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**DELIGHT FOR
10 FAMILY
RESOURCE
CENTRES**



**MEN'S GROUP
IN CORK: BE
UNDENIABLE**

• Strength in
brotherhood.



**JOBS EXPO
NUMBERS
SURPRISE
ORGANISERS**

• Event reached people
experiencing barriers.



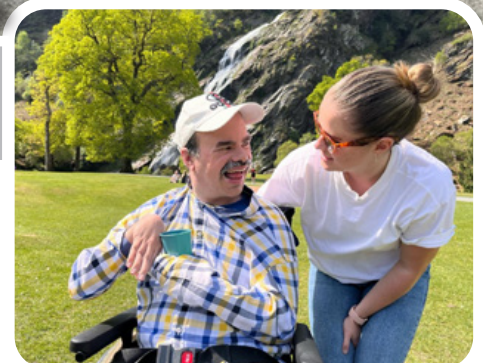
CAMPAIGNING FOR CHANGE BEFORE WE DIE!

• Campaigners for relatives with intellectual disabilities outside Leinster House in February.

ST. JOHN OF GOD'S MANAGER CALLS FOR REVISITING POLICY

ALSO INSIDE:

- ART BEHIND BARS • SOCIAL FARMING
- CARE CO-OPS • DUBLIN 10 FOOD ALLIANCE
- FIRST EVER COMMUNITY SECTOR APPRENTICESHIPS •



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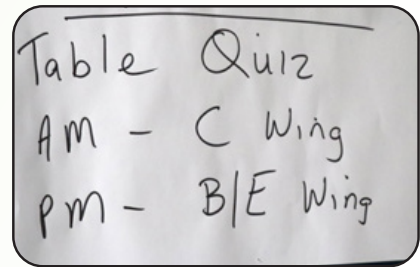
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• How's your general knowledge? As seen on a noticeboard in Limerick Prison.



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'BEFORE WE DIE' CAMPAIGNERS SHOW NEED FOR GREATER COMPASSION

In recent times, I learned a lot about the services provided to people with intellectual disabilities and their families, due to campaigning by the new 'Before We Die' lobby group. Their plight centres around care, compassion and support.

More funding is needed, but it would also be wise for policies and related guides to be re-examined.

Many were adopted 15 years ago after Ireland signed up to the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and while widely welcomed and well-intentioned, some of these policies and connected regulations appear to be slowing down service delivery.

For instance, some in the sector believe decongregation has gone too far. Niche co-living arrangements could be considered. They would ease costs, be easier to build and would be popular with some families.

Realistically, full implementation of policies adopted under the Convention would probably cost more than the Government is willing to spend - and that is before factoring in a looming global

depression.

However, there are pragmatic responses that could improve life for families of people with an intellectual disability. Multi-annual funding would also help by allowing providers to plan.

It may also be helpful to review the wider impact of HIQA (the Health Information and Quality Authority) inspections. The expectations placed on services can sometimes be counter-productive, reducing capacity at a time when families are desperate for places.

On the following pages we look at where we are today and how the State could consider responding.

10 new Family Resource Centres

As Ireland's population expands, so too does the need for community development and family support and it was great to see 10 new projects recently approved to join the national Family Resource Centre Programme.

Floods in the East

Solidarity from west to east where flooding created mayhem in households and communities. I drove through one such flood and we will come back to the subject.

Solidary with people of Gaza, Ukraine, Lebanon, Iran, Sudan...

This is the first edition in a long time where we do not have an article connected to the awfulness being unleashed by military powers on vulnerable peoples. I cannot remember a time in my life when there were so many affected by war. Support global solidarity actions whenever, wherever and however you can!

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: editor@changingireland.ie



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€4m investment in rural social enterprise through new PEACEPLUS project

An investment of €3,971,440 in rural renewal was announced in February at the launch of the Rural Innovation and Social Enterprise (RiSE) Project, an initiative designed to put social enterprise at the centre of sustainable rural development.

RiSE is supported by PEACEPLUS, a programme managed by the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB). It aims to strengthen rural communities by providing training, networking opportunities, and practical support to help organisations enhance sustainability, expand income generation, and increase access to vital community services.

SEUPB chief executive Gina McIntyre said, “By investing in developing approaches to social enterprise and innovation, we are helping communities work together across borders and traditions, creating opportunities that build trust and future economic opportunities. Projects like RiSE are vital to peacebuilding because they turn shared challenges into shared solutions, with cooperation and inclusion at the heart of community life.”

She noted that, “Significant developments have been made in the provision of collaborative cross-border services in recent years, providing equality of opportunity for citizens in rural areas.”

Through networking, events, and activities, RiSE will encourage and facilitate collaboration between rural communities on a cross-border and cross-community basis. Participating groups and organisations will benefit from shared learning and tailored training designed to maximise income generation, strengthen long term sustainability, and widen access to essential community services. A dedicated element of the project will also focus on inspiring the next generation of social entrepreneurs through a programme of youth-focused training and collaboration.

Ministers welcome RiSE project

The Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht, Dara Calleary, and Minister of State with Responsibility for Community Development and Charities, Jerry Buttimer, welcomed the announcement.

Minister Calleary congratulated everyone involved in creating the RiSE project.

“I am happy that my Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht (DRCDG), working with the Special EU Programmes Body and the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs in Northern Ireland, will continue to provide assistance for this remarkable project. This project will bring lasting advantages to the area”.

Minister Buttimer said, “This important financing will enhance the availability of communal areas and services in rural locations. Planned investment will empower communities to flourish and achieve their complete economic, social, and environmental capabilities”.

Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, Andrew Muir, said: “I am delighted that my Department, along with DRCDG and SEUPB, is providing funding to the RiSE project, which will strengthen rural social enterprise and build on a connected, collaborative cross border community.”



• FRONT (l.to r.): Paul Sheridan SEUPB; Andrew Muir, MLA Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs in Northern Ireland; Teresa Canavan, Rural Action; Liam Caffrey, Dept. of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht. BACK: Amanda Johnston, Social Enterprise NI; Ella Camille, Social Enterprise Academy Scotland; and James Claffey, Irish Rural Link.

“Projects like RiSE are vital to peacebuilding because they turn shared challenges into shared solutions”
- Gina McIntyre

He said the project will “support new social enterprise initiatives and provide opportunities for young people to design and lead meaningful social action.”

Includes young people aged 14-25

The project brings together a multi-stakeholder partnership comprising of Rural Action which will lead the project along with Irish Rural Link, Scotland Social Enterprise Academy and Social Enterprise NI (SENI) - with Community Finance Ireland as an associate partner. Rural Action was formed in 2019 as a regional delivery organisation with a focus on supporting grassroots communities.

Speaking at the launch, Rural Action's chief executive Teresa Canavan said the RiSE programme brings together three strands: Social Enterprise Leadership and Development, Making it Happen (which focuses on turning ideas into action and offering practical support and guidance), and Youth Social Enterprise, aimed at supporting people aged 14–25.

More information

Further information is available at ruralaction.co as well as on the websites of all programme partners.

About some of the partners

1. The **Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB)** is a North-South body with the statutory remit for managing EU funding programmes within Northern Ireland and the border counties of Ireland.

2. The **PEACEPLUS Programme** has been designed to promote peace and prosperity across Northern Ireland and the border counties of Ireland, and has a total value of €1.14bn, to be delivered over the next four years. It is co-funded by the European Union, the Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, the Government of Ireland, and the Northern Ireland Executive.

4. **Social Enterprise NI** was formed in 2012 and is the representative body for social entrepreneurs and over 800 social enterprises across Northern Ireland. It also provides opportunities for collaboration between social enterprises and the public and private sectors.

5. The **Social Enterprise Academy (SEA)** is a Scottish charity. It has facilitated over 78,000 social entrepreneurs and third sector leaders to help create fairer communities. In addition, using social franchising and impact partnerships, SEA offers learning programmes in communities worldwide.

We want change before we die



• Campaign group members from 'Before We Die' outside Leinster House with Liam Quaide, TD.

By Allen Meagher

I grew up at a time when emigration, not immigration, was all Ireland had known for a century and a half and more. Nowadays, there is a great scarcity of housing with all its knock-on effects. We know Travellers suffer greatly. We know low-income families can barely afford to rent, never mind buy, in Dublin. We know not how or where our daughters and sons will manage. And in the midst of it all, families with people who have intellectual disabilities are suffering. They must be one of the most vulnerable groups in society.

Successive governments at best lost focus on their needs. Sadly, some families felt bullied by the State, but now they are fighting their case, united under the banner 'Before We Die'.

They are campaigning because when someone with an intellectual disability needs accommodation today, because their parents have died or become incapacitated, there is no plan. In most instances, the State relies on private sector support and accommodation providers to tender their services. For families and for the individuals it can be heartbreaking because relatives can be moved hundreds of kilometres away.

Until Tony Murray from Dublin (originally from Kilkenny) set up 'Before We Die' these families were alone in their struggles, but in recent months this new advocacy group has forced the issue onto the political agenda.

Thankfully, as Tony notes, this government when it came into office had the wisdom to set up a dedicated Cabinet Sub-Committee on Disability. He does not know how often it meets, but he sees it as a positive that it exists.

Taoiseach, Micheál Martin, and other politicians have met Tony and others from 'Before We Die' and recognise their predicament. The Taoiseach responded by putting the issue on the agenda for the cabinet sub-committee.

Like many others, Tony aged 71 and his wife Susan know their daughter Aoife, aged 42, will sooner or later be in need of State-provided care and accommodation – but under the present chaotic system it will

uproot her from everywhere and all the people she knows.

"The (day care) service is her life," said Tony, and yet Aoife is likely to end up moved to County Kildare or further afield. It could be worse. Tony told me about an elderly woman in Cork whose adult child has been given emergency accommodation in

around 1,000 members and he estimates there are 20,000 families in Ireland providing care to adults with intellectual disabilities. Since the state does not keep fully up-to-date records, he had to work on the data himself – and he stands over his calculations.

Given that he will die, as will

- **Families caring for adults with intellectual disabilities face a crisis, with an estimated 20,000 such families in Ireland and no state plan for when parents die. More government funding is needed urgently.**
- **Also, opening more respite housing would ease the pressure. We have fewer today than a few years ago.**
- **Easing overly strict regulations would help service providers to expand capacity.**
- **It may be timely to revisit policies enacted since Ireland ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.**

County Louth, over 300km away from home. What chance does that poor mother have of seeing her daughter again? It reminds me of 19th century emigration where communities held wakes for the living as they knew they wouldn't see them again.

By contrast, when a place does become available locally, which is no longer the norm, it means everything to a family.

