role in making the community aware of what is available at Southill Hub and she was looking forward to families moving into new houses in the area.

“New families are going to be moving in and they will come over, because it’s right on their doorstep. The cafe is a great place for outreach, people from the community come in, and they stop and chat. They might be giving out about something and they’ll be advised to talk to the family support worker or the youth employability worker. The cafe is a great way to draw people in and then refer them to services. People go in for food and they might come out with help for getting a job or something. We need the cafe as a way of linking into the community,” she said.

as costs crisis looms

BY OWEN RYAN & ALLEN MEAGHER

DUBLIN 1



• Portland Row in Dublin serves three-course meals for €5 in its community cafe and it also provides a groceries service to people experiencing food poverty.

“You’re dealing with rising costs of staff, food and energy. The costs are going up, but the demand is also going up at the same time.”

The **Crosscare community cafe in Portland Row**, Dublin, is seeing demand go up as well as its costs, according to senior manager for community services Yvonne Fleming.

She says that the impact of inflation was really noticeable towards the end of the year and it is hard to find a steady source of funding.

“Our cafe is open to everybody and you can get a three course meal for €5. We have our income from what people pay for the food, but that doesn’t cover the cost. We’re competing with other NGOs for funds and donations. It is difficult, but we are reluctant to put up our costs because we know people are struggling with the cost of living.”

“You’re dealing with rising costs of staff, food and energy. The costs are going up, but the demand is also going up at the same time.”

The background of people coming there for meals has changed radically, due to the extreme costs facing Dubliners.

“A couple of decades ago when we were doing this, it was people with really obvious issues like homelessness or addiction; not so now. We have families and we have working people coming in. People might have decent jobs but if they are in private rented accommodation in Dublin and have a kid in childcare, they’re really pressed. If they can come in and have a dinner every day they bring down the dinner and cooking costs at home,” she said.



Crosscare also offers a citywide service in food poverty casework

Crosscare was founded in 1941 by the Catholic Church and its mission is simple – “to support people at those times when life gets tough”. As well as Portland Row cafe, Yvonne Fleming says the organisation helps those struggling with food poverty in other ways too.

“We also have what we call a food poverty casework service, for if you are in food poverty, are looking for groceries and can’t afford them.

“We are different to a foodbank in that we offer this casework service where we say - come and collect your groceries, you can select them off shelves like a shop, with some rules around quantity, but we also want you to meet with a caseworker. They’ll help you look at why you are in this position, look at the money coming into and out of the household, how can you be helped, are you getting your full suite of social protection entitlements, could you restructure debt, could we help you with that. Are you paying the correct rent for your social housing property, things like that. People sometimes don’t realise they can change an energy provider or phone provider, and we coach them on making those calls.”

That service is also available in other parts of the city.

“The case work service is also in Finglas Village, Finglas West and Jobstown, but we are servicing all of Dublin. People can ring us from anywhere and we’ll agree someplace for them to go to. If they can get a bus into town we’ll say come to Portland Row.

“We’re trying to build that model of the two things together in multiple locations, but it’s hard to get the money. We have some support from the Department of Social Protection and some from the HSE, but nowhere near the full cost of running it.

“The monies that we are getting from statutory agencies; it’s all annual. So you’re employing people, trying to keep them because they are really good staff, but your money is annual,” she said.

The cafe gives people a chance to get a nutritious dinner for a very reasonable price, and some people utilise it as much as they can.

“We are trying to shuffle around our menus and also to give really good food that people like. We do quite a traditional menu. People like to have a good dinner.

“Some people come in twice a week, have their dinner and get a takeaway meal for the next day. They might get a payment, their social welfare or their pension or whatever, and they might buy five meal vouchers for the next five days or the next week, so they know that at least they’ll have their dinner every day,” she added.



• Yvonne Fleming, Crosscare’s senior manager for community services.

EXCLUSION

Qualified for Tús employment scheme, but unable to take up offers

Difficulties opening bank accounts is holding people back from Tús opportunities



BY OWEN RYAN

Tús is the Irish word for start or begin. However, bureaucracy around opening bank accounts is having a severe impact on some people who want to get back into the labour force, according to James Hill of the Northside Partnership in Dublin.

James is a supervisor whose job involves working with participants on Tús work placement schemes, and he sees up close how hard it is for some people to open accounts.

It is so bad that people end up walking away from the work opportunities, so frustrated and disenfranchised are they by the bureaucracy they must negotiate.

For every 100 people he seeks to set up with Tús placements each year there are usually around 30 that struggle to set up a bank account.

“The main challenge is that none of them would have a driving licence and never will. The other challenge is that they wouldn’t have a passport, they’d probably have never left their area to be honest with you. Another challenge with online applications is that there are literacy issues, and another part is that they wouldn’t be savvy with a computer. They might have access, but they wouldn’t have the skills to go through the process,” he said.

He is not allowed to give them the help that they need.

“It can be quite challenging, we try to help them as much as we can, but with GDPR and everything else we are very limited. If they are communicating with the passport office and you are lucky enough to get through, they won’t talk to me, they have to talk to the participants and they wouldn’t even know where to start,” he said.

In his experience the financial institutions expect a level of IT knowledge that the participants don’t have.

“I talked to Bank of Ireland and



It’s not easy for everyone.

“They give up after a few tries”

Permanent TSB and they said to send them in to an appointment, we’ll help them get set up. The participants go in and next thing they are being directed to doing it online, and that puts them off completely again,” he said.

Without a bank account nothing will happen for those people who might have otherwise found a path back to the workforce by working part-time, 19.5 hours a week.

“If we find a placement that is a match to their skills and interests, and the organisation that we work with are willing to offer the place, we can’t offer a 12-month contract for them to work. We can only pay them a salary into a bank account, we can’t do cash, we can’t do it through the post office, it has to be some sort of financial institution.”

He has been dismayed to find that banks will not accept the Public Services Card, as he like many others thought that it was introduced for this kind of scenario. If it was accepted, it would be more straightforward for people without

other forms of identification to open a bank account.

Meanwhile, people who are on the brink of significant personal progress through Tús get knocked back by something that should be accessible.

“It takes a lot of effort to get them to this point, to have the confidence to come in and try this programme, to get back into the labour force. Then they give up after a few tries. We try our best to support them as much as we can, but unfortunately without a document of some sort it can’t go any further.

“Unfortunately, I have to refer back approximately 30% of my participants, because I can’t get an account opened for them because of this protocol. I understand it is in place because of money laundering and all of that, but there has to be some way.”

He also sees the impact on those who are left behind by the continuing drive to get people to do everything on the internet.

“Everything has moved online, you do your banking online, pay your bills. But there is a generation that won’t move over to the digital format. They are finding it challenging. Recently they’ve found they can’t pay their bills at the Post Office anymore, which is another headache,” he said.

Response to questions put to Dept. of Social Protection

The Department of Social Protection issued a statement (below) to Changing Ireland as follows. It also provided a summary description (bottom of page) of the Tús scheme.

The Department has received a small number of queries regarding the payment of wages to a Tús customer that doesn’t have a bank account. In these instances, the Department advises the customer of the process involved in setting up a bank account and directs customers to supports available in the Implementing Bodies and online, such as that provided by the Citizens Information Board on their website. In addition to mainstream banks, customers are also advised to consider opening an account with other providers such as Credit Unions, An Post or digital only banks that operate primarily through online platforms. The Implementing Bodies actively work with customers who are interested in taking up a Tús place and who may be encountering issues setting up a bank account.

Under current legislation the Public Services Card cannot be requested by a financial Institution as proof of identity. The Banking and Payments Federation of Ireland provides guidelines for people who may not have the standard documentation required to open a bank account where generally it is recommended that an in-person appointment is made in a financial institution for these cases, further details can be found here: <https://bpfi.ie/a-guide-to-moving-your-personal-account/opening-a-new-personal-bank-account/>

Who is the Tús scheme for?

Tús is a community work placement scheme which provides short-term working opportunities for unemployed people who are in receipt of a qualifying social welfare payment.

Tús is managed by Implementing Bodies, formerly known as Local Development Companies and Údarás na Gaeltachta, on behalf of the Department

of Social Protection, which has overall responsibility for the scheme.

Tús participants work 19 ½ hours a week and the placement lasts 12 months.

Tús participants are paid directly into their bank accounts by Electronic Funds Transfer (EFT) on a weekly basis.



THE INVISIBLE WORK KEEPING FAMILIES TOGETHER

“Despite our strong outcomes, Families First remains relatively unknown outside Tusla. We’ve been so busy working on the ground that we haven’t told our story.” - Alice Ann Lee

Alice Ann Lee is employed by an organisation called Families First / Archways which is focused on early intervention, empowerment, and keeping families together and connected to their communities.

The project is funded primarily by the Department of Justice.

She tells the project's story here.



For almost two decades, I’ve worked with families who are hanging on by a thread. Parents who feel they’ve failed. Teenagers who have lost hope. Families who love each other deeply but can no longer find a way to live together safely.

This is the world in which the Families First team operates — quietly, intensively, and often unseen. We’re part of Archways, and for 19 years we’ve been providing an evidence-based, trauma-informed systemic* therapy service to families referred by Tusla. Our work focuses on children on the edge of care or already in alternative placements — those facing the most complex emotional, behavioural, and relational challenges.

While much of Ireland’s focus rightly falls on foster care and residential services, what we do sits one step before that: we help families heal and stabilise so that children can remain safely at home.

What makes our approach different

In Families First, we don’t work with just one person. We work with the whole system: the child, the parents, and sometimes the extended family and foster carers. Every piece of the system influences the others.

Our model combines systemic family therapy and individual psychotherapy with trauma-informed practice. We meet families where they are — literally. Most of our therapy takes place in their homes, because for many of our families, getting to a clinic isn’t realistic. We also offer out-of-hours sessions to match the rhythm of real family life.