The campaign group that Tony founded has swiftly attracted

other parents, for all of them this is an emergency. There are 1,500 adults with intellectual disabilities in Ireland living with family carers over the age of 70, according to 'Before We Die', so the situation is urgent.

"We are urgently campaigning for the Government to fund and deliver residential places... so that adults with intellectual disabilities can live with dignity, security, and independence," says Tony.

There is a partial solution that would ease the pressure for many – more respite houses. At present, as well as funding shortfalls, a well-meaning but punishing regulatory framework curtails service providers from expanding to meet needs. Decongregation also needs to be revisited as a policy.

"St. Michael's house before the crash had five respite houses. Now they have one. And in some emergency cases they place someone into a respite house so they're basically blocking the bed. It means that parents who had expected respite are not getting it because the bed is blocked. So there's almost no respite. Your life is constantly about providing care," said Tony.

On the plus side, it is clear that if more respite houses are provided by the state it could ease the pressure. If parents can get a break – to rest mainly – many would be able and willing and happy to care for longer for their adult children.

In the longer-term, reality insists that we revisit the policies devised since Ireland signed up to the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) in 2007 and, in particular, since 2018 when the state ratified that decision.

Ratification made it legally binding on the state to uphold the rights of disabled people. It kick-started the process of aligning our laws, policies and services with the standards set out in the Convention. It is happening too slowly say critics, but there are other problems too.

Parents in emergency situations

Community worker never felt so empowered

Sheila* is the parent of a child with an intellectual disability who has been changed by joining voluntary advocacy group 'Before We Die'. She is also a community worker which gives her an unique perspective.

The group, set up only a few months ago, already has nearly a thousand members in its closed Facebook group. It is also connecting on other platforms. Due to her line of work she prefers to use a pseudonym*.

Not surprisingly, rather than trying as she had in the past to advocate for her daughter by herself, she finds comfort in taking collective action as a member of a group. She said members of the group all felt "marginalised and exhausted" before joining.

"We also felt intimidated by service providers and statutory agencies. That makes people feel isolated, voiceless and very powerless. So it's inspiring when you're a member of a group that can suddenly reach out to government departments and meet members of the Dáil - the leadership is very inspiring and people feel very well represented.

She like other members I spoke to is angry that "in such a wealthy country people have been living in such poor circumstances."

"I get a bit emotional when I think about it, because we had been trying to get on with things behind the scenes as best we could and keep our heads down.

"Being told (by the state) that we don't have any residential place for your daughter over and over again has an impact.

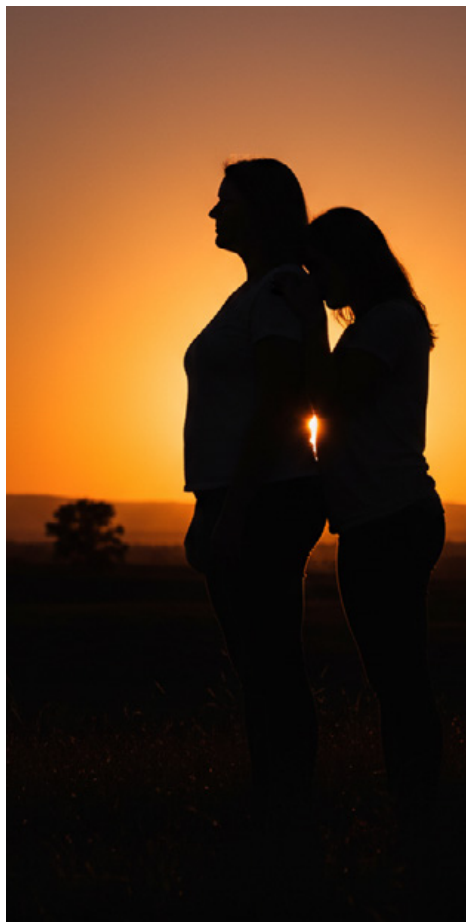
"After you come through the process of raising someone with an intellectual disability, how difficult it is to get assessments and placements and all that. And then you get to adult age and you're told the same - there's a lack of resources, but it's worse. You just become really browbeaten.

"So to discover this 'Before We Die' campaign, and to hear other people's stories and to identify with them, it always lightens up the dark spots of yourself that you've denied and kept in the shadows. When you listen to others you say, 'That is my story as well'. While I'm younger than a lot of the other parents, I'm actually not able to do this for much longer."

"I now know that people are backing me, supporting me, understanding me, agreeing with me - that it wasn't just me expecting too much - that actually the services are not okay. Being believed and nodded at and smiled at and comforted; it's like a warm blanket. It also gives you a great blast of energy and the appropriate level of outrage. This is probably the most empowered I've felt in my entire life.

"Being part of this group has made me more assertive and less tolerant of things that shouldn't be tolerated.

Sheila is the parent of an adult child with an intellectual disability and recently joined 'Before We Die'



"And yet the pushback still exists, it's still real, there's still a denial by the state of their obligations. What happens when we die? That's what this campaign is about.

Activism versus state-funded community work

Reflecting on her paid role as a community worker she says advocacy on behalf of others is difficult nowadays.

"There are restrictions in your employment, especially if you are funded by a government agency. It's very hard to have a voice in reality because you're afraid to bite the hand that feeds you. Even Section 38 and Section 39 groups who aren't being properly funded aren't able to go out and scream as loudly as they want to, on behalf of service users, because they're afraid they will be penalised in some way.

"At work I can't just speak out on behalf of groups. I have to go to a board of management and ask 'Can I say this or that?'. You have to work through statutory agencies and you need to maintain relationships, you can't go stepping on toes, or you might not get funded the next time round.

"By comparison, there isn't any of that risk in the 'Before We Die' campaign. This is totally different. We have nothing to lose because things are already so bad," said Sheila.

Kathy Sinnott role model

She often thinks of disability advocacy campaigner and former MEP Kathy Sinnott these days.

"I remember Kathy and how she took on the state and she really changed things. Kathy just didn't give up.

Her campaigning changed her life and many people's lives. I get choked up when I think of Kathy and people like her, you know, the exhausting campaigning work they did.

"For me there's a day-to-day loss in that you don't have the same availability for your family when you're challenging something, but you have to look to the future and think of the greater good.

"We keep going for ourselves and for the many people who are even more powerless than us.

"It is painful and it is very time consuming and exhausting, but that's how change happens. Also, if we don't campaign we're stuck in the foreverness of living like this," she said.



• Kathy Sinnott in 2007. Source-Wikipedia

IN CONVERSATION WITH ALLEN MEAGHER

Reluctant campaigner **Tony Murray**

Tony Murray and his wife Susan are the parents of Aoife (42) whose future they fear for. Around October last year, Tony set up a campaign group called 'Before We Die'.

He and fellow members have since met the Taoiseach (next page). Minister Norma Foley and many politicians. Minister Foley acknowledged the group's work "advocating for increases in the provision of residential services for people with disabilities".

Here Tony tells his own story.

"People say it to me that it must be like having a black cloud over you, but it's not like that, because a black cloud will lift eventually. It's more like a black hole. At present luckily both Susan and I are healthy, but it can change in a flash and then Aoife's situation becomes an emergency.

"In our old naive way of thinking we thought that St. Michael's house, which is the service that Aoife is in, would step in and they would provide after we die. But they're saying that is out of the question.

"I had no idea of this. What will happen is absolutely shocking. Basically, after we become incapacitated or die Aoife's care package will go out to tender. Those words alone – "It goes to tender" – are so upsetting, because we all know what the government normally does with a tender. They usually take the lowest bid."

"What happens is that within a six-week period of, let's say, Susan and I being incapacitated or dead, Aoife loses her home, her social activities – and her service, which is her life.

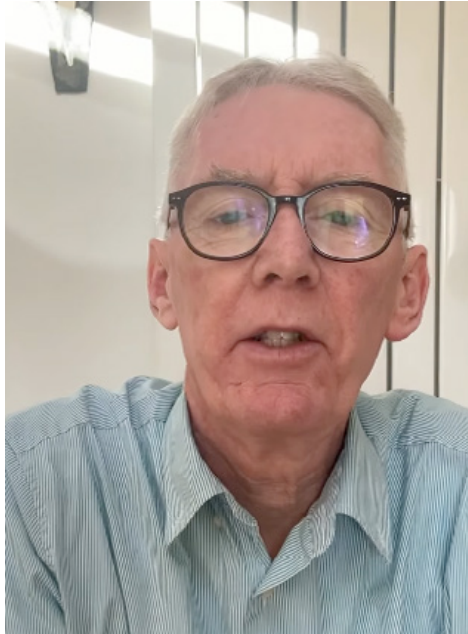
"The ideal thing for Aoife and us would be that Aoife would gradually move into her own place, her own new home. She would segue into it. She might just go one night a week to start with. She would feel safe. We could monitor it and eventually her new home becomes her new home. She could slowly adjust. But that's a fantasy. That doesn't happen," he said.

Speaking at an Oireachtas Committee on Disability Matters (on Feb 4) Angela Colgan from Stewarts Care made the same point: "The availability of respite is important to enable [people with an intellectual disability] to know what it is like to live outside the home and beyond the family and to give families this security."

However, in some cases, as TD Liam Quaide pointed out in an earlier Disability Matters debate (on Nov. 26 last) "people are placed more than 200 km from home" and sometimes "in quite an isolated setting without access to community supports, and they can remain stuck in that situation indefinitely".

Tony is fearful that safety issues could arise if Aoife is living far from relatives who could drop by, isolated from her friends and local connections.

"You know that phrase 'Out of sight,



• Tony Murray, now aged 72.

When we die "Aoife loses her home, her social activities – and her service, which is her life."

out of mind', all that kind of thing," he said, describing distant residency as "a recipe for neglect".

He also fears Aoife would not be easily understood, particularly as often staff speak English as a second language and even he struggles sometimes to know what Aoife is saying.

He and Susan are glad the 'Before We Die' campaign has won attention, but clearly their concerns have yet to be allayed.

In another scenario Aoife could be provided with independent living in an apartment of her own, but Tony believes she would be vulnerable to being preyed on by others in such a setting as she has the mental age of a young child.

"Accommodation you get from the local authority tends to be one-bedroom apartments. But for somebody like Aoife who has got significant needs, that's no good," said Tony.

Again, at the recent meeting of the Oireachtas Committee on Disability Matters (Feb. 4) Lorraine Egan, CEO of Horizons, noted that: "Individualised living can turn into one person in one house, and there is a risk of isolation there." She said the sector and the National

Federation of Voluntary Service Providers was well aware of this issue.

In fact, probably every point raised by Tony in his interview with Changing Ireland has also been mentioned in discussions in Leinster House, but his group has highlighted the urgency of the matter.