Over time, we’ve learned that if you focus only on the young person’s difficulties without addressing the parent’s trauma or the family’s relationships, the change won’t last. Parents often carry their own histories of abuse, neglect, or loss. Unless those stories are part of the work, healing cannot take root.

Two Irish research studies — one retrospective and one randomised controlled trial — have shown significant improvements in adolescent behaviour, emotional wellbeing, and family adjustment for families who complete our programme. The evidence supports what we see every day: this approach works.

LISA’S STORY: REBUILDING TRUST THROUGH UNDERSTANDING

Lisa was sixteen when she was referred to us. She had autism and severe anxiety, had stopped attending school, and spent most of her time in her room. Her mother, Karen, was exhausted. Every attempt to help seemed to end in an argument.

Over 10 months of therapy, we focused first on rebuilding the relationship between them. We explored how autism and anxiety interacted with family stress and we helped Karen find new ways to communicate with her daughter. Lisa began to express her needs more clearly, and her mother learned how to respond without escalating conflict.

Together, we found an alternative education placement that suited Lisa’s needs. She started attending full-time and began to rediscover her confidence. The change was slow but steady. By the end, Lisa’s family felt calmer and more connected, and Lisa was thriving.

“Lisa became more confident, more open,” her mother told me recently. “Our home is a different place now. I’ll always be grateful for the support we received.”



• Archways and other organisation reps made presentations to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Children and Equality to discuss Child Poverty and Deprivation on International Children’s Day, Nov 20th.

HAROLD’S STORY: HEALING THROUGH CONNECTION

Harold entered foster care at age four with his two younger siblings. By sixteen, he was struggling with identity and loss — why he was in care, why his father had denied him, and why his mother seemed distant.

We began by helping Harold tell his story. Using art and narrative therapy, he explored questions about his past that he had never been able to ask. We also supported his mother, who began grief counselling for the first time, and brought both of them together for joint sessions.

Gradually, Harold’s understanding of his life became clearer. His relationship with his mother strengthened. His foster placement stabilised. He began an apprenticeship and started to picture a future for himself.

“For the first time, I felt heard,” he told us. “I understood my story instead of feeling lost in it.”

Why this work matters

This kind of therapy takes time. It takes flexibility, consistency, and a willingness to walk alongside families through chaos, ambivalence, and pain. But when it works, it changes lives — not just for the young person, but for the entire family system.

Our approach also saves public resources. Families First has helped avert out-of-home placements, sustain foster placements, and support safe family reunifications. By addressing trauma, relationships, and practical needs together, we reduce the number of separate services families must engage with — and the risk of them dropping out altogether.

A social worker recently told me, “This service has been life-changing for many families. We’ve seen real reductions in risk and huge improvements in relationships.”

After nineteen years

Despite our strong outcomes, Families First remains relatively unknown outside Tusla. We’ve been so busy working on the ground that we haven’t told our story. But our work deserves to be seen — because it shows what’s possible when families are met with compassion, skill, and understanding.

As Ireland faces growing pressure on the care system, we need to invest more in prevention and early therapeutic intervention. Families First has shown that when families are supported holistically — not judged, not fragmented across services — children can stay at home, and families can heal.

Nineteen years in, I still believe in the same simple truth that brought me into this work: real change happens in relationships. And every time a parent and teenager start talking again, or a child finds safety in their own home, we’re reminded that this quiet, invisible work matters more than ever

* “Systemic” work means looking at a person’s family, community and other support networks, rather than solely viewing them as an individual facing a challenge. To find out more, visit: <https://archways.ie/>. Of note, Queen’s University Belfast teaches a [Masters in Systemic Practice and Family Therapy](#), part-time over three years.



• Minister Dara Calleary greets attendees as they arrive in his hometown of Ballina, Co. Mayo.



• A presentation was made at the conference to Michelle Mulally, the LDCN's Programme, Impact and Communications Officer in recent years, as she is taking up a new position in the world of finance.



• Karen Mannion, Piotr Sadłocha, Breandan O'Caomh and Karen Keaveney taking part in a panel discussion.



• Shay Riordan, CEO, West Limerick Resources (WLR), Minister of State Jerry Buttimer, Sean Lavery, chair of WLR, and Dearbhla Conlon Ahern, WLR's SICAP co-ordinator. Photo courtesy WLR.

BALLINA HOSTS INAUGURAL LOCAL DEVELOPMENT CONFERENCE

BY ALLEN MEAGHER

Minister Dara Calleary reaffirmed his Department's commitment to supporting Local Development Companies.

The inaugural Local Development Conference held recently in Ballina, Co. Mayo, marked a major milestone for the community-led local development sector, celebrating the essential role Local Development Companies play in social inclusion, rural development, enterprise support, and community services nationwide.

Hosted by the Local Development Companies Network (LDCN), the two-day event brought together leaders and changemakers from various sectors to explore “how to build stronger communities, inclusive societies, and resilient local economies”.

It opened with a welcome from Thomas Fitzpatrick, chair of the LDCN, and Sean Carey, Cathaoirleach of Mayo County Council, who highlighted the ethos of Local Development Companies and their impact through programmes such as SICAP, LEADER, and the Rural Social Scheme.

A later panel discussion focused on integrated services: the idea that by housing complementary programmes within one community-based organisation, the total becomes greater than the sum of its parts.

Minister of State Jerry Buttimer spoke on the first day, highlighting the vital role that the local development sector plays in fostering partnerships, empowering communities, and delivering real, measurable change.

Minister Dara Calleary welcomed all to his Moyside hometown on the second day. In his keynote address he reaffirmed his Department's commitment to supporting Local Development Companies. He emphasised the importance of sustainable funding for programmes such as SICAP, LAES, and LEADER, which underpin community-led development nationwide.

The conference also featured panel discussions with national and international speakers including Minister of State Jennifer Murnane O'Connor, Michael Reilly, Dr Eburn Joseph, Dr Anna Visser, Piotr Sadłocha, Bairbre Nic Aongusa,

Rosarii Mannion, Michelle Carney and Dr Anne Devlin. Broadcaster, comedian and author Colm O'Regan was MC.

Voices from the floor included a contribution regarding LEADER funding by former community worker and now MEP (Independent) Ciaran Mullooly.

Hundreds attended over the two days in Ballina and over 40 Local Development Companies were represented. Reflecting on the event afterwards, Ryan Howard, the CEO of South and East Cork Area Development, said the conference posed important questions:

“Over a thirty-year period, investment in community and local development has proven to be very effective in supporting sustainable development, enabling communities to prepare for and address major challenges in terms of equality, accessibility, connectivity, and integration. The levels of funding made available has not kept pace with the scale of the work that communities, volunteers, and community-based services are expected to manage. Too much pressure is being added to volunteer-dependent supports leading to burn-out. And the funds have some of the most ridiculous levels of administration,” he added.

Other issues were addressed over the two days included threats to future EU LEADER funding, lessons from cross-government coordination on child poverty and child well-being, and how building connections can help to tackle poverty.

By housing complementary programmes within one community-based organisation, the total becomes greater than the sum of its parts.

Local Development Summit

October 30–31, 2025, Ballina, Co. Mayo



• Comedian, author, and broadcaster Colm O'Regan was master of ceremonies.



• Killian Cawley, CEO of Monaghan Integrated Development.



• Eva Gonley, a TY student on work experience, and her father Chris Gonley, CEO of Leitrim Development Company.



• Denise McCool, Sinead McDaid and Shauna McClenaghan of Inishowen Development Partnership.



• Martina Earley, CEO of Roscommon LEADER Partnership, Minister Dara Calleary and Paul Rogers, CEO of Northside Partnership.



• Deirdre Bigley, Maeve Howe, Karl Duffy (CEO) and Linda Walsh - all with County Kildare LEADER Partnership.



• Bairbre Nic Aongusa, assistant secretary general, DRCDG, Máirín Ó Cuireáin, CEO of the LDCN, and Paul Geraghty, principal officer, DRCDG.



• Enjoying a cuppa at the conference at the Great National Hotel in Ballina, Co. Mayo.



• Sabina Trench, CEO, South West Mayo, Breandán Ó Caoimh, social scientist, Caroline Lydon, CEO, Laois Partnership, and Liam Quinn, CEO, Buíon Phort Láirge.



• Ciaran Mullooly, MEP (Independent) for the Midlands–North-West.



• Snapping the snapper! Evanne Kilmurray, CEO, Inner City Enterprise.



• Isabel Cambie, CEO, South Tipperary Development Company (STDC), Minister Dara Calleary, and Noirin O'Dwyer, STDC.



• Justin Sammon, CEO, Mayo North East.

4TH NATIONAL CIVIC FORUM

Lord Mayor of Cork highlights Community Employment challenges

Lord Mayor of Cork, Cllr. Fergal Dennehy, welcomed attendees to Millennium Hall, saying, “Your presence reflects the importance of dialogue and your shared commitment to strengthening our communities.”

In his speech he appealed to Minister of State, Jerry Buttimer to consider the challenges facing community organisations that are struggling to fill Community Employment vacancies in an era of near full employment. He called for incentives to encourage more people to take up CE posts and for a new model.

Speaking to Changing Ireland afterwards he said, “What I was saying to the minister today is that maybe we should look at another model where the department would support an element of paid staff (because) we obviously can’t keep relying on the Community Employment schemes - it’s not working and hasn’t worked for a number of years.”

For his part, Minister Buttimer promised to pass on the Lord Mayor’s concerns over Community Employment to Minister Dara Calleary.



Liffey CEO wants co-design to be the norm

The forum featured presentations on best practice from across the country and gave people a platform to speak about poverty and marginalisation.

Anne Fitzgerald, CEO of the Liffey Partnership, opened with an example of the kind of work she’d like to see partners to community development engaged in as a matter of course – programme co-design. She pointed to a research report published last summer with the HSE which identified alarming levels of food poverty in Cherry Orchard in Dublin. The report is called ‘Spinning Plates’, so named in recognition of the extraordinary job families in poverty do to feed and clothe their children, and is available to read online.

She and Trisha Loughman, senior health promotion officer with the HSE, pointed out how 43% residents in these parts of Dublin experience food poverty, compared to a national (also alarming) figure of 9%.

In regards to all anti-poverty work, Ann stressed that, “It is really important to keep community voices at the heart” of discussions on policy. While noting the increasing number of foodbanks in Ireland, she welcomed the fact that there is now more focus and discussion on poverty than before.

While proud of this research

work, as Anne noted, the norm is for community organisations to be seen by funders as “contractors,” “implementers,” “tenderers,” and “suppliers of services”.

“We’d like to be working more in partnership. We’d like to be involved in co-design,” she said.

She also called for contracts that include protocols that “protect the rights of civil society organisations to critique the state”.

In further presentations, James O’Brien, a volunteer from Co. Wicklow, Laura O’Callaghan of the Disability Federation of Ireland, and Michael Nicholson from Wicklow County Council shared learning from their Disability and Inclusion Steering Committee. It was set up in 2020 to pursue a multi-departmental approach to making services provided by the Council accessible to all.

Collette Deeney, co-ordinator of Monaghan Children and Young People’s Services Committee, and Packie Kelly, manager of Teach na Daoine Family Resource Centre, delivered a presentation on Local Area Child Poverty Action Plan Pilots.

The afternoon featured presentations on the We Act Campaign by Claire McGowran and on Public Consultation Guidelines by Barry Vaughan from the Department of the Taoiseach.

Minister Buttimer says collaboration is key to anti-poverty work



• Minister of State Jerry Buttimer addressing the National Civic Forum.

The fourth annual National Civic Forum took place on a wet and windy November 14 in Cork, marking the first time it was hosted outside Dublin.

Opened by Corkonian and Minister of State, Jerry Buttimer, it brought together representatives from community organisations, agencies and local and central government to discuss how to tackle social exclusion and improve civic engagement and true collaboration.

In his speech Minister Buttimer welcomed all on behalf of the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht.

He said the Department had begun work on developing a successor strategy for the community and volunteer sector as well as a new volunteering strategy.

“Each one is being developed in collaboration with the sector and

other government departments, and will have the values and principles (for collaboration and partnership) rooted in their core,” he said.

In his closing remarks, having listened to participants, Minister Buttimer thanked all for their continued commitment to strengthening communities across Ireland.

He noted concerns that “poverty is alive and well” and said we must tap into the power of collaboration to tackle poverty.

“You are at the coalface and without you there would be catastrophe in my opinion,” he added.

As in previous years, for those who missed the forum, the views, proposals and presentation notes are expected to be made available in due course on gov.ie



• Attending the National Civic Forum in Cork – Moderator Dr Chris McInerney from UL, Kieran Moylan, Principal Officer, DRCDG, Rebecca Loughry, director of services, Cork City Council, Cllr. Fergal Dennehy, Lord Mayor of Cork, and Minister of State, Jerry Buttimer.

Millennium Hall, Cork, November 14th, 2025



• Louise Lennon, policy and media officer, Irish Rural Link, Chloe Ní Mháille, development co-ordinator, Community Work Ireland, Karen Ciesielski, CEO of the Irish Environmental Network, and Rebecca Gorman, head of policy media in the Irish National Organisation of the Unemployed.



• Anne Fitzgerald, CEO of the Liffey Partnership, Susan Randles, Pobal, and Kieran O'Connell, a social inclusion specialist with Cork City Council.



• James O'Brien, a volunteer from Wicklow, speaking at the National Civic Forum.



• Panel discussion featuring speakers at the National Civic Forum.



• Claire McGowran manages The Wheel's We Act Campaign.



• Trisha Loughman, Senior Health Promotions Officer at the HSE, speaking about food poverty.



• Anne Fitzgerald, CEO of Liffey Partnership.



• Chris Dorgan of Cork City Council, Fíonnadh McGonigle, National Disability Authority, and Dave Keogh, principal officer, Department of Social Protection.



• Collette Deeney, co-ordinator of Monaghan Children and Young People's Services Committee, and Packie Kelly, manager of Teach na Daoine Family Resource Centre.



• Michael Nicholson, director of services at Wicklow County Council.



Scariff going on air full-time is NATIONAL news

BY ALLEN MEAGHER & OWEN RYAN

With a decade of broadcast experience, volunteers with Scariff Bay Community Radio were on tenderhooks in recent months, pending the outcome of their application for a full licence to allow the station to dramatically increase its level of broadcasting. Now approved, it brings to 22 the number of community radio stations in the State with a full-time licence.

The station signed off on the licencing agreement in December with Ireland's media regulator Coimisiún na Meán (CnM).

"It will allow us to broadcast seven days a week if we want to," said jubilant station manager Jim Collins, who has been involved from the start in 2015.

Even the application itself was nationally significant because no station has sought a full-time license since 2017 when Community Radio Kilkenny City received one and began broadcasting seven days a week.

"The licensing of Scariff Bay Community Radio is a very positive move for community media in Ireland," said Brian Greene, chair of Craol, the national umbrella organisation for community radio stations.

He said that many aspirant stations have been waiting more than a decade to transition from pilot licence to full licence stations.

"We welcome the new impetus of Coimisiún na Meán with regard to licensing new services in community radio," he said.

Community radio stations rely on volunteers and the core aim of every one of them is community development - using radio to bring people together.

Volunteering is good for you, says



• Scariff Bay Community Radio reporting on a senior camogie county final between clubs from Truagh and Scariff.

Jim: "It keeps the brain ticking over. It brings you out, there's a social benefit in meeting people and in working with other people with the same interest. One of our volunteers jokes that it keeps him off the tablets!"

Clearly people in East Clare like getting together and have a lot to say.

"In 2017 we got our first FM licence," recalled Jim. "The normal first FM licence is a 30-day licence, so we broadcast every Saturday for about six months. In 2019 we got our first hundred-day licence and with that we broadcast for 50 weekends, both Saturday and Sunday. We have basically been doing that since 2019."

Now that the station has been awarded a full licence, it is for the group to choose how often to broadcast.

"For us, it's a hobby, it's an interest and we don't want to be stressed from it. We are a voluntary group and we haven't the personnel or the resources, or the population, to go seven days a week," said Jim. But they will go halfway; starting anew

broadcasting three days a week (Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays) is realistic.

"We are getting more and more people in doing programmes and broadcasting. We have a board of nine people and at last count we had about 90 volunteers," he said.

Some of Scariff's volunteers are already involved on a weekly basis, for example covering sports. They also have people who like to help out behind the scenes.

Many of the station's volunteers are heavily involved in other local organisations and bring a valuable perspective to Scariff Bay.

"Lots of our them would be in other organisations like Comhaltas, or like Conradh na Gaeilge or the GAA or rugby or athletics, or the Irish Countrywomen's Association.

"They are well placed to tell us what is going on and we're an outlet for those organisations to spread their message," said Jim.

Now they have much more airtime to offer their volunteers.

What does Scariff Bay Community Radio currently broadcast?

As well as covering local news and sport, part of what's important for community radio is to give the community it serves a voice.

"We have to provide social benefit," said station manager Jim Collins. It is part of their remit to support community groups, to give people an opportunity to tell their story, or to get involved in programme-making. Every weekend, the station broadcasts a variety of sports, current affairs and music shows.

It has a sporting-themed discussion show, and during the hurling and camogie seasons, the station ensures that every club in the catchment area features in one of its live match commentaries.

The station's flagship current affairs programme is called Saturday Chronicle, broadcasting every Saturday morning for two hours.

"We have a programme called Local Media where we talk about the Clare Champion and the Clare Echo. It's kind of like an hour-long version of "It Says in the Papers". We go through as many things as we have time for in the two papers," said Jim.

The station has a variety of music programmes - covering traditional, pop/rock, country and more - and it also encourages local musicians to come in and play live in studio.

See their programme schedule here: scariffbayradio.com/



Community Radio – All you need to know!

- Community radio exists solely for social benefit, giving a voice to people and groups in the communities they serve.
- The stations receive funding from a variety of sources, chiefly through the Community Services Programme and/or Coimisiún na Meán's Sound & Vision fund.
- Currently there are 22 fully licensed stations, including Scariff Bay Community Radio, around the country, and 14 aspirant stations.
- It is important that temporary licensed stations can develop into fully licensed stations as there is more support and funding available to full licence holders.
- There is a very clear step by step criteria to

follow to enable applicants to secure a full-time 10 year license. The licensing team in Coimisiún na Meán are on hand throughout the process to offer help and guidance.

- Craol is the representative, coordinating, and training body for community radio stations in Ireland. W: craol.ie
 - Craol argues that the social benefit that community radio delivers is invaluable to local communities, yet this work cannot continue if it remains unrecognised and underfunded.
 - Community radio stations in Ireland follow core principles named in the Community Radio Charter for Europe (the AMARC Charter). Community radio stations are growing stronger every year, says Craol.
- Thanks to Craol for assistance with this factbox.



• A delegation from SBCR recently visited Brussels - pictured here are station manager (and chairperson) Jim Collins, David Fleming, the Irish Ambassador to Belgium, Kevin Conmy, and Tom Hanley.