"How come the system has not been able to match the service to a predictive need?" he asks, still perplexed that nursing home places can be found for older people who do not have a disability.

"There's no surprise with Aoife. From the age of one, when she was diagnosed, they knew there was going to be a problem. Like, it's not rocket science. I've raised with politicians, and they kind of said, well, that's true."

In the meantime, there is no rest for Tony and Susan. While funding for respite and residential places is increasing, Keira Keogh, TD, noted in another debate recently (Oireachtas Committee, Feb 26) that it had not yet translated into changes on the ground that she could see.

"How quickly do we think the uplift of the budget will start making a difference on the ground?" she asked.

Nobody had a clear answer. In the meantime, Tony, Susan and Aoife and other families are struggling with scarcity.

Much sooner than later the Murrays and many other families need to see change. Tony highlighted some of the challenges and areas worth focusing on.

Church to State

Where the Catholic Church once provided care, the State is now responsible.

As Tony sees it, "The State took it over, but never put in place a sustainable system. So now it's just emergency, emergency, emergency, which is the most expensive form of care. The for profit companies have the HSE over a barrel. They can charge what they like, because the HSE have to solve the problem."

Decongregation gone too far

On decongregation, Tony felt it had gone further than parents would like. He believes that up to 10 people in a house is fine, and advocates for clusters of housing, as can be found around the country for students and for older people. However, he pointed to just such a cluster setting that was recently decongregated, because it was deemed too large.

"Most parents would have given their eye teeth to have their adult child in a safe setting like that," he said.

He also believes that decongregated houses are not really "in the community".

"It's nearly a fashion: 'Oh, we'll put them out in the community', but the community really doesn't care that much, you know in big cities people are too busy with their own lives," he said.

"You can't get a house unless there's a care package with the HSE. The HSE won't give a care package unless there's a house. It's a catch-22."



• Susan and Aoife pictured at home by RTE in October when Tony launched the 'Before We Die' campaign.

(Continued from previous page)

Burden on women

There is also sexism. He told of a young social worker who said to the father of an adult female with an intellectual disability, "It's a pity you haven't got another daughter."

He understands the question because Susan looks after their daughter's most intimate care needs.

"However, it illustrates how bad the system is, because they're saying this not out of malice," said Tony.

Another 'Before We Die' member told 'Changing Ireland' of a similar experience.

Catch 22

Tony said parents are presented with a bureaucratic nightmare when trying to support their grown-up child to access housing.

"Effectively you can't get a house unless there's a care package with the HSE. The HSE won't give a care package unless there's a house. It's a classic catch-22."

Meanwhile, he has noticed an unwelcome change in language from the HSE where there is less talk about "care and compassion" and more focus on "support".

"Support is a very different thing to care. It's a more mechanical thing," he said, acknowledging that both are required for different situations.

Sympathy for providers

He has sympathy for the service providers.

"There's no multi-annual funding, so they can't plan because they don't know what they're going to get next year," he said.

Also due to it being a mainly female workforce, maternity leave can sometimes lead to reduced staff numbers.

"It's largely young women. So when they go on maternity leave, unlike teachers, they're not always replaced, particularly if the staff are from a day service. If they are working in a residential home, they will have to be replaced, because HIQA (the Health Information and Quality Authority) will say you're understaffed.

"It's also stressful challenging work and sometimes staff get injured and go out sick and there's no replacement. So the service providers are constantly running on a treadmill," said Tony.

BY ALLEN MEAGHER

Taoiseach commits to act on issues raised by 'Before We Die' group

Responding to Dáil questions on February 17 the **Taoiseach Micheál Martin** said:

"I met with the Before We Die campaign group and we had a very good discussion. These are very serious issues. There needs to be stronger co-ordination between local authorities, section 39 bodies and Government Departments, particularly the Department of housing and the Department of disability.

He added, "I am placing it on the agenda of the next Cabinet subcommittee meeting with a view to creating a structure that will work to support families in this situation. There are a lot of issues we have to work through. I

"We should be able to create a structure that is proactively supporting families in this situation."

do not have the length of time to go through it all here, but suffice to say it is not enough. The HSE will say it looks after moderate to severe disabilities. There has to be



a continuum of care, of sheltered housing and of supported housing, depending on the needs of a given individual."

"Between the local authorities,

Government and the approved housing bodies, we should be able to create a structure that is proactively supporting families in this situation," he said.

We need to **TO SUCCEED** revisit policies

- says intellectual disabilities services manager Des North

Interview by Allen Meagher

A senior manager who oversees the delivery of services for people with an intellectual disability, in south-east Dublin, believes it is time to re-examine national policies and strategies devised since Ireland signed up to the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

Amidst chronic underfunding, it would help families if there were more respite homes, it would help providers if there was less red tape regarding residential housing standards and the policy of decongregation should also be discussed.

Des North has worked in the sector for 27 years and since 2005 with St. John of God (SJOG), one of the largest of the many not-for-profit organisations that provide such services. He suggests that revisiting policies is a practical response the State could take now to the crisis for families needing residential care for adult children with intellectual disabilities. It would lead to more families being looked after than the system can currently support and care for and better value for money.

SJOG in Dublin South East covers an area stretching from Ringsend in Dublin city to Bray in Co. Wicklow and it provides day, respite, residential and other services. While it has 120 residential beds, there are 138 people with an intellectual disability on its waiting list, 35 of whom Des describes as “extremely in need, virtually emergency cases”.

His heart goes out to parents on the waiting list.

“It’s absolutely shocking when you see parents aged 88 and 91 and have a 65-year-old adult child who they are struggling to care for and who has significant behavioural needs on a daily basis.”

Part of his role is to communicate with families, often to say there is no place for their adult child at present.

“We are having tough conversations with families on a continuous basis. We try to stay in regular contact with them so they don’t feel forgotten,” he says.

The burden on families to provide care while the system is in crisis is largely unseen.

“When someone is living on the streets and is clearly homeless, the State works with them to try and provide accommodation. However, a family caring for somebody with an intellectual disability and



• Des North is the regional director for St. John of God in Dublin South East.

needing support is unseen, and responding effectively can in some ways be avoided.

Burden leads to desperate actions

“That’s why families sometimes go nuclear, like the mother who recently brought their loved one to an A&E and drove away. Parents become desperate to make the State face up to its responsibilities,” he says.

Some people get driven to the edge.

“I know families who have said to me that if this does not improve... [Editor - specific threats of suicide omitted]. That has happened on more than one occasion,” he says.

“On occasions, we are glad the HSE is able to ring private sector companies and ask about openings.

“Respite is key. Most families will say: ‘We don’t need our child to have a full-time residential place, we need a break’.”

“When we don’t have a bed, or a suitable bed, that person still needs to be accommodated somewhere and the private companies usually can provide. They are a godsend in certain situations,” he says.

Respite is key

“Respite is key,” he emphasised. “I have heard families say ‘We don’t need our child to have a full-time residential place, we need a break’. And if there was more respite places available, people would be able to stay at home with their parents for longer.”

He gave as an example a five-bed respite house for adults.

“That house is full every night, seven days a week, pretty much all year, and it provides a great service to the community. We’ve probably a

hundred families who benefit from that particular house.

“We could have another respite house open in three months if we got the funding. We would happily double the amount of respite we provide. Apart from being a partial solution to the numerical challenge and the financial challenge, people just need a rest – and they want to spend time with their other children who they’ve possibly neglected.”

Want to do more

“In my area of responsibility, in Dublin South East, we support around 450 people with an intellectual disability. We have 520 full-time staff and about 50 volunteers. We have 22 day services locations and 24 residential locations.

“We lobby and advocate for people with intellectual disabilities with the HSE locally and nationally, to try and unlock funds. We want to do more.”

Decongregation needs to be revisited

“Decongregation makes a lot of sense, but it needs to be looked at again,” he says, pointing to push and pull factors - the sky-rocketing cost of house-building and the emerging trend of co-living among other groupings in society.

“There’s no doubt that the State is going to find it very difficult to continue to provide residential places for people, like they have been doing. The expense is phenomenal. For example, after you buy it, a four-bed for people with disabilities can cost approximately €400,000 per year to run,” he says.

Considering the mounting annual costs, it could be timely for the government to revisit their policy ‘Time to Move on from Congregated Settings’, published 15 years ago.

Some people would prefer congregated settings

Moving groups of people out of dormitory accommodation in institutions to three- and four-bed houses in community settings was well-intentioned, but expensive. Des says the policy has been to reject any housing that placed 10 or more people together.

However, Des believes that clustered co-living where people have the independence of own-room



• Service-users enjoying a celebration in a St John of God respite house.

Parents in emergency situations

“Decongregation makes a lot of sense, but it needs to be looked at again.”

(Continued from previous page)

or apartment accommodation should be considered. For example: clusters of six-bed and eight-bed houses, and apartments where people are grouped together, where staff can go between each apartment, yet the residents are able to live independently.

“We have great risk assessment processes now that we didn’t have before,” he points out.

“The choice of the service-user is very important here,” he says.

Des is concerned that resource allocation for decongregation leaves next to no resources for people living in their family home who need residential places.

Communal living

“Some people would be horrified that this would be considered for people with disabilities, but I would say one needs to go back and have a discussion about every option again,” he says.

“The issue around policy, in my view, is that it doesn’t take into account the subtleties and the nuances of human beings. There are plenty of people who would love the idea of living in a shared accommodation with like 20 beds and communal areas. It would be perfect for them. You’ve got your own privacy, your own bedroom, your own bathroom, but you still have access to staff, to people that you can meet, hang out with, watch TV with, if you want.

“There is niche co-living accommodation now for students and others, particularly in Dublin, where they have shared cooking facilities and social facilities. It can work very well for certain people.”

UN Convention

The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) is aspirational. As an Oireachtas Committee on Disability Matters heard recently from another worker in the sector: “While Irish policy and legislation affirm the equal rights of disabled people, a significant gap exists between these affirmations and practical reality.”

Des says: “We all understand and appreciate why the Declaration was written and it is important that people’s rights are enshrined in law. However, policies need to be looked at again, because we’re spending money foolishly at times.”



• A service-user of St. John of God with a friend on a visit to Powerscourt Waterfall in Co. Wicklow, last May.

Our values: Hospitality, compassion and respect

Des North on St. John of God (SJOG):

“Across the country SJOG provide day, respite, clinical and residential services to around 3000 people with intellectual disabilities. That’s a phenomenal amount of people and we do a really good job.

“The reason I work for St. John of God is our values. They are hospitality, compassion and respect and in our line of work they are absolutely key. For me, what makes St. John of God stand out is we do espouse our values. They are important. And when we start to drift, we bring ourselves back to those values. They govern our service and that’s why we’re good at what we do,” he said.