VOLUNTEERS ACCUSE CHARITY REGULATOR: SAY IT IS “HARSH, UNWIELDY AND UNREALISTIC”

- Regulator responds to complaints from group that encourages Irish families to host Ukrainian refugees

BY OWEN RYAN

Helping Irish Hosts, a group formed by Irish volunteers to support war refugees displaced in the early months of Russia’s full-scale attack on Ukraine, has criticised the level of difficulty it faced in getting charitable status.

In the end it actually gave up on the process, which it criticised for being unwieldy, unrealistic and even threatening.

In a statement Helping Irish Hosts said that the Charities Regulator had been unrealistic about what a group formed at short notice to respond to a crisis, could do in a matter of months.

“In May 2022, while supporting thousands of Ukrainians fleeing war, we applied for charity registration. After months of back-and-forth, the Charities Regulator declined in December to recommend Helping Irish Hosts for registration, citing payments to trustees and connected persons, lack of open recruitment processes, uncertainty over salary-setting, and questions about whether paid roles served a charitable purpose. They also suggested we relied too heavily on paid staff rather than volunteers.

“These concerns fundamentally misunderstood the nature of emergency response. We were operating in full crisis mode. People were sleeping in airport terminals. Families were arriving with nowhere to go. We were matching displaced people with Irish households, conducting welfare checks, coordinating safeguarding, and managing complex case work across the country - all while building the infrastructure of an organisation from scratch.”

So much was required that it couldn’t all be done by volunteers alone, with a very real need for paid expertise and skills.

The statement continued:

“This work required specialist skills: trauma-informed support, safeguarding protocols, data protection, and logistical coordination at scale. It could not be done solely by volunteers, nor sustained safely over time without paid expertise. The short-term payments in question - salaries, consultancy fees, and expense reimbursements - were made before any public funding existed.

“People were stepping up however they could: covering laptops, suitcases, food packages, room hire for roadshows. Once the organisation stabilised, all related-party arrangements ended and formal policies were introduced.”

It said that there was no acknowledgement of the base they were coming from, where nothing had been in place previously.

“The Regulator applied the standards of a long-established charity to what was, in effect, a rapid-response community start-up. There was no clear guidance for organisations formalising during a crisis. Departments within the CRA gave conflicting advice.



• Above: Helping Irish Hosts volunteers. The group receives funding from the state, yet could not register as a charity.

“There was no pathway that acknowledged the public interest work already being delivered, work that was publicly recognised, government-supported, and carried out under a service-level agreement with the Irish Red Cross.”

It claimed that the Regulator seemed to oppose the group rather than assist it, while it showed no apparent respect for the work it was doing.

“Instead of support, we faced an adversarial process. We were threatened with jail time. Treated as bad actors. Our work - helping Irish households open their doors to people fleeing war - was never acknowledged as being in the public interest, nor was our purpose deemed charitable,” said the group.

Ultimately its board decided in early 2023 not to continue with the registration process.

It says that it has continued to play a positive role in society, despite its experience.

“Helping Irish Hosts continued to operate as a Company Limited by Guarantee - seeking and receiving grants, delivering publicly funded work through our agreement with the Irish Red Cross, and running philanthropic and EU-funded projects.

“By the time our official role in the government’s Ukraine response ended in April 2025, we had matched over 3,000 displaced people with 1,500 Irish households, built a wealth of resources for hosts and guests (including a support line that fielded 70 calls per day) and built a peer-to-peer support network that sustained placements - many still going strong three years later.

“We maintain independently audited accounts for three consecutive years, operate under a strong and active board, and voluntarily adhere to the Charities Regulator’s governance standards - because we believe in transparency, integrity, and public trust.”

Helping Irish Hosts claims that its experience shows that the current system works against anyone trying to respond to an emergency.

“It penalises agility, punishes those who act before bureaucracy catches up, and offers

no pathway for groups doing urgent public-interest work to formalise without jeopardising their ability to operate.

“Communities were stepping up when systems weren’t. The regulation process should have supported that, not threatened to shut it down,” the statement ends.

Response from Charities Regulator

The Charities Regulator issued a response in which it said its role was not to stop anyone doing something positive, but there are legally defined requirements that a group must meet if it is to be designated a charity.

“The Charities Regulator does not prevent an individual or an organisation from carrying out good work. Charities are one type of not-for-profit organisation, and our statutory role is to regulate Ireland’s 11,500 charities on behalf of the public so they can have trust and confidence in the sector. The Charities Act 2009 is very clear on the requirements to be a charity, what we call the Charity Test, and by law, an organisation must meet each of these requirements to be registered.”

It said that these requirements are still in place even if a group is formed quickly to respond to a crisis.



“The Irish people are known for their generosity including at times of national and international crisis when they understandably want to help in whatever way they can. However, registration is a legal process set out in law and this takes time, which is why we encourage people to donate time or money to an established registered charity at a time of crisis, as it is a much more effective way of assisting people than seeking to set up a charity from scratch.

“Any changes to the requirements to be a charity would require a change in legislation, which is a matter for government.”

Perhaps the most striking complaint from Helping Irish Hosts was its claim that its representatives had been warned they could be sent to prison.

While it didn’t address that claim specifically, the Regulator’s statement said, “On a general note, the Charities Regulator takes a proportionate approach to regulating the sector. However, we are obliged to point out the potential legal penalties of non-compliance with charity law. This is to protect the public who may donate to organisations they believe to be charities which are regulated entities.”

LIBRARY NEWS BRIEFS

Cavan TALKS

Due to popular demand the Cavan County Library Service Autumn Lectures Series was made available online over five days during the recent Library Ireland Week.

These lectures are now available on YouTube:

- 'Land ownership in Co Cavan - a protracted revolution' by Dr Jonathan Cherry.

- 'A quiet county? Cavan and the Irish Revolution' by Prof. Eunan O'Halpin.

- 'No Promised Land' by Professor Mary E Daly on life in Ireland soon after independence.

- 'Cavan's Local Authorities and the foundation of the Free State' by Dr Brendan Scott.

- 'Ghosts of a Family: Ireland's most infamous unsolved murder, the outbreak of the Civil war and the origins of the modern Troubles' by Professor Edward Burke.

Sligo ROMANTICS

On December 3, Sligo Central Library played host to an event titled The Word, a collaboration between the library and the BA in Writing and Literature course at Sligo ATU.

Author Maggie Armstrong was there for a conversation with ATU Sligo's Elske Rahill, in which they discussed her collection of short stories Old Romantics, and the intricate craft of writing. There was also an Open Mic section and it featured the sound and voice of Claudia Schwab. It can be watched back on YouTube.

Limerick WRAPS

Christmas may be a spiritual and a family time, but it also sees an annual riot of consumption and on December 13, Limerick City Library hosted a free workshop on Furoshiki.

Furoshiki is the name given to any piece of cloth used to wrap gifts, while it also refers to the act of wrapping goods with cloth. It has become popular all over the world in recent years as an alternative to wrapping gifts with paper.

The workshop was timely as the EPA estimate that Ireland produces 450 million kgs of paper and cardboard waste per annum.

Kildare SIGNS

Kildare Disability Week ran in December saw Leixlip Library embrace the Christmas spirit with their Irish Sign Language group signing and recording a beloved Christmas song—Wham's 1980s hit Last Christmas. You can view the video on the Kildare Library Service's Facebook page.

'IN OUR WORDS'

"Our job is to smash limiting beliefs"



EILEEN MCHUGH

HAIR TOGETHER

TRUST • BELIEVE • BELONG • SUCCEED



• Eileen McHugh, founder of Hair Together.

Hundreds of young people have benefited from programmes run by Hair Together, which provides programmes mixing wellbeing activities with hairstyling and barbering, to support young people in Ballymun and surrounding areas.

It was founded by Eileen McHugh and she spoke about her own journey through adversity and that of Hair Together at the In Our Words conference in Athlone, which showcased the impact of grassroots community work through the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP).

Education

"I was a full blown heroin addict doing my Leaving Cert"

She said that returning to education was a huge step for herself. "The first step was college. I was a full blown heroin addict doing my Leaving Cert and I didn't do too well. I went back to Ballsbridge Business College and then did Organisational Management in DCU. And all these bits were building confidence, slowly."

She said that she became aware of the Back to Work Enterprise Allowance while involved with Innovate Communities in Ballymun, and she became aware of the supports that were available for things like Hair Together.

"The big support then for the last couple of years has been Inner City Enterprises. They give us hub space at a reasonable price and supports. I just have to call them up with whatever I need and I always need stuff because we're growing and developing."



Impact

It has helped a lot of young people who are having difficulties.

"We've had just under 300 young people go through our programme. We've had people get work experience, get jobs, the impact we've had is incredible. We work with young people, TYs, that are probably not turning up for school. We've ran programmes with Tusla, Extern, the Garda Youth Diversion, for young people that are struggling like I was when I was younger. We have a winning formula I suppose."

The work it has been doing has been widely recognised.

"Today we are multi award winning. This year we won the Image PWC Social Entrepreneur of the Year Award. We won global awards, we won the Kevin Murphy Icon Award, that's hugely recognised in the hair world, I don't know if any of you know it, it's a big deal in hair on a global level. One that was very special was the Dublin City Council Social Enterprise Awards this year. That was really special to me, I get real emotional thinking about it. When your own city backs what you're doing..." she said, struggling to hold back tears.

As she addressed 250 people at the 'In Our Words' SICAP showcase event in Athlone, in October, Hair Together was on the verge of taking a significant step forward, and in time she wants their intervention model to expand to different parts of Ireland, giving young people support across the country.

"We've just got the keys to our first premises in Ballymun. We're ready to open the world's first Training for Impact Salon and Academy. It's the world's first model like this. I found it really hard to get supports for social enterprise, but on our own we raised €125,000 through philanthropic donations and built a pipeline like that. We have just closed off the money and we have got the keys and we're hoping to open soon," she said.

In December, seeing the sign go up over their new premises she and the team were "all feeling emotional".

"The plan is in the next five years to have 20 more Hair Together's around the country."

"We knew this day was coming, but nothing prepares you for the moment," she said.

"This isn't an idea anymore, it's not a plan on a page, it's our place. This is us, finally standing in the space we've been building towards for years. This creates four new jobs instantly and we have a little system going where we have three chairs for rental to support people who are like me when I started out as a sole trader and didn't know where to go or what to do. We'll be there to support them and the plan is in the next five years to have 20 more Hair Together's around the country."

Possibilities

She said her own example shows the potential that is within people, even when things don't look very positive.

"I'm here today to prove that no matter how dark life gets, with the right supports and a bit of bravery and faith, you can build something powerful. Hair Together is about a second chance, belonging and showing the next generation that they matter. Our job is to smash limiting beliefs and to get our community dreaming big and to stand beside them when they make those dreams real. If I can come through addiction, homelessness and single motherhood to build this, imagine what's possible for the young people that we serve."

'IN OUR WORDS'

"BEHIND EVERY SUCCESS IS A WEB OF SUPPORT"

SABRINA WHELAN

Potential deep within people will be brought out with the right opportunities and support.

That was the message from Sabrina Whelan at a recent conference on the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP).

Now a community engagement worker with the County Kildare LEADER Partnership Sabrina says that how she ended up there shows the value of SICAP and of nourishing people's possibilities.

After growing up in a loving family Sabrina became a mother herself at a young age.

"I've been married to my husband for the last 20 years, we have two beautiful daughters. I became a mother when I left school at 18 after completing my Leaving Cert. I was very young and it shaped me to be the person that I am today. It was the first time in my life that I experienced stigma, the stigmatisation that comes with being a young parent. But it gave me determination to succeed. To work hard, to give it my all and to prove people wrong; just because you are a young mother doesn't mean you can't develop."

Volunteering

With a baby to mind, thoughts of third level education went on the back burner, but six years ago she started to become active in her community, a decision that changed her life in ways she would never have imagined.

"In 2019 I decided to begin volunteering and I started with a new local women's group being set up in North West Kildare. That choice opened up a new chapter in my life. Around the same time SICAP was introduced into my life. I met the local community development worker Linda Walsh who was supporting the group with a committee set up, a constitution, provision of workshops and the empowerment of the women living in North West Kildare. To my surprise, in my second week, I found myself becoming secretary of the group.

"If you enlist then you soldier, that was what I was always taught. It was completely out of character for me but week after week we showed up. And looking back now I realise that simple decision not only gave me purpose, but also encouragement and friendship and a sense of belonging that I hadn't even noticed was missing."

She feels that the group provided an important outlet for a lot of women.

"North West Kildare is quite a rural area with poor transport links. The women who attended spent their lives at home raising their families, their husbands were out working, the families were raised now, and what do you do? They found themselves a little bit lost. This group has been a lifeline for so many people. It celebrated its sixth birthday on November 3 and it has grown now to approximately 50 women who meet once a week. It's going strong and I'm immensely proud that they've carried on even though I've stepped away."

Education

Getting back into education wasn't on her horizon at all, until suddenly it was.

"I was not aware of adult education. I didn't think that I'd be eligible to go back to college or that there was an opportunity for someone like me. In 2020, County Kildare LEADER Partnership

"I was not aware of adult education."

in association with NUI Maynooth were offering a certificate in community development and leadership. I was asked if I wanted to interview for a place on this course. I did the interview and I got my place."

Nonetheless, she was a little uncomfortable talking about what she was about to embark on.

"My husband and my kids knew but I didn't tell my parents because I thought they might think that I had notions. Who did I think I was going off to Maynooth? I never got to Maynooth because Covid struck and it was all online!" she laughed.

While it was supposed to be one cert, she ended up studying until this year, picking up a degree and other valuable qualifications and experience on the way.

"I had incredible support from CKLP (County Kildare LEADER Partnership) and Sinead Bashir, our community education and support worker," Sabrina commented.

Those who worked with her helped transform her life, she feels.

"To see the transformation, I don't even recognise myself now from the person I was in 2020. I couldn't work a computer, couldn't use Zoom, I didn't know what Zoom was. I didn't realise the technology involved, but the empowerment they gave me and the confidence to stand up and do this, to show my daughters I could do this..."

Working

Improving her education and her level of activity in the community were huge steps, but there was even more.

"In September of 2023 I started working full time with County Kildare LEADER Partnership as a community engagement worker. It's incredible. It baffles me that I can stand here and say that I work with the people who encouraged me and came out and saw that spark in me that I didn't see in myself."

She loves the job, and the chance to help people as she was once helped.

"It's a privilege that I have that role to support people and build capacity in communities, strengthening their approach and most importantly developing their self belief. It's a privilege to go in and work within communities to identify those people and show them that it is possible, we can do this, our journeys can change significantly."

Looking back on the last few years, she is delighted with the support that was there for her. "I had incredible support to become a community engagement worker through SICAP. I have incredible guidance from both County Kildare LEADER Partnership and our colleagues in Kildare County Council. I really was very lucky in my journey."

SICAP has really played a huge role in changing her life for the better.

"Behind every success is a web of support, be it family, be it friends, community, or in my case the



• Sabrina Whelan speaking at the 'In Our Words' SICAP showcase event held recently in Athlone.

valuable help of SICAP. It was more than a programme for me, it was a lifeline when I didn't know I needed one. It empowered me and it continues to empower people to take the next step, to believe in themselves and to see the possibilities where once there were barriers. It invests in people and by doing so it strengthens entire communities."

It is important to remember that with the right backing people can do a lot more than might seem possible, she added.

"I want to share a final thought; I strongly

"Through kindness, care, compassion and programmes like SICAP ordinary people can achieve extraordinary things."

believe that every community and individual you meet has potential. Sometimes all it takes is a word of encouragement or a spark or a volunteering opportunity to get the right programme of support to unlock the potential that is simmering away beneath the surface. For me volunteering lit that spark but SICAP gave me the tools and the belief to turn it into a flame."

"Believe in people, invest in community and never underestimate the power of support. Through kindness, care, compassion and programmes like SICAP ordinary people can achieve extraordinary things."



A challenge to community groups

Working as a community development worker with Galway Rural Development has been life-changing, ex-prisoner Damien Quinn told a recent 'In Our Words' event in Athlone. The celebratory occasion was held to showcase the value of the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme for which Damien works.

Having used his three years in prison to better educate himself, he found that the work involved in turning his life around was not over at all when he came out. Due to his criminal record, he was locked out of the type of community development roles he sought.

That was the case until he was finally given a break.

"I spent since 2011 studying community development, and I couldn't get a break for over a decade. Galway Rural Development Group were able to see me for the man that I am today, and the skills that I bring, and they invited me into the team," he said.

"I started on the Social Enterprise Regeneration Project first, which was providing training to social enterprises in Galway, Mayo and Roscommon and I actually started my own social enterprise the same week," he said.

That social enterprise, Spéire Nua, helps people in the situation he once was in himself, by seeking to help former prisoners to reintegrate into society and work.

At Galway Rural Development he progressed to a role on the SICAP team, working in community education and disability support. "I went for the job, and I got that, and I am a very, very proud member of a team."

He said that management and colleagues there have had a huge impact upon him and he thanked them all.

The experience has been transformative, for a man who worked very hard to get the chance.

"It has been an absolute life-changing experience to grow professionally in an area in community development, which I'm very, very proud to be a part of," he said.

Brooklodge Day Service is located quite near his home, but he didn't know what was happening there until he came into contact with it through his work.

"I always thought it was the priest's house, but it was actually a disability day service that I never knew about! One of the first things that we did was look at ways in which to empower the individuals and for them to generate a bit of trade income for themselves, and that type of thing.

"We successfully supported them to set up their own coffee shop, the Friday coffee shop, and when they got it all set up, one of the first things they did was to cater for a wedding of 110 people."

He was also involved in helping to set up something similar in Athenry.

"If you're ever in Athenry and you fancy spending a few quid socially, pop into the Green Bean Cafe, in Athenry Primary Care Centre and meet the lovely staff. It's one of our favourite projects," he urged the audience.

He also spoke about social farming and the benefits of that as a programme, while he said a project that involves drumming is one of his favourites.

"Everybody connects to the beat. For any ability, any age, there's nothing stopping you from getting involved in drumming, and it's great to be a part of it. And when you feel the energy, and you see the smiles, you know, it's a really, really nice way to spend an hour or two."

He said that running a summer camp for children with additional needs, where he observed the joy in the faces of the participants and their families, showed him the importance of the work.

As a child, Damien and his siblings were at times left alone, and he said people from the Travelling community played a major role in helping them, doing more for them than the statutory services.

He said he enjoys working with the community now through his job, for example being involved in the production of a mini-documentary about Traveller culture entitled 'Life on the Road'.

"We did it in collaboration with the HSE and it actually premiered up in the Dublin International Film Festival. We were really, really proud to play a little part in celebrating life on the road and Traveller culture."

His work on helping the rehabilitation of people with criminal pasts is continuing.

He spoke about an event called Generation Change where "the whole idea is inviting employers into the room with people with criminal histories. There will be national employers there, and we'll be pulling on all those levers."

He encouraged community workers who might know somebody who would benefit from interaction with Spéire Nua to contact him: "Let me know and I'll work with you on that."



• Emily Hughes, Climate Action Officer with colleague Damien Quinn, SICAP worker, Galway Rural Development.



• Damien Quinn (right) with Richard Good and Michael McCusker of the Turnaround Project, Spéire Nua's Northern Ireland partners.

He said that his job has challenged him and he said he wanted to challenge his colleagues in the audience.