Recently, SJOG wanted to open a new house, but were delayed until certain – arguably unnecessary – fixes were made.

In other cases of over-zealous regulation, tables have to be replaced because of scratches, or lino has to be replaced because of a tear – both are seen as infection control issues. A washing machine has to be moved from a kitchen to an outdoor shed.

“All of these things make sense in themselves, but they become serious issues for service providers, because we end up spending a huge amount of money and time fixing these when we could be providing more respite.

“It’s very simple. If we want to create new places for people in need, we need to be more efficient with the level of resources that we have. We have to work smarter,” he says.

Up to the Government

Whether or not we review policies is not for the sector to decide.

“The power when it comes to revisiting policy documents rests with the State, so it’s the State that needs to lead out on a review of the legislation, the regulations,

the policies, the guidelines, the standards.

“Support groups and service providers can clamour for change, but they can’t action it. The State can action it. The minister can come out in the morning and call for a review of policy X or Y, and we’re up and running.

“A Citizens Assembly would bring sensibility to these discussions because the man or woman in the street tends to have a very good grasp of what’s needed and they tend to also have a very good grasp of how far a euro can go.

“In my view, a government-led citizens assembly looking at these issues could go a long way. I think we would seriously benefit from an in-depth review of all the policies and strategies we are following.

“Additional respite beds are vital in the sector and ring-fenced resources for every county are needed immediately to facilitate this development.”

“New funding announced by Minister Norma Foley is very welcome, but should be protected for non-emergency cases,” he added.

Capital funding announced by ministers in February

On February 24, **Norma Foley** (pictured) **Minister for Children, Disability, and Equality, and Emer Higgins, Minister of State with responsibility for Disability**, announced €43



million in ring-fenced capital funding to support Community Based Specialist Disability Services in 2026.

Minister Foley said, “This represents a substantial increase of €16 million compared with 2025 and demonstrates the Government’s firm commitment to support and expand disability services.”

The funding will go towards residential, respite, day and children’s services and to neuro-rehabilitation.

Two days later, on February 26, at an Oireachtas Committee on Disability Matters, Minister of State Higgins pointed out that the Department’s broader five-year strategy to 2030 will, among other things, help to address “the increased cost of service provision, pay cost pressures, capacity limitations and service provider sustainability.”

“It is vital that we provide stability for a sector that has been operating under sustained cost pressures and increasing demand for services. We also need to make sure that this year’s significant budget allocation of nearly €4 billion is managed as effectively and efficiently as possible,” she said.

“With regard to residential services, there will be a focus on delivering more planned places this year and beyond to move away from a crisis-driven, unplanned response in residential services.

“As well as expanding services, the Department will deliver a new vision and strategy for the progressive improvement of specialist disability services in Ireland, which will be fully aligned to the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the principles of long-term financial and operational sustainability,” she said.

Replying to a question by **Liam Quaide, TD**, on behalf of service providers who say that multi-annual funding is pivotal for them to be able to plan rather than simply react to a crisis, Minister Higgins said: “The Department of Health is currently under review when it comes to multi-annual funding.”

The full debate can be accessed here: <https://bit.ly/CommDisabFeb25-2026>

It's a start! An apprenticeship for non-profit administrators by 2027

BY OWEN RYAN

No-one has yet done an apprenticeship in non-profit administration in Ireland, because it's an option that simply does not exist at present, but that could soon be rectified.

The Wheel, the country's main association for non-profit organisations, has signed a Memorandum of Understanding confirming Technological University Dublin as the official education partner in an application to the National Apprenticeship Office for a Level 6 (National Framework of Qualifications – NQI) apprenticeship. The working title of the apprenticeship is Nonprofit Administrator.

There is still a long way to go; approval for the apprenticeship programme has yet to be granted, but the ball is rolling.

The apprenticeship will introduce participants to topics that all organisations in the community and voluntary sector recognise, including: governance, the community and voluntary sector landscape, fundraising, event and volunteer management and others.

The course will be designed with community and voluntary sector approaches in mind - for example, trauma-informed practice, social value and person-centred care.

Mairead O'Connor, senior sector skills policy manager with The Wheel, said that her colleague Sharon Hughes had come up with the idea after conversations with a number of organisations.

"Sharon was talking to CEOs and other people working in the sector over the course of a year or two. She knew about the apprenticeship model and how it was used in other sectors.

"She had a kind of a light bulb



• Pictured at the signing of an agreement between The Wheel and Technological University (TU) Dublin are (l. to r.): Dr Colin Hughes and Dr Lorraine Sweeney from TU Dublin; Maria Couchman, Sharon Hughes and Barry Dempsey (CEO) of The Wheel; Dr Etain Kidney, TU Dublin; and Mairead O'Connor, The Wheel.

moment, if you like, and saw that it would address a lot of the issues she was hearing about from employers in the sector.

"We brought it to our members, put it in front of them at a meeting in January of 2025. We kind of got the green light at that meeting, and we went from there with it," she said.

Benefits

One of the benefits of an apprenticeship is that apprentices continue to earn throughout their training, offering an accessibility advantage over more academic programmes.

"It will be delivered by our educational partner the Technological University Dublin and their partners around the country. The idea is that it would provide a unique pathway into the sector for people. It's an earn and

learn model. You don't have to go off and spend a number of years in education, you are working and learning at the same time," said Mairead.

Progression

The apprenticeship programme would potentially give opportunities for progression to people who already have a foothold in the sector.

"Talking to employers, that's something they are very keen on. There are people already working in the sector, a lot of whom might have valuable lived experience. They may come in as service users initially and they join the workforce in the sector. They mightn't have had the opportunity to go into education, there might have been barriers.

"This is a way for them to upskill without having to take time off work and to create pathways for them as well. The idea is this would be

a starting off point on a learning journey; it's a level six but we would hope that down the line there would be level sevens and level eights and that people could continue their (educational) journey," she said.

The apprenticeship will also be a gateway for people to enter the sector for the first time.

It's no secret that the community sector has experienced labour shortages since the pandemic. Many of the organisations that are backing the development of apprenticeships see it as a means that could help them address such issues in years to come.

"We know that over the last few years we have heard a lot from our members about recruitment and retention being a really big issue. It's definitely an issue. And if you can give opportunities for people who are already in the sector, already working in your organisation, upskill them and give them opportunities for progression, that's the ideal scenario. That's how you keep people really, through learning opportunities and the apprenticeship is ideal for that," said Mairead.

Possible 2027 start

At the moment she says it isn't possible to say how many apprenticeships could be offered, but the picture should become clearer in 2026. If everything goes well the first apprentices could be in training in 18 months or so.

"What we're hoping is to get through the initial application this year, probably the earliest intake would be September 2027, all going well. We are working towards that and we do hope to do an awful lot of the heavy lifting this year."

16 employers to date ready to support apprenticeships

As of March 2026 there were 16 members of the consortium who intend as employers to offer the apprenticeship when all is ready to go. They are:

1. Novas
2. Community Enterprise Association of Ireland
3. Daughters of Charity Child and Family Service
4. North Dublin Inner City Home Care and Home Help Services
5. Longford Women's Link
6. Carmichael
7. Exchange House
8. P.A.C.E. (Prevention, Accommodation, Community, Enterprise)
9. Irish Traveller Movement
10. Business in the Community
11. Threshold
12. Airfield Estate
13. St. John of God Community Services
14. Foróige, the national youth development organisation
15. WALK
16. DePaul



10 projects join National Family Resource Centre Programme

1. **Mayo:** Erris Family & Community Support Centre based in Belmullet.
2. **Donegal:** Local Youth & Family Service based in Gweedore.
3. **Leitrim:** Northwest STOP in Drumkeeran.
4. **Tipperary:** Roscrea Family Resource Centre.
5. **Limerick city:** Limerick Island Community Partnership, Nicholas Street.
6. **Wexford:** Templeshannon Community & Childcare in Enniscorthy.
7. **Kerry:** Coiste Áiseanna na hOige, sa Daingean Uí Chúis.
8. **Dublin 12:** Walkinstown Greenhills Resource Centre.
9. **Louth:** Omeath District Development in Knocknagoran.
10. **Longford town:** Longford Family Resource Centre Steering Group.



• There was delight in February among FRC campaigners in Erris, Co. Mayo, seen here with Minister Dara Calleary.

In February, it was announced by the Government that 10 more groups are to be admitted to the Family Resource Centre Programme.

Being part of the national programme is sought after by community groups because it provides greater security, sustainability and opportunities for increased access to resources. The successful applicants will now be allocated core funding of €180,000 for each full year of operation.

However, it is about more than funding; as one successful group remarked – “It’s about hope, inclusion, and a stronger future for our town.”

The announcement – by the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality, Norma Foley - brings to 136 the number of Family Resource Centres (FRCs) across the country. The ten new groups chosen for admission come from counties Mayo, Donegal, Leitrim, Kerry, Tipperary, Limerick, Wexford, Louth, Longford and Dublin.

Among the ten is **Erris Family and Community Support Centre (FCSC)** whose campaign we covered over a number of years.

Chairperson Rosaleen Lally said, “After years of hard work and advocacy, I am thrilled that we have finally been granted official FRC status. Having the security of a permanent FRC means long-term support and services right here where we live.”

Erris FCSC **co-ordinator Leanne Barrett** said the recognition “represents a new chapter” and provides “renewed hope for families and individuals across the region”.

“At the heart of Erris FCSC’s work are community development values and principles - collective action, community empowerment, social justice, sustainable development, human rights, and participation – values which lie at the core of both the national programme and of Erris FCSC’s own mission locally,” she added.

Local Youth and Family Service CLG in Co. **Donegal** was also among the ten. They responded to the news saying, “We are so delighted to be a part of the Family Resource Centre Programme to offer much needed supports across the Northwest/ Gaeltacht.”

In **Roscrea, Co. Tipperary**, there was also relief and joy after North Tipperary Development Company worked with the local community to make the successful application. They carried out a comprehensive needs analysis



• Senator Joe Flaherty introduces Minister Norma Foley to Longford people who were at the time campaigning for an FRC. Longford was among the ten new chosen places.



• Staff from Local Youth and Family Service CLG in Co. Donegal pictured at a showcase event in 2025.

and highlighted key metrics on deprivation, employment, the number of non-Irish residents, and education levels in the town.

Longford County Council warmly welcomed the announcement by Minister Foley confirming funding for a Family Resource Centre in **Longford** town.

“This is a milestone our community has been working toward for many years, with Longford facing some of the highest levels of need in the country. This centre will provide vital, judgment-free support for children, young people, families, older people, people with disabilities, Travellers, refugees, and asylum seekers,” it said in a statement.