"My role with Galway Rural Development certainly empowered me and I spend my time empowering them as well. Reciprocity is a massive word; a bit of give and take. They've supported me to do what I want to do. They've employed me, but they're not just employers, they're friends and they're people that challenge me to be the best version of myself every day and I challenge them to be the best version every day as well.

"But I want to challenge you as well. I heard a lot of talk about funding and the need for funding; we go around every day and we empower people, we empower social enterprises, we empower local community groups, but I challenge you to think about how you can empower yourself. How you can identify opportunities to have your local development company grow and to ensure that you're not scrounging for funding when the time comes," he concluded.

As a child, Damien and his siblings were at times left alone, and people from the Travelling community played a major role in helping them, doing more for them than the statutory services.

People emerging from prison often carry labels they can't peel off

By Jody Moore-Ponce, Mary O'Shaughnessy and Mara Van Twuijver*

Today's Ireland is wrestling with an unexpected scarcity: a scarcity of belonging. As digital life expands, the infrastructures that once offered connection - shared spaces, local rituals, everyday community interactions - have thinned out. We see the consequences everywhere, including rising levels of loneliness and anxiety experienced by young people, reflected in recent Eurobarometer research.

For those already on the margins, especially people leaving prison, this social fragmentation becomes a chasm. Former prisoners step back into a society where the formal sentence may be finished - but the social stigma continues indefinitely.

The result, as recent CSO data shows, is predictable: - 42% of people released from custody reoffend within a year, rising to 62% within three years. These cannot be understood as individual failures; they arise from the absence of the societal structures that should support people at their most vulnerable.

And it is in everyone's interest that people with criminal histories are supported to build stable, contributing lives - because reintegration strengthens the whole community.

With new European evidence emerging, this is a timely moment to examine the role of work-integration social enterprises (WISEs). Fortunately, Irish policy increasingly recognises their importance and, because much state support flows through labour-market activation schemes, Ireland has developed a strong WISE landscape.

Recent UK research by Rebecca Jayne Oswald also highlights how WISEs can provide the stability, flexibility and holistic support needed for people with complex needs to move toward sustained employment and desistance.

People emerging from prison often carry labels they cannot peel off: 'ex-prisoner', 'risky', 'a bad bet for employment'. These lingering stigmas push them into a kind of social limbo. They are no longer incarcerated but not yet permitted to belong. This is what anthropologists call liminality - the in-between zone where one identity has ended and another has not yet been entered, the liminality experienced by people exiting prison is largely unsupported.

Recent RTÉ reporting on prison conditions has again highlighted the urgency. Overcrowding has pushed prisons far beyond capacity; spaces built for 80 or 90 people now routinely hold more than 220.

"As everyday community interactions have thinned out, social enterprises are bridging the gap for people when they leave prison."



* Jody Moore-Ponce, Mary O'Shaughnessy and Mara Van Twuijver in UCC.

Services that should support reintegration - education, training, medical care, psychological treatment, and access to probation - cannot function under such strain. Some positive initiatives do exist - such as UCC's Inside-Out prison education programme - but overcrowding limits their reach.

WISEs operate in the post-release space - the gap between custody and full participation in community and employment. In Ireland, they intentionally inhabit this in-between space, offering stability, structure and belonging at a point when these are most fragile. Many operate as profit-for-purpose enterprises, combining financial sustainability with job creation and social value.

In Dublin, initiatives such as PACE's Mug Shot Café** and the enterprises developed by Spéire Nua show what this looks like in practice.

The scale of the sector is significant. According to the ENSIE Impact-WISEs Report, which came out in November, 2,604 work-integration social enterprises across Europe supported 214,349 disadvantaged workers in 2024, achieving 66% positive outcomes - including nearly half transitioning into employment.

Ireland's National Social Enterprise Baseline Exercise likewise highlights the importance of Active Labour Market Programmes (ALMPs) in sustaining the country's estimated 4,335 social enterprises, with 60% of those with paid staff employing people through these programmes.

CONCLUSION

WISEs cannot do this work in isolation. As Ireland reflects on reintegration and social inclusion, there is a valuable opportunity to recognise WISEs as key partners in this landscape.

The State should be asking: How can we support and strengthen these bridge-building organisations? What can we learn from them?

Reintegration is not a personal test. It is a collective responsibility.

* The lead author here is Dr Jody Moore-Ponce, a researcher at Cork University Business School working on an EU-funded project with Prof Mary O'Shaughnessy and mentor Dr Mara Van Twuijver.

** Read our articles about the Mug Shot cafe here: changingireland.ie/everybody-deserves-a-second-chance-anns-life-after-prison/

WHAT IS DESISTANCE?

What is desistance?

- Desistance is when a person or group cease a specific behaviour, for example criminal re-offending.

What is a social enterprise?

- The National Social Enterprise Policy (2019–2022) and the Trading for Impact Strategy (2024–2027) define social enterprises as businesses with a core social mission, including training and labour-market integration.

What is a work-integration social enterprise (WISE)?

- A work-integration social enterprise (WISE) is a business that sells goods and services while also providing training and employment opportunities to people experiencing marginalisation.



LOCAL AUTHORITY NEWS

VOLUNTEERING IN BELFAST

December 5 was International Volunteer Day and Belfast City Council used the occasion to look for people to sign up as part of its team to work behind the scenes at next year's Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann.

The eight day festival in August will be taking place there for the first time. Those interested in volunteering are asked to go to the volunteering section on fleadhcheoil.ie.

Meanwhile Belfast's Sounds Atypical Music Grant Scheme has officially reopened for 2026. The Belfast City Council funded scheme is for d/Deaf, disabled, and neurodivergent musicians. Applications are open until February 12 and can be made through its Facebook page.

COMMUNITY SAFETY IN GALWAY

A new statutory body focused on improving community safety in County Galway held its first meeting on December 3, marking the formal end of the Joint Policing Committee model. The new Galway County Local Community Safety Partnership was established under the Policing, Security and Community Safety Act 2024 as part of a national shift towards wider and more inclusive planning.

Its members include up to 30 people from Galway County Council, An Garda Síochána, the HSE, Tusla and local organisations representing youth, social inclusion, education, business and community groups.

Over the next three years the Partnership will draw up a safety plan for the county, coordinate new initiatives, engage with residents and feed into the work of the National Office for Community Safety.

QUILTING IN TIPPERARY

Among the projects honoured at Tipperary County Council's annual Nenagh Municipal District Awards held in November was the Nenagh Traveller Women's Quilt Project.

The project is an adult learning initiative developed through Family Learning Adult Literacy sessions facilitated by Tipperary ETB in collaboration with North Tipperary Development Company.

Beginning in September 2024, the project brought together 13 Traveller women who sought to express their identity, heritage, culture, and lived experiences through a collaborative art piece. The quilt is on display in the Civic Offices in Nenagh and can be viewed during working hours, Monday to Friday.

GRATEFUL AMIDST GRIEF: Ukrainian refugees adapting to living in Sligo

By Owen Ryan

More than three and a half years after the Russian invasion saw millions of Ukrainians displaced, efforts in the northwest of Ireland to integrate them into the local economy and society continue.

Among the displaced is Anna Koka, who came to Ireland in April, 2022. At home she worked in banking, but she is now the Ukrainian employment links worker with Sligo LEADER Partnership.

"This is a complete change of direction, into social and community work, but it is very interesting," she said.

There are around 2,600 Ukrainians living in the county and more often than not they get in touch with Anna, who speaks fluent English, about accessing services.

"I do pre-employment work with people, I organise courses for Ukrainians, labour market related courses, things like Safe Pass, manual handling, basic first aid training, job seeking skills, a barista course. I provide CV support, mock interviews, job hunting skills.

"It's the first step towards employment. They don't know what to do, don't know where to start. Some of the courses like Safe Pass and manual handling are necessary for them. Intreo asks them to attend these courses and at least they have some certificates then. Some employers have them as requirements.

"A big issue for some people was that they didn't have a CV and didn't know anything about cover letters. We have provided courses on how to do a CV and cover letter, how to do an interview. We've also done mock interviews for people."

The level of upheaval experienced by Ukrainians is almost unimaginable for most people in Ireland. Despite the hardships, Anna feels those in Sligo have adapted and she says there is a huge effort being put into learning English.

She is also involved with colleagues providing community supports such as a gym programme and camps for children, teenagers and parents. This year, they ran a surf camp and robotics classes for children.

"Kids' programmes are usually in English, although the robotics one was in Ukrainian, but usually the classes are in English and the kids learn the language



• Sligo LEADER Partnership is helping Ukrainians to do courses such as SafePass and Manual Handling so they can find employment, as Anna Koka, also from Ukraine, explains.

very quickly, much faster than adults," she said.

In general, Ukrainians in Sligo are getting on well.

"They are trying to be engaged with the community. All of the kids are in school, their parents and the other adults are trying to learn English. It is

much harder to learn when you are older, but everyone is trying. Many Ukrainians are going to English conversation clubs. People are going to Mayo, Sligo & Leitrim Education and Training Board classes. Some people are even doing preparation for the Cambridge IELTS test. That's a test that allows you to prove the level of your English if you need to work in a school, in a medical setting or as a nurse or somewhere that you a very good level of English."

Many of them have suffered and are continuing to suffer, but are still doing what they can to forge a path for themselves in Ireland.

"Many of the families are without the Dad, because they couldn't leave the country. Many women are without their husbands and it's hard for them and for the kids.

"Some of the people living in Sligo don't have their homes (at home) anymore because they were destroyed. Some of them have family members who are dead following attacks. For some it's a very hard time, some have been depressed for obvious reasons.

"But they are trying. Some had to start from scratch. They might have had good qualifications; they might be engineers or teachers, but they don't have a certain English level. They've started working here as bar tenders or housekeeping in hotels, they are learning English, working in these jobs and trying to get further opportunities."

She says there is a real appreciation and gratitude for the opportunities made available to the Ukrainian arrivals in this country.

"Everyone is really thankful for the support that Ireland provided from the first day and is continuing to provide. We are all really thankful for that. People have got the opportunity to study, to work, just to live. Ireland provided some social welfare support and some

allowances, which was really important. Almost everyone came here without money, even without much clothes, just a little pack of stuff from home," she said.



Roof-grown office spuds are good for staff morale

By Allen Meagher

Galway City Partnership's new rooftop garden received €15,000 through the Community Climate Action Fund, but it is possible to set up a small rooftop garden on a small budget.

Changing Ireland visited on a windswept Friday and was greeted by enthusiastic staff eager to show us their produce.

All of the veg and salads are for GCP staff to use during their lunch breaks and staff have enjoyed many salads over the first summer. All agreed the project is great for morale.

It is also suitable, along with other community gardens, for Tús placements.

As enterprise officer and climate justice co-ordinator Paul O'Donnell explained, "The garden is a pilot funded by Galway City Council under the Climate Action Fund looking at how we can transform urban spaces to encourage sustainability and people growing their own vegetables."

If you have a community building with a flat rooftop you also could look at the idea of a community garden like this. As Mary McHugh, SICAP co-ordinator, said:

"If we can manage to do it here, anyone can do it. It's very good for bringing staff together, especially in the good weather, particularly in the summer, going outside to pick things, there's something really cool about that.

"It's a healthy option and it's a bit of fun. It encourages us to go out and use the balcony and the rooftop more than what we would have done



• The rooftop garden is located above Lidl on the Headford Road in Galways city. Visitors welcome.

in the past. We have had meetings out here. I think it's the beginning of something really good," she said.

Tús leader Sean Lynch agreed, saying that a rooftop garden for small money is a runner: "It would be more difficult, but the setup doesn't have to be that sophisticated, or that complicated."

He added, however, that, "It would be advisable if you make the garden boxes from wood to line the boxes That's the main thing for longevity. Our boxes are made to a very specific form that can last a long time. But it doesn't have to be that

sophisticated. You could start a garden pretty easily."

While growing produce on a third floor rooftop is a challenge, theft is not an issue and the wind keeps pests such as carrot root fly at bay, meaning carrots, parsnips, parsley, and celery grow in peace.

For more info contact Galway City Partnership: <https://gcp.ie>

NEW TO SECTOR

Swimming in acronyms: SICAP, Section 39, LCDCs! Owen Ryan writes

"I don't know what a tracker mortgage is"

That immortal piece of Celtic Tiger marketing came to mind when after beginning work with Changing Ireland numerous emails came my way with references to something called SICAP.

SICAP... SICAP... SICAP.

I had to admit that as acronyms go, it was a catchy one. SICAP. I liked it straight away, but what or who it was, or how it worked or where it was, I hadn't a clue.

They say it's better to keep one's mouth shut and be thought a fool rather than to open it and remove all doubt.

Normally when I find myself in the company of people talking at a level above my pay grade I follow this advice, mixing silence with occasional knowing nods, that might give the misleading impression of engagement, or even silent wisdom.

However, when expected to deliver professional results that usually isn't an option

and I knew straight away there was no option but to humbly reveal my ignorance and look for an explanation about SICAP (it's the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme but you probably knew that). And besides SICAP, the community sector has its own jargon that is only slightly less impenetrable than Ancient Greek to the uninitiated.

For instance, until recently I couldn't have told you what a Section 39 organisation was. I didn't know there was a Section 39. In fact there may still be other Sections out there I should know about, Section 39 could be one of hundreds.

But I now know what the abbreviation LCDC stands for. I'm somewhat familiar with Our Rural Future. I have a far more honed appreciation of what LEADER is.



It may seem like a rudimentary understanding, it probably is compared to what you possess gentle reader, but for me, a mere civilian getting to grips with the community sector; it is very real progress.

I'm still on the foothills, but an important part of journalism is making what the expert knows accessible to the many.

Brian Clough once observed that being thick isn't an affliction if you're a footballer, and in the same way being clueless isn't necessarily a bad starting point for a journalist, as long as you aren't also a spoofer, who pretends to know more than they do.

I may be clueless but not being afraid to admit it can help a journalist go a long way. Here's hoping...



Tralee Coffee Pod: Connecting refugees to locality and work

By Owen Ryan

People who come to Ireland seeking refuge and who find themselves in Tralee, Co. Kerry, are getting a kickstart as barista trainees serving ethically-produced coffee from a converted horsebox. Located on Boherbee Road, near Austin Stack GAA Stadium, the Coffee Pod is one of the most impactful social enterprises in the country.

The food truck is run by Tralee International Resource Centre and it provides training opportunities to asylum seekers and refugees such as Dariia Asieieva. With her life upended after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Dariia found that working at the Coffee Pod helped her to make a new start.

Now a business student, Dariia said that her 48 hours of training there really helped.

"It was shortly after I came to Ireland and it really helped to improve my English, to improve my communication and to integrate in Ireland," she said.

It helped her to meet people from diverse backgrounds and many countries.

"You come and make friends, you learn how to speak to clients. The barista supervising me was Ukrainian and that made it easier for me. It's a really interesting experience to talk with people of different nationalities, languages and cultures," she said.

Two aims: Work and Integration



• All smiles at Tralee's Coffee Pod in Boherbee.

Mary Carroll is the manager of Tralee International Resource Centre and she said the Coffee Pod supports a number of other initiatives such as a drop-in centre and English classes.

"The Centre has been there for about 16 years and our whole aim is to support integration in Tralee. We support asylum seekers, refugees,

whoever is in the international community, to help them build a new life in Tralee."

She said that, as a social enterprise, the Coffee Pod has two aims.

"One - we are training people so that they can get jobs. Nearly all people want to work and sometimes the blocks are that they don't have work experience or they don't have training. We provide barista training, manual handling, customer service, and we give them work experience in the Coffee Pod. They see what an Irish workplace is like. Also, they can maybe get a reference from us as well, and we support them to find work.

"The second thing is that it is really good for integration; in fact, it's one of the best things we have ever done. It's like integration in action. The local people coming to get a coffee and some food are getting served by someone from Ukraine or Sudan and there's that interaction happening.

"Most of them are working now. While they may not be working in the coffee sector, they all say that it helped them."

People who might never meet someone from another country are getting a real experience and we're finding that it has become very much like a community hub in Tralee, for international and local interaction."

Fancy Coffee in a Converted Horsebox

The Coffee Pod itself is quite a simple facility.

"It's a horsebox basically, a real horsebox converted," said Mary.

When it came to choosing a coffee brand, they were much fussier.

"We went for Cloudpicker coffee - it's really only in a few places in Ireland. The company behind it has a very good ethos, they support integration and refugees. It tied in nicely. We do home-baking; at the moment a Ukrainian lady is baking for us. We wanted this to be representative of what we do, which is about integration."

Recently a little dome area was added, so that people can sit around and talk after collecting their orders.

Since it got going there have been participants from a wide range of countries.

"There are a lot of Ukrainians, but we have had people from Sudan, Somalia, Iraq, Nigeria, Afghanistan - there has been a good mix. There has been a mix of men and women. They all get a certificate at the end which they are delighted with."

Social Enterprise

There is lots of evidence that those who complete the training benefit from it.

"Our main barista is a Ukrainian man: he did the course and he has taken over running it. So far, we have trained over 50 people and we are around two and a half years in operation. Most of them are working now. While they may not be working in the coffee sector, they all say that it helped them because it gave them a chance to practice English, which is really important. They could go to classes all day, but they learn so much from interacting with customers. And an employer likes to see a little bit of local work history," said Mary.

Since the inception of the Coffee Pod, there has been valuable support from many quarters.

"We got great support from Kerry County Council, the Community Recognition Fund and LEADER were very good to us. North East West Kerry Development are very good to us, they help us with funding and with training. Without funding it would have been difficult to keep it going, because it is a social enterprise," added Mary.

You can follow the Coffee Pod and keep up with Tralee International Resource Centre's activities on social media, especially through their Facebook page.



• A Coffee Pod trainee receives their certificate of completion in barista skills.

If all accept Erris should be part of the National Family Resource Centre Programme, then why are they waiting so long?

By Allen Meagher

Erris Family and Community Support Centre expressed “disappointment and dismay” in September after losing out for a second time in three years to become a fully-fledged Family Resource Centre (FRC).

The Erris area is one of the most remote and disadvantaged rural areas in the country and the application was viewed by independent adjudicators as being exceptionally strong.

However, only five new projects were accepted into the National Family Resource Centre Programme and Erris’s strong presence on the ground and impact may, ironically, have gone against them. They currently receive core funding support from Tusla and employ a co-ordinator and a part-time administrator. Following the first unsuccessful FRC application, they also took on a family support service previously set up in 2018. This service is also funded by Tusla.

Full FRC recognition would enhance their ability to deliver for communities across Erris.

“The application was really strong and we were really happy with it. So it was a big shock and we were really disappointed,” said project co-ordinator Leanne Barrett. “We asked for feedback and we scored highly on all criteria, but what went against us was that we were already providing the service.”

In September, it was announced that five new FRCs - in Dublin, Monaghan, Louth, Kildare and Galway - were to be admitted into the national programme. With this expansion, the number of Family Resource Centres has increased from 121 to 126.

“While we welcome the addition of new FRCs and are pleased for the new communities that are going to benefit, we are extremely disappointed and surprised by the outcome of our application,” the board of the Erris group said in a statement issued immediately after the announcement.