“Based at The Attic House and supported by a dedicated voluntary steering committee and Foróige, the new FRC will offer a welcoming space where everyone belongs,” it added.

Longford-based **Senator Joe Flaherty** said it was “excellent news” and he was pleased that Minister Foley had visited the town and seen for herself the challenges.

Minister Foley said, “I have seen first-hand the incredible work that Family Resource Centres do every single day. They are of the community and for the community and by the community and they represent our ongoing investment in children, families, and communities across Ireland.”

Taoiseach Micheál Martin said the FRC programme is about “strengthening communities at their core – through grassroots action, partnership, and compassion.”

The announcement builds on the 2025 announcement of five new FRCs and follows up on a commitment in the Programme for Government to expand the capacity and network of Family Resource Centres over the

lifetime of the Government.

An open call was made to all interested parties, and subsequent submissions were evaluated in a process independently chaired by a representative of the University of Limerick. All the unsuccessful applicants were informed that their application would remain under active consideration should additional funding be secured for further expansion.

In Budget 2026, the minimum funding level for all Family Resource Centres was increased from to €160,000 to €180,000 for 2026.

COMMUNITY & COUNCIL AWARDS

South Dublin wins Council of the Year 2026



• Helen O'Donnell from Limerick was announced as the Volunteer of the Year at the Community and Council Awards 2026.



• ACT (Accelerating Change Together) based in Ballina, Co. Mayo, won the Best Social Enterprise award for work to accelerate the Green Transition.

Helen O'Donnell was named **Community Volunteer of the Year at the Community and Council Awards 2026, held on February 28 in Dublin.**

Helen, who was nominated by Limerick City and County Council, received the award for her leadership and service to community development and environmental action in Limerick over many years.

This year, the Council of the Year Award went to South Dublin County Council.

Councillors nominate people and projects for the awards and, this year, the organisers received

533 nominations and shortlisted 137 entries across 26 categories.

The awards, now in their 20th year, are organised by the Local Authorities Members Association, to recognise exceptional local authority projects, partnerships, and community champions.

"The people and projects recognised tonight reflect the resilience, creativity, and volunteer spirit that strengthen local democracy and improve quality of life for people nationwide," said John Hogan, Chairman of IPB Insurance, the awards' long term sponsor and partner.



• Happy Deise heads! Waterford City and County Council won the award for Best Green Sustainable Initiative.

THE WINNERS*

Community Volunteer of the Year:

Helen O'Donnell - Limerick City and County Council.

Best Community Wellbeing Initiative: Roscommon Community Toolkit - Roscommon County Council.

Grand Prix Award: Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council.

Best Corporate Social Responsibility Project in a Community: Community Response Hubs (after Storm Éowyn) - Cavan County Council.

Best Community Transport Initiative: The Crescent/Sea Road Junction Upgrade - Galway City Council

Heritage Award: Donegal Emigrant Working Lives in Scotland 1940-1990 - Donegal County Council.

Council of the Year: South Dublin County Council.

Best Community Scale Enhancements: IQ Ballina - Mayo County Council.

Best Irish Language Initiative: Scoil an Phiarsaigh - Galway County Council

Reimagining Public Places Award: The Shackleton Experience - Kildare County Council.

Best Tourism Initiative: Dublin Winter Lights - Dublin City Council.

Best Business Working in the Community: Barrow Valley Activities Hub - Kilkenny County Council.

Best Housing Regeneration and Urban Planning: Shanganagh Castle Estate - Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council.

Best Green Sustainable Initiative: The Business Pledge for a Cleaner, Greener Waterford - Waterford City & County Council.

Best Inclusive Public Realm and Accessibility: Woodstock Gardens and Arboretum - Kilkenny County Council.

Best Social Enterprise of the Year: ACT – Accelerating Change Together, Ballina - Mayo County Council.

Best Sustainable Infrastructure and Climate Action: The Great New Ross River Walk - Wexford County Council

National Impact Award: Driving STEM in the Midlands - Laois, Longford, Offaly, Westmeath County Councils.

Best Green Sustainable Initiative: A.B.I.L.I.T.Y Coaching Programme - Longford County Council.

* The above list features community-related winners. Not included above, for example, is an award given for innovation in road maintenance.

Colourful launch by Southside Partnership of their strategic plan



You've probably been to a few lame launches where the highlight is a PowerPoint presentation.

They do it differently in south Dublin.

On March 7, amidst a blaze of colour, music and dance, Southside Partnership, which operates in the Dún Laoghaire–Rathdown area, launched its new 5-year Strategic Plan titled 'Strengthening Foundations, Expanding Possibilities'.

The plan sets out an ambitious strategic vision that can also respond to emerging needs as they arise.

"The plan is focused on building resilient, inclusive, sustainable and thriving communities across Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown," said the organisation in a statement.

Speaking after the launch Sinéad Sherwin, CEO, said, "After almost 30-years of working in partnership with local communities and key strategic partners to develop collaborative responses promoting social inclusion, our new strategic plan clearly represents our commitment to empowering those individuals and communities we care most about."

The plan outlines key priorities including:

- Investing in evidence-informed early interventions for children, young people and families.
- Placing a greater emphasis on arts and culture as a method for deepening community cohesion and participation.
- Expanding employment, training, enterprise and social enterprise supports.
- Embedding a culture of sustainability into the heart of the work.

Southside Partnership's work is funded through the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP) 2024–2028, as well as Community Employment and Tús Schemes supported by the Department of Social Protection. It also manages a number of projects financed through the HSE, Tusla, local government and philanthropy.

The organisation works through collaboration, advocacy and person-centred programmes, with and within local communities, to advance social, cultural and economic inclusion, strengthen local resilience, and create pathways for people to realise their potential.

The plan was formally launched by An Cathaoirleach, Cllr. Jim Gildea. It can be downloaded at: southsidepartnership.ie



• **Top (l to r):** Southside Partnership staff members Gogontle Morula and Finn McGuirk, Cllr. Jim Gildea, Sinéad Sherwin, CEO, Sandra King, Social Inclusion Manager, and Alan Wyley, chairperson of Southside Partnership. **Main photo:** Dancers from The Zoryanna dance group at the launch of Southside Partnership's Strategic Plan. **Middle:** Performers from the Echo's of Hope Choir; Entertainers from LBS (Loughlinstown, Ballybrack and Shanganagh) Men's Shed; and attendees enjoying the launch. **Bottom:** Artist Harry Burton capturing the day.

Photos by Dave Keegan Photography.

MEN'S SHEDS

Longford shedders visit Brussels



Members of the Drumlish-Ballinamuck Men's and Ladies' Sheds in Co. Longford made a trip to Brussels in February. It was facilitated by MEP Ciaran Mullooly. Among the highlights they identified were a visit to the European Parliament and they also witnessed a speech by President Zelensky calling for more support from EU countries.

Kells Men seek €60k

Kells Men's Shed has launched an iDonate page with an aim of raising €60,000 by the end of the year so it can develop its own permanent premises. It has already been given planning permission by Meath County Council to place two large, purpose-fitted buildings on a piece of land that will be leased to it by Meath County Council.

Naas Men get fit

Naas Men's Shed has been offering lots of exercise options to its members. They have combined with other local groups for mixed walking football games to get fit for the Kildare Sports Partnership Mixed Football Blitz. In addition to that a number of members completed a six-week Swim Ireland beginners' course.

Northside model

The Hollyhill Express is a 40ft Northside Christmas Village model created by Knocknaheeny/Hollyhill Men's Shed in partnership with the NICHE Health Project.

The stunning display captures the heart of the place in fantastic detail, from St Mary's on the Hill to the colourful terraces that characterise the area and other local landmarks.

It has been put on display at local locations.

Clon Men ag labhairt Gaeilge

There is a growing enthusiasm for casual opportunities to use Irish and Clonakilty Men's Shed are playing their part in meeting the demand. It has established what it calls its Cúpla Focal group, which meets in the front bar of O'Donovan's Hotel for an hour each Tuesday.

Shocking data led to Dublin 10 Food Alliance

Launched in early February, the new Dublin 10 Food Alliance describes itself as “a coalition dedicated to transforming the local food landscape”.

It is a response to research that revealed that 40% of the community in Ballyfermot faces food poverty. The Alliance brings together key stakeholders “to combat systemic food insecurity by creating a vibrant and sustainable food system in the area”.

The cross-sector partnership includes formidable partners - Liffey Partnership, Dublin City Council, the HSE, the Department of Social Protection, the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, FamiliBase, Ballyfermot Family Resource Centre and local councillors, Ray Cunningham and Daithi Doolan.

Drawing inspiration from progressive Scandinavian and European models, the alliance is launching several initiatives designed to empower the community.

These include:

- Collective Advocacy: Using local data to drive change in national

Aims include ending the isolation of food poverty by creating warm, inclusive spaces, where everyone has a seat at the table.



• Stakeholders at the launch of the Dublin 10 Food Alliance.

health and social welfare policy.

- An Open Community Kitchen: A hub for cooking clubs and community dinners to foster shared connection through food.

- Not-for-Profit Meal Kits: Helping people with access issues to cook

fresh, varied dinners at home.

- Co-ordinating Local Services: Bolstering local services and installing new free fridges, freezers and dry pantries to make healthy food more accessible.

- A Co-operative Community

Shop: An affordable, community-owned grocery shop with high-quality produce.

As Lauren Corbet said after the launch, “You can’t make good choices without good options.”

Lauren is employed as community food and nutrition worker by Liffey Partnership and she believes that it is “fundamentally wrong that fresh, nutritious food is often considered a privilege in Ireland”.

“We believe in the power of food to bring people together, so our mission is to fight for income equality, build a healthful, dignified food environment, and end the isolation of food poverty by creating warm, inclusive spaces, where everyone has a seat at the table,” she said.

This new initiative does not yet have an online presence and can easily be confused with another “Food Alliance” also based in Dublin but operated by a private company to reward customer loyalty.

For more information email Lauren directly at: lcobet@liffeypartnership.ie

277-PAGE OECD REPORT ON RURAL IRELAND PUBLISHED

After an extensive two-year exercise the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has published a comprehensive rural policy review of Ireland.

The Review praises Ireland’s policy structures:

“Ireland has built one of the OECD’s most sophisticated rural policy frameworks and has a unique whole-of-government approach that maintains visibility on rural impacts across all departments in Ireland,” it states.

The Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht had contracted the OECD to undertake the review to aid the development of future policy.

The 277-page review, titled ‘Rural Policy Review of Ireland 2026’, assesses trends, challenges, policy options and opportunities. It will now be “fully considered” says the Government in relation to ongoing work on the successor policy to Our Rural Future. This will cover the period from this year to 2031.

Responding to questions in the Dáil in early February, Minister Dara Calleary said he was “intent on having the new Our Rural Future published ahead of the summer”.

He said, “The new policy will build not just on the progress already achieved but will set out a renewed vision for the whole-of-government approach to rural development for the years ahead.”

The report calls for more support for rural enterprises and the delivery of essential services in rural areas.



Compared with many OECD countries, rural Ireland shows strong economic performance.

As well as contracting the OECD to provide insight, his department also engaged with thousands of stakeholders through public consultations, meetings and online engagement.

The OECD’s research took a “rural wellbeing framework” approach and it makes many recommendations, including for improved use of rural intelligence, broadening of support for rural enterprises and enabling delivery of essential services in rural areas.

The report highlights positives about rural society here as well as naming challenges. It says:

“Ireland’s rural areas are central to the country’s economy, society and territorial identity. Compared with many OECD countries, they show strong economic performance and relatively favourable demographic trends, particularly in regions with good access to urban labour markets. Yet, persistent spatial disparities between urban and more remote rural areas create distinct policy challenges.”

The document is now available for download from the OECD’s website: <https://www.oecd.org>

Or you can read a summary here: https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/rural-policy-review-of-ireland-2026_d53ea78f-en.html

BY ALLEN MEAGHER

Social Farming Ireland national conference set for April 24



Social Farming Ireland will hold its annual conference on April 24 at The Heritage Hotel, Killenard, Co Laois. The event will look at the impacts, outcomes and the future of social farming.

The conference will be officially opened by Minister for Agriculture, Food, Fisheries and the Marine, Martin Heydon.

The event will bring together supporters of social farming from across the country to share experiences and celebrate a decade of the network's work.

Social Farming Ireland Major expansion after 10 years

Social Farming Ireland is this year celebrating 10 years of the national network, funded by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine.

Over the past decade, the network has grown from seven social farms in 2017 to 159 today. Last year, its social farmers provided more than 10,300 placement days, supporting participants across a wide range of health, social care, and community settings.

Last year, SFI was awarded a tender worth €900,000 over four years to expand on its work.

“This recognition reflects our long-standing commitment to supporting social farming and we look forward to continuing to grow the network, building meaningful opportunities, and supporting inclusion and wellbeing across Ireland,” it said at the time.

SFI's funding had remained the same since 2016 while the project had grown exponentially, but now it has been able to take on new staff.

It said: “With this increased level of funding we have brought on board four new team members who will help us to enhance and develop the Network further. We now have two development managers - one



• A group engaged in social farming at summertime. Source: Social Farming Ireland's Facebook page.

North and one South who will be developing the commissioning of placements, a new regional co-ordinator in the South and a new finance administrator to support the National team. We are excited as we now look forward to taking the Social Farming Ireland Network to the next level.”

SFI is based in Drumshanbo, Co. Leitrim and is led by Leitrim

Development Company.

Of interest, SFI is currently involved in an Erasmus project to explore how social farming and organic gardening can support social integration, wellbeing and empowerment for people with diverse abilities and backgrounds.

For more information visit:

socialfarmingireland.ie/

KERRY SOCIAL FARMING going strong

Voluntary model has 40 host farmers - and seeks more



• A Kerry Social Farming participant speaking at the organisation's AGM.

Over 70 participants and 40 farms are now active in Kerry Social Farming (KSF) with five new host farmers joining last year.

Since 2013, Kerry Social Farming has operated a voluntary model of social farming that provides meaningful weekly working farm visits for people with disabilities and those accessing mental health services. The impact on participants has long been recognised as beneficial and, as a result of the commitment and dedication of farmers, participants, support staff and facilitators, almost 2,500 days of social farming were held in Kerry in 2025.

In January, over 90 people attended KSF's annual meeting in Killarney. The attendees included host farmers, participants and their families, service provider agencies, project partners and representatives of social farming projects.

Éamon Horgan, a host farmer from Kilgarvan, said that there are many people in Kerry waiting for

a chance to go social farming and he urged other farmers to come forward and volunteer.

Social farming participants Pat O'Connor, Tracy McCarthy, Antoinette O'Sullivan, Seamus McCarthy and Tim Heffernan shared their social farming stories.

Other speakers included Marie Carr (outreach manager, Kerry Parents and Friends Association), Brenda McNamara (a manager of day services with St John of God) and Patrice O'Neill (HSE day service opportunities co-ordinator).

Peter Johnston, assistant principal officer with the Department of Agriculture, Food and Marine also attended, as did Noel Spillane, CEO of South Kerry Development Partnership. Their respective organisations are supportive of KSF's voluntary and collaborative work.

For more information visit:

www.kerrysocialfarming.ie

LIBRARY NEWS BRIEFS

IRELAND NOW HAS 25 "LIBRARIES OF SANCTUARY"

At least 25 of the state's 330 public libraries have taken agreed steps to welcome refugees and people seeking asylum and all newcomers to an area.

Known as Libraries of Sanctuary they have committed to creating a culture of welcome and inclusion.

Many libraries have included offering solidarity with refugees in their action plans. Portlaoise Library was the first to become a library of sanctuary, followed by Louth County Libraries (5 libraries), Westmeath County Libraries (5 libraries), Wicklow Libraries (13 libraries) as well as libraries in Offaly and Fingal.

An organisation called Places of Sanctuary Ireland provides support. Pointing to examples from around the country it says that many libraries "have responded proactively and creatively to the arrival of refugees and migrants."

As a library user in Dundalk, a teacher who came from Zimbabwe, said:

"When I moved to Dundalk with my children, the library soon become our safe haven. We received a hearty welcome and felt such a sense of belonging, it was a wonderful way to start integrating in Dundalk."

The east coast has seen major population growth. For example, the population of Drogheda and Dundalk combined is 139,000 people with 19% of its residents born outside Ireland.

For more information on Places of Sanctuary, including libraries, visit: posi.ie

TRALEE'S MEN ONLY BOOK CLUB



Kerry has a men only book club, titled the Yorkie Book Club for Men. While many book clubs have largely or exclusively female membership, this is an effort ongoing since 2024 to get men to come together and chat.

The book club meets monthly in Tralee Library. We're not sure if Yorkie bars are provided but the books are free.

CARE BLINDNESS

Care is the invisible foundation of the real economy

BY CAROLINE CROWLEY AND CAROL POWER

Ireland's population cohort aged 80+ is projected to quadruple to over half a million people by the middle of this century, creating a growing need for home care services.

The rise in this age-group has already outpaced the rise in the workforce. Over 5,000 older people who are approved for home care are waiting for care workers.

As care work in Ireland is increasingly outsourced to the for-profit sector, price competition drives a "race to the bottom" of precarious contracts and poor terms and conditions for workers.

With the older population growing and care workers exiting the sector, family care becomes even more essential. Addressing these challenges calls for joined-up thinking.

It also raises questions such as:

How can a more effective care system be developed?

How can a system that fails to value and reward care workers survive?

How can families support older members while trying to make ends meet in an economy driven by individualism, competition and extraction?

Wellbeing needs

Our wellbeing depends on our needs being met throughout life and that happens through care.

Long taken-for-granted by a "distorted economy", care is a gift that flows through relationships with loved ones in households, unpaid volunteers in communities, and nature herself. The great unravelling of the social and natural fabric on which the economy (and life) depends reflects the existential risk of such care blindness.

Research findings

Care co-operatives are organisations based on values of self-help, democracy, equity and solidarity and their business model focuses on people, not profit, combining quality care with fulfilling work. To raise awareness and stimulate discussion, a UCC project called CO-AGE, funded by Research Ireland, examined this social model of care.



• Dr Carol Power and Dr Caroline Crowley, Centre for Co-operative Studies in the Cork University Business School. Photo: Ruben Martinez, UCC.

The research sought to answer the question: "Do care co-operatives have a role to play in meeting future care needs?"

In support of the CO-AGE research, the Great Care Co-op in Dublin and Equal Care Co-op in Yorkshire, England, shared details about their work with the UCC researchers.

Then, CO-AGE explored the approach of these co-operatives with older people, family carers, care workers, and managers.

Care co-operatives

The research found that re-imagining an integrated and resilient care system in Ireland calls for designing a more holistic continuum of care – one centred on a social care approach. The co-operative model fits with this vision as care co-ops do not have to maximise profits for external shareholders. Instead, surpluses are re-invested in their mission and members. Since care co-

ops are embedded in communities, this enriches local areas too.

But the co-operative may be compromised if it must conform with existing care systems. Also, social innovators attracted by this model may be dissuaded by its unfamiliarity or cumbersome regulations.

The CO-AGE project highlighted the need for a supportive ecosystem to champion care co-ops by raising awareness and securing funding, along with training members and workers.

Such an ecosystem will depend on the State showing care by developing the legislation, regulation, funding and contracts needed to weave a tapestry of community-led care co-ops across Ireland. In that regard, Sláintecare's new HSE health regions and the Commission on Care for Older People offer timely opportunities.

You can freely download the report (138 pages) here: <https://bit.ly/UCC-CO-AGE-CareCoops>



• Care workers and domestic workers marching in Dublin.



THE GREAT CARE CO-OP

The Great Care Co-op is on a mission “to provide great care and great jobs”.

BY OWEN RYAN

Mariaam Bhatti is one of the co-founders of The Great Care Co-op and she says that carers have traditionally not received the recognition they deserve.

“Carers provide such valuable work, yet they are almost invisible. Historically it was always seen as work that was done by women, but that’s not supposed to be paid for. We just see them as doing very low work, but it’s essential work as Covid has shown us,” she says.

The Great Care Co-op, based in Dun Laoghaire, was founded in 2017 as a response to those in the sector not being valued. It is a non-profit social enterprise that describes its mission as being “To provide great care and great jobs”.

“After many years of a group of us campaigning for better working conditions for domestic workers, for carers, we felt that there were still so many issues, so we thought that maybe we should set something up which could be an example of an ideal workplace.

“And also something that could provide great care in a way that has not really been seen before,” says Mariaam.

Initially there was no financial backing, just idealism, but a lot of progress has been made since, both for workers and those receiving care.

“We started with no funding, with just a big idea and were motivated by wanting to see a better world. We got funding from Rethink Ireland, under the equality banner and it has made a huge difference.



• Mariaam Bhatti

“Instead of carers running across the county from Finglas to Dun Laoghaire to provide 30 minutes of care, how about we set up hubs where people can work locally and they can be paid well, get benefits such as pensions; sustainable



• Owner-workers of The Great Care Co-op.

Currently, 43 people work in The Great Care Co-operative. Everyone starts off as an employee, but after six months they transition to being a worker/owner of the CO-OP.

jobs basically.”

Since the start the goal has been to provide very good care and very good employment. “We care about positive ageing, sustainable societies. We also care about workers being able to progress in accessing decent work,” says Mariaam.

The Dormant Accounts Fund Annual Report 2024 praised the model pursued by The Great Care Co-op, which it said is good for carers and those receiving care:

“GCC’s model brings carers into leadership and decision-making roles. It reinvests all profits in employee pay, pensions, and training, which directly improves the quality of elderly care. The co-operative’s innovative governance model ensures that care workers participate in key decision-making processes, instilling a sense of ownership and accountability that is rare in the sector,” stated the report.

“This ultimately means that a much higher level of care is delivered to those people who use its services.

“GCC delivers a localised service that gives greater continuity of care to service users while also delivering greater job satisfaction for the care workers.

“Altogether this enhances the quality of care delivered, a circular model that is beautifully simple and effective.

“By reinvesting in its employees and prioritizing a worker-led approach, GCC is proving that ethical employment practices result in better quality care and improved working conditions for those in the sector,” the report concluded.

At the moment there are 43 people working in The Great Care Co-op. Everyone starts off as an employee, but after six months they transition to being a worker/owner of the co-operative.

Currently it serves the Dublin South and Bray areas, but there are ambitions to scale it up to serve a far larger section of the country.

While there is nothing else like it in Ireland, it is modelled on a similar co-operative in the Bronx, and a social enterprise in existence in the Netherlands.

Anyone looking for a carer can contact The Great Care Co-Op directly via phone or email, while it is also accredited to provide HSE-funded care.

The ESRI recently predicted that the number of long-term residential care beds and home support hours needed by the older population will increase by at least 60% within 15 years, meaning the type of services provided by The Great Care Co-op will be in more and more demand.

W: thegreatcarecoop.ie

Organisers surprised at numbers that attended Limerick Jobs Expo with a difference



• Diarmuid Healy, Department of Social Protection; James McCarthy and Alison Curtin from Bedford Row Family Project; Majella Ryan, Rose Slattery and Pdraig Moynihan from the Department of Social Protection, and Michael MacCurtain, Limerick Chamber of Commerce. PHOTO: AM.

Even the organisers were surprised at the number of people who showed up for a Jobs Expo with a difference that was held in City Hall, Limerick, on March 5. They recorded 178 visitors to the event, the first of its kind held outside Dublin.

It aimed to connect people who encounter barriers and discrimination with supportive employers. People who have served time in prison encounter more obstacles than most and the event was designed to encourage them – among others - and it showed people real pathways to employment.

Advice was provided by staff and volunteers from Bedford Row Family Project and Northside Family Resource Centre, and by officials from the Department of Social Protection and the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration. Also central to the event was the voluntary campaigning, training and support group Spéire Nua.

It is likely that this event, when next held, will attract even more community groups and employers and people who struggle to find work for a variety of reasons.

Collaboration to support

BY ALLEN MEAGHER

BEDFORD ROW FAMILY PROJECT



• Alison Curtin, project leader of the Bedford Royal Family Project.

PHOTOS: Allen Meagher.

“We offer a host of services in Bedford Row.”

Alison Curtin is the project leader of the Bedford Royal Family Project which supports families and communities impacted by imprisonment and addiction.

She and colleagues was pleased with their first ever jobs event, held in collaboration with Spéire Nua and the Department of Social Protection.

She said, “We wanted to show people with convictions that there are ways around the obstacles that come your way when trying to find employment.”

She said the Jobs Expo was the first event of its kind in the city “and it demonstrates the level of community collaboration that happens in Limerick”.

“We had key workers from local hostels who brought their clients down. We had Doras and many other projects. It was great to see so many people show up and hopefully it helped to improve their prospects of getting employment,” she said.

Members of the public are welcome to visit the Bedford Row Family Project, off Henry Street in Limerick (near Dunnes) anytime.

“We offer a host of services from drop-in, counselling, play therapy for children, support visits, and from literacy issues to psychotherapy, whatever you need. We will try and support you around your biggest challenge and then work from there. Including finding work - pre and post release,” said Alison.

LIMERICK CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

Michael MacCurtain (pictured) from Limerick Chamber of Commerce said, “It’s great to see the collaborative nature of all the different agencies. The thing we do great in Limerick is we work well together.”

“This is the first event of its kind here and I think it’s something that we could see replicated across the country,” he said.



Support people to overcome barriers to work

The Jobs Expo in Limerick, on March 5, was organised by Bedford Row Family Project, Spéire Nua, the Department of Social Protection and the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration.

DEPT. OF SOCIAL PROTECTION



• Rose Slattery, Dept. of Social Protection.

NORTHSIDE FAMILY RESOURCE CENTRE



• Martina Bieniek and Mark Ryan from Northside Family Resource Centre.

“I would be delighted if we had more of these events in 2026.”

Rose Slattery is an assistant principal officer in the Department of Social Protection (DSP), working in the area of employer relations, and she said the DSP was delighted to be involved.

It allowed close to 200 people to “get opportunities to look at the next step in their journey whether that’s upskilling, training, or going into employment.”

“We met people who have encountered many barriers and have now got an opportunity to meet local employers and local stakeholders to support them on the next step.

“It’s a great initiative and I would be delighted if we had much more of these events in 2026,” she said.

She also spoke about the DSP’s Work Experience Placement Programme, a 6-month, 30 hour per week voluntary work and training programme.

DEPT. OF JUSTICE

Lorna Conway (pictured), an assistant principal officer in the Department of Justice, explained her participation in the Jobs Expo.

“I have policy and responsibility for building pathways together, which is an employment strategy and it’s designed to lift barriers for people with criminal convictions to help them access employment.

“We are encouraging employers to take a more open attitude to giving people with convictions an opportunity to compete in roles, to get roles in employment.

“I’m also involved in the Prison Education Task Force. We look at matching labour force needs with what’s available in prison. We’re very interested in what employers and sectors are needing people, particularly now that we’re in full employment and trying to match the offerings in prison with what’s out there so people have a much better chance upon release of getting employment,” she said.



“We can help people to overcome the barriers.”

Mark Ryan and Martina Bieniek from Northside Family Resource Centre took part to promote vacancies on their Community Employment Scheme. They encouraged people seeking upskilling or work experience to contact them.

Martina said, “I would encourage people looking to upskill or looking for work experience to get in touch with us, because we can help them to overcome the barriers that people experience in seeking employment.”

She said the nationwide Community Employment Scheme is “a great opportunity for people” with her colleague Mark adding that it offers “an opportunity or a stepping stone back into the traditional Labour market.”



SPÉIRE NUA

Damien Quinn is the founder of a volunteer group called Spéire Nua (New Horizons in Irish) which engages in campaigning and mentoring in support of people when they are released from prison.

“We’ve set up a process to support people leaving the justice system to show that they’ve moved on. We’ve developed Certificates of Commitment to Change and we help employers match up with people who are looking for a fresh start.

He described the nearly 200 people that attended as a “massive” number, saying there were great employers there as well.



• Damien Quinn (left), founder of voluntary group Spéire Nua, with volunteers at their stand.

LOCAL AUTHORITY NEWS

WINNING PATHWAY ALSO SERVES AS FLOOD DEFENCE



The marshy banks of the River Barrow provide a scenic setting for a walkway in New Ross, Co. Wexford, that has won the town a national award.

At the Local Authority Members' Association (LAMA) awards the Great New Ross River Walk – which is beautiful but shorter than its name suggests – came first in the Best Sustainable Infrastructure and Climate Action category. The walk features benches, signage and public lighting, but what sets it apart is that the walkway also serves as a barrier to future-proof the area from flooding.

The award was officially presented on February 28 to representatives of Wexford County Council and New Ross Municipal District. The town has a way with parks. In 2017 it won a LAMA award for a new park beside the public library.

This year's LAMA competition attracted 533 nominations from the state's 31 local authorities, across 26 award categories. (For more see page 14).

CLARE'S NEW BIODIVERSITY PLAN

Clare County Council has launched the Clare County Biodiversity Action Plan 2025–2031.

The plan sets out 58 targeted actions to tackle key challenges to biodiversity, including habitat loss, fragmentation, invasive species and climate change.

The launch took place at the Michael Cusack Heritage Centre in the Burren on World Wildlife Day.

DIGITAL ARTS FOR PEOPLE ON MARGINS

Louth County Council has signed a contract with Redeemer Family Resource Centre in Dundalk to deliver a PEACEPLUS Digital Arts Project.

The project will support participants to become creatively involved in technologies such as gaming and coding, animation, 3D printing, design and digital fabrication. It will focus on engaging with marginalised groups to assist people seeking employment to explore opportunities in the technology sector.

35 YEARS OF NEWS AND STORIES

Travellers' Voice magazine

By Owen Ryan

In existence for over 30 years, Travellers' Voice magazine looks to shine a light on issues sometimes ignored within the community, while it also acts as what editor Michael Power calls an "empowerment tool" showing Travellers who have succeeded.

Travellers' Voice – now a 48-page glossy magazine – started off in 1991 and its aim then was to connect Traveller training centres.

Thirty four years on, its remit has changed – as has the magazine's look and target audience.

"Previously it was a publication that was been solely there to dispel the myths that surround Travellers; this notion that Travellers aren't employed, that Travellers don't want an education. Although there are still issues in those areas, we are not a homogenous group in that regard," said Michael who is based in Athlone.

"Right now the magazine is more of an aspirational tool for members of the Traveller community. We feature members of the community that are doing really well.

"It is used as an educational tool within institutions as well and knocking on the head the notion that Travellers don't want an education, don't want employment," he said.

He thinks that it helps to show that many Travellers do have an interest in becoming educated, but he feels more schools should read it.

"A lot of people who use that magazine would be surprised that there are so many Travellers in third level education for example.

More primary schools should subscribe to Travellers' Voice

"One of the things we have struggled with is trying to ensure that the magazine goes into all national schools. We find that within national schools there is sometimes a plateau on people's expectations of the level of education that Travellers want.

"We find that maybe our young people aren't doing as well in the education system, but in a lot of cases (while) there is a lot of goodwill towards individuals people think that Travellers don't necessarily want a junior cert, so they don't push them as much as



"We try and highlight issues within the community that Travellers don't generally talk about themselves."

"Within the community, we are so long in existence that we are considered a trusted source. We have people that reach out to us and ask if we would highlight their stories. A lot of our front covers are individuals that come through the grapevine who are aspirational figures."

Advertising and discrimination

Getting advertising from the private sector isn't easy.

"A lot of businesses are reluctant to advertise within the magazine because it's almost seen as opening the floodgates to members of the Traveller community. This is despite the fact that we know that members of the community utilise a lot of the businesses that we reach out to."

The reluctance of businesses to be associated with it reflects an ongoing discrimination.

"A lot of people that go onto third level might not go through education with their identity intact. In order to get employment after third level education you almost have to change your surname, or use the Irish version of it, to try and conceal your identity as

they would their settled peers."

On the issue of getting national schools to access the magazine he says that schools that don't have Traveller students often don't want it.

"In a lot of cases they say they don't have any Traveller students so there would be nobody benefiting from it. That's losing sight of the fact that it's not just for Traveller students but it's to inform teachers as well what the community is about."

Shining a light on taboo subjects

As editor he wants to focus on subjects that are too often ignored.

"We try and highlight issues within the community that Travellers don't generally talk about themselves. We speak quite a bit about depression because it affects the community disproportionately, but people don't talk about it."

Travellers' Voice also seeks to highlight the successes of its readership.

"Public sector entities see Travellers' Voice as a useful means of reaching the community."





(Continued from previous page)

a Traveller. There is still a lot of discrimination out there in terms of Traveller employment. It can be very demotivating when you see members of your family go through third level education and still end up on social welfare," he said.

Depressingly, some people who feature in the magazine because of their achievements can find that the focus actually works against them.

"We have had people who featured in the magazine previously, and who had their interviews on our website, reach out to us and ask if we could take the interviews down from the website, because when employers google them, that's what comes up."

More positively, public sector entities see Travellers' Voice as a useful means of reaching the community.

What else is in the magazine?

There are serious stories inside, but also a light side. For instance each issue contains recipes.

"We actually get great feedback on our recipes from people within the prison system. The magazine goes into all of the prisons in Ireland and in the UK because there is quite a high population of Travellers in the UK as well. We get correspondence from people currently in the prison system saying they tried a recipe; it's very accessible to them.

"We want the contents of the magazine to be as accessible to members of the Traveller community as possible, we don't use jargon, don't use anything that would be out of reach to the average person," he said.

To subscribe, which costs €30 for a year, visit: <https://www.travellersvoice.ie/subscribe/>

Michael's route via voluntary work to becoming editor

"The magazine is our national platform, but we also run youth services on the ground."



• Former President Michael D. Higgins greets Michael Power, editor of Travellers' Voice magazine.

"I am with Travellers' Voice for the past 19 years. I'm the editor and I'm also the CEO of the overall organisation Involve," says Michael Power.

"The magazine is our national platform, but we also run youth services on the ground. We have seven youth locations. We run the STATUS toolkit - STATUS stands for Supporting Travellers Accessing Universal Services. We run a Traveller culture and identity programme and manage the Traveller Pride Week budget on an annual basis."

Michael started off volunteering with Travellers' Voice, and has kept moving on within the organisation.

"I'm a member of the Traveller community and I was out of work 18 years ago. I put myself forward for a voluntary position that came up with the magazine, it was sales or subscriptions at the time. This is prior to the magazine obtaining Community Services Programme funding administered through Pobal. I have been in it with different hats on since then.

"I started off in a volunteer role within sales, I then became a reporter, I was really interested in writing, and I started writing articles featuring members of the Traveller community. My approach to features and to the Traveller community has always been strengths based, as opposed to what we don't have.

"Then in 2015 the role of the magazine manager/editor came up and I applied for that. I've been in that role since as well as taking on the broader role in the organisation," he said.

Michael in a voluntary capacity also sits on the board of directors of this publication, bringing unique expertise to the role.

Travellers' Voice is supported by the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht and Pobal through the Community Services Programme.

NEW RESEARCH

YOUTH DIVERSION PROJECTS

Newly published research shows how effective, trusted relationships between youth justice workers and young people helps to generate positive change and to reduce offending behaviour.

It examines how relationships are built and how they make a difference within Ireland's Garda Youth Diversion Projects (GYDPs). There are 550 people employed in these projects and the aim was to develop guidance for practitioners in GYDPs and to support the policy of intervening to divert young people from crime.

The research for the 'Better Together Report' was conducted by the Research Evidence into Policy, Programmes and

Practice (REPPP) team in the School of Law at the University of Limerick.

It found that effective professional relationships can lead to greater trust in adults and services, improved ability to cope with challenges, and increased confidence and self-worth.

As follow-up, the UL team is organising webinars, events - and a six-part podcast series which will be hosted by community worker James Leonard from the acclaimed The Two Norries podcast.

To view the research: <https://www.ul.ie/artsoc/ccjvs/action-research-project>



• Podcast host James Leonard and Caitlin Lewis, UL School of Law. PHOTO: Alan Place.

Skibbereen men now **UNDENIABLY** fitter, tougher and talking!

BY RAY LUCEY

Skibbereen native Andrew Desmond made an incredible comeback after stumbling in life and now he leads a local movement based on the idea of getting men moving. 'Be Undeniable' is about one simple idea: men need other men.

"Sometimes, the best way to fix a man's head is to get him sweating first," he says. "There was a time when men were tired for the right reasons. You worked. You moved. You sweated. You met other men without planning it weeks in advance. Life was hard but it made sense."

These days, a lot of men are wrecked without ever having done anything physical.

"They are too busy. Too stressed. Always rushing. Sitting more. Sleeping worse. Carrying a bit extra weight and telling themselves it's just how life is now. I know, because I lived that life myself," he says.

"I'm a local man, and years ago my life went badly off track. Addiction and gambling took hold. Confidence disappeared. Purpose went with it. I wasn't present, not for myself or anyone else.

"What brought me back wasn't talk. It was doing hard things again. Getting up early. Moving my body. Training. Sweating. Showing up when it would've been easier not to.

"Physical fitness gave me my confidence back. Not overnight but day by day. As my body got stronger, so did my head. I stopped drifting. I started standing up straight again.

"Over time, that discipline led me into competitive fitness, and eventually I found myself fitter at 50 than I had ever been before, even winning my age category at national level. I don't say that to boast. I say it because it proves something important: Men don't fall apart because they're weak. They fall apart because they stop doing the things that keep them strong," he says.

Around the same time as he was changing his life around, he noticed something else:

"Men were lonely, not in a dramatic way, but in a quiet, dangerous way. Too busy to meet. Too tired to play. Too proud to say they missed having other men around."

So, with all this in mind he started a small group in Skibbereen.

"We have early morning workouts.

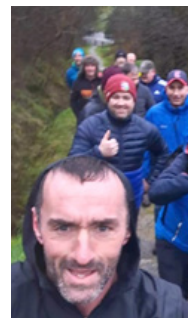
'Be Undeniable' isn't about motivating men. It's about normalising men spending time together, being honest, supporting each other, and lifting each other up.



• Heavy rain does not stop the 'Be Undeniable' group from going for a run.

WHAT 'BE UNDENIABLE' DO:

- A weekly men's circle focused on real conversation and connection.
- Three early morning workouts each week.
- A run club and breakfast club every Saturday.
- Hikes every second Sunday, with larger mountain hikes planned quarterly.
- Weekly sea dip and sauna sessions.
- An online community where men stay connected between events.



• Andrew Desmond.



• Skibbereen's 'Be Undeniable' members take a swim in the sea.

We go for walks. Coffee after. Men talking while moving, not sitting across from each other analysing life.

"What happened surprised me. Farmers. Tradesmen. Fathers. Business owners. Men who looked like they had it together but who admitted they'd let themselves go, stopped playing, stopped pushing themselves.

"We weren't there for a chat. We were there to raise the bar. That's what the men's circle became: not a support group, but a place of standards. A place where men move their bodies, challenge themselves, and hold each other to account while still having the craic.

"Some weeks are tough. Some weeks are full of laughter. But every week, men leave better than they arrived.

"Alongside that, an online community has grown - not as a place to complain, but as a base for action. Men organising meet-ups, setting challenges, encouraging each other to follow through."

Andrew concludes, "This isn't about going back to the past or blaming modern life. It's about remembering something we've lost. Men were never meant to sit still all day. They were meant to move, to build, to work hard, to rest well, and to have other men around them."

The Skibbereen group provides proof that when men are given structure, challenge, and connection, they don't shy away.

So onwards and upwards for 'Be Undeniable'. It's making a remarkable difference to many men's lives, of all ages, in West Cork and they have plans to go nationwide.

Andrew welcomes queries on how to set up a 'Be Undeniable' group in your area and how to inform others with a genuine interest in forming one for men of all ages, run by men, in your community.

E: andrewdesmond3@gmail.com

M: 087-955 3955.

W: beundeniable.online/

You can get a good idea of the group's activities on Andrew's Facebook page: [facebook.com/andrew.desmond.7](https://www.facebook.com/andrew.desmond.7)

“They can’t wait to come again the following week.”

Parents of children with additional needs generally haven’t realised that boxing is an avenue open to them

BY OWEN RYAN

For four years now, children with additional needs have been given the opportunity to try boxing, through a programme known as the High Five Boxing Academy.

It has been driven by Dubliner Paddy Dingle, who has coached Irish international teams and been involved with the sweet science since he was a boy of 12.

“What happened was I was in England with an international schoolboy team. I met a man over there from Bristol, he had a gym where the weigh-ins were being done. He was helping people with dementia and I had the idea that I’d love to help additional needs children,” says Paddy.

He is a father of two himself, neither of whom have additional needs, but all the impetus for High Five came from him.

“I had to get it passed by the IABA (Irish Athletic Boxing Association) because it’s a boxing academy. I went to some of the Central Council people, I gave them the programme and they backed me. I was asked what I was going to call it. The Special Olympics were on at the time, and all the guys and girls were giving high fives, and I just thought ‘High Five’.”

He says that parents of children with additional needs generally haven’t realised that boxing is an avenue open to them, but that once they arrive the sport seems to offer greater benefits than others.

“It’s not about contact; it’s about kids doing boxing techniques, hitting the bag, skipping, doing games. We have gone into many schools doing the programme and teachers have told us that for motor skills and behavioural skills, it’s one of the best things.

“I don’t want to put down the other sports; great sports like rugby and GAA and soccer do additional needs, but they reckon that for some reason the boxing seems to help these children quicker than the other sports. I don’t know why, it might be the one-to-one contact, but there is some reason for it.”

It also provides a role for young people who do not have additional needs themselves, and aids their personal development also.

“We have a kind of a buddy system, children around 16 or 17 who give a dig out and they’re learning life skills too. Some of them will be parents in years to come, they may have children with additional needs. It’s all to do with people volunteering, although you have to be vetted and do a course, you can’t just come in

and start tomorrow.”

Become coaches themselves

In time he wants to provide an opportunity, for those that are able, to