Now, hopes are higher. Speaking to Ms. Barrett in December, she said, “We took it on the chin, because they recognised the good work being done and were complimentary about the application.”



“Tusla said that our plan was robust, it was well evidenced, that it aligned with both the community needs and community development approach, and also the kind of commissioning priorities that they would have.

“They hope to be able to meet with us in the new year to explore opportunities and how we might align and integrate the funding we have with the national FRC model,” she said. Erris has a “very

good relationship” with their local Tusla office also.

Leanne pointed hopefully to plans laid out in Budget 2026 to expand the national programme by adding 10 new centres to bring the total number up to 136 FRCs by year’s end.

For Erris, one of the most important elements of their work is community development. The area had gaps in terms of services and suffered from generational disadvantage, while cutbacks over a decade ago had taken a heavy toll.

Leanne believes capacity building and empowerment work is needed “to get people engaged and involved”. The area has an aging population, services are far away and unemployment is relatively high. She spoke of the need “to give people spaces so they can come together collectively and look at what the needs are, and to give them the skills and capacity to actually do something about it - that it’s not just about services”.

“It’s important to not just focus on the need and disadvantage in Erris. It’s actually about taking the good things we have, the strengths and using that. We have always said: Give us the funding and the resources and we will work to make sure that we can meet our needs and respond to our needs,” she said.



• Leanne Barrett (4th from right) pictured in September with volunteers and supporters who helped to raise €2,000 to provide counselling through Erris Family and Community Support Centre. They are pictured at an event organised in collaboration with the local branch of North West STOP-Suicide Prevention.

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

Louth award for ‘Dear Future Me’

The Louth Public Participation Network (PPN) celebrated the work of local organisations at its annual Community & Voluntary Awards on November 19.

Award winners included mental health initiative Dear Future Me, the Drogheda Tidy Towns Biodiversity Group, social inclusion group Women in Waves, the Louth Traveller Movement and Dundalk Youth Centre.

Louth PPN Secretariat member David Larkin said, “These awards are a testament to the power of collective action and the spirit of volunteerism that defines County Louth.”

Free headshots in Dublin

The Dublin City PPN Members’ Winter Networking Event was held on November 20 at the Friends of the Elderly premises on Bolton Street.

It was designed as an informal networking evening where you can meet other PPN member groups, learn more about the core work of the PPN, enjoy refreshments and music, and have a professional headshot taken by JustMedia.

It also featured an exhibition by Northside Partnership, titled “Who Are We Now”, reflecting on the Crowne Paints factory riots in 2024.

5 funds focus in Donegal

Members of the Donegal Public Participation Network were given updates on funding opportunities at a recent event held in Letterkenny.

Speakers included Isabella Donnelly who talked about SEAI grants, Kathleen McGowan on Donegal County Council Community Funding, Stephen Barrett on PeacePLUS small grants, Fiona Kelly on the Community Climate Action Fund, and Tracey Hannon about the Acorn Fund.

Quick mobilisers in Waterford win award

Belvedere Manor Residents Association scooped the overall award at the 21st Annual Waterford PPN Community and Voluntary Awards.

Judges said, “They mobilise quickly in times of crisis to combat loneliness and foster social connection for all ages. Not happy with what they have done over the past 30 years, the group have more plans for the future. These include expanding their youth engagement, improving their social media page with real-time updates, a resident’s feedback portal and creating a community app or newsletter to keep residents informed.”

40 years celebs



In November, Lourdes Youth and Community Services in Dublin, celebrated 40 years.

The project is an integrated community development organisation, providing education, training, and social and development opportunities to local people living in the North East Inner City.

It is known for being a leading local organisation that embraced local/global early on and it receives funding from Irish Aid for its Global Citizenship Education work. Minister of State Neale Richmond visited in November to witness their work first hand. He is pictured here with LYCS manager Sarah Kelleher.

Mayor has 1st cuppa



Mayor John Moran enjoyed a cup of tea, with no sugar and a drop of milk, and a scone with butter and jam, in Herbertstown Hub, Co. Limerick, on November 18. It was the first cup served in the new community café.

The project has been funded through various community initiatives, through the Town and Village Renewal Scheme, and has support from Limerick City and County Council including from the Mayor's own dedicated fund.

The once derelict former co-operative in the centre of the village is now a beacon, with its red roof which can be seen for miles, announcing to all and sundry that Herbertstown is alive and well as a village.

The local men's shed was integral to the project's realisation and the new hub is due to be officially opened in early 2026.

€1m for stations

Craol, the Community Radio Forum and the Community Television Association welcomed the €1 million announced in Budget 2026 for a new Community Media Scheme for the community radio and television sector. (See also page 18).

What is bioregioning? Keeping up with the lingo can change our outlook and our environment

By Allen Meagher

"Bio-regioning" is the new in-thing to know all about, but what a maddening name.

The term has come into vogue in the last four to five years, but like "regenerative agriculture" it doesn't exactly roll off the tongue. I cannot pronounce "regenerative" without pausing everything. It has six consonants and just too many "e"s. Maybe, being urban-based, I'm too used to talk of "regen" and "regeneration" which is another thing entirely.

Both bio-regioning and regenerative agriculture sound like words made up by an ecologist having a bad day who chewed on a dictionary, choked, and spat out a few random splats of paper.

However, after a recent chat by phone with one Sarah Prosser from Dunhill Ecopark, Co. Waterford, I grew to at least like the concepts. And I now understand both.

Let's get "regenerative agriculture" out of the way first. It is basically anything farming related that is about giving back, adding to nature, rather than extracting.

I might have understood bio-regioning quickly too if we had begun by looking at maps. We went the long way around.

I thought it best to be frank with Scottish-born Sarah who is the CEO of Bioregioning South East Ireland, the first group of its kind on this island.

I said: "When I hear of "bio" I think of yogurt and sci-fi movies starring Arnold Schwarzenegger. And "regioning" isn't a word. It's a noun mangled into being a verb."

Well, "bio" in this instance means life and nature, she explained. Fair enough. So what is bio-regioning, you might wonder?

"Bioregioning is defined as a holistic, place-based approach to living sustainably within natural boundaries," said Sarah effortlessly. I liked it. Not too wordy.

However, being a fervent believer, Sarah later sent me a full definition that should really only be used by operators of torture chambers. Here's a flavour of it: "The unifying thread (of bio-regioning) is a commitment to relocating knowledge, governance, and economies based on the unique characteristics of each bioregion."

You have to forgive Sarah and others for their enthusiasm. They are promoting a new way of seeing the landscape and seascape - that runs contra to consumerism, extractive capitalism and the financialisation of everything on earth.

Really, it was only when Sarah pointed to two maps of Ireland - one a county map, the other a map not just of Ireland's rivers, but of their tributaries and catchment areas, that the penny dropped. Ah, life-regioning.

We're obsessed with counties in this country, she said.

"Counties are great, they are super for making connections, but you should not rely solely on counties for your view," she said.

Rivers – at the heart of many bio-regions – often serve, ironically, as county borders.

Broadening its reach, Bioregioning South East Ireland, with philanthropic funding, is seeking to connect with and stir interest in other bio-regions across the island.

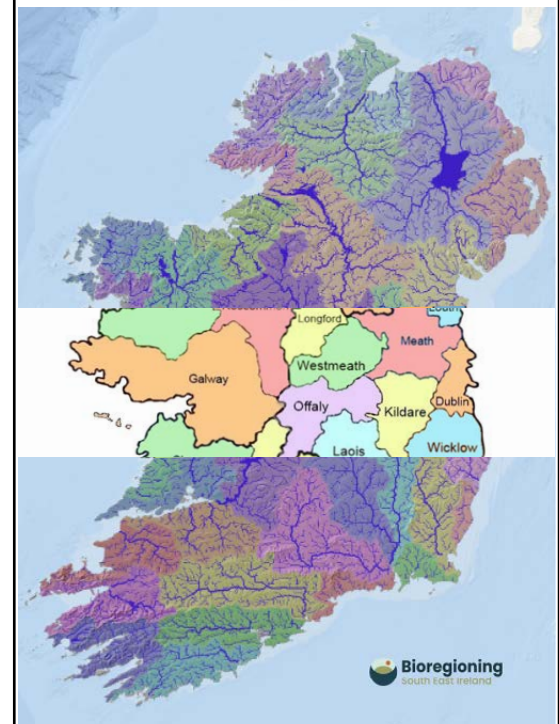
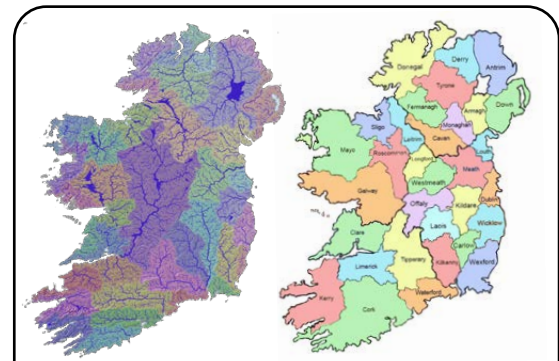
And for the record, bio-regioning was first named as a concept in the 1970s by a US ecologist called Peter Burg. It is timely for it to make a comeback. With pollution rising, especially in eastern and south-eastern bio-regions, we need to see ourselves as part of an ecosystem and as part of the solution.

So, next time you see a map of Ireland, ask yourself: Is that the actual landscape I live in or something else entirely?

Look up <https://bioregion.ie/> to find out more.



• The Lough Corrib and Lough Mask catchment area is a bioregion straddling two counties.



• Love your county, but love your natural environmental region too! How we see our surroundings determines our local actions as well as national policy, say people who call their work bio-regioning. We are encouraged to see beyond counties, to embrace the natural landscape and see ourselves as part of the ecosystem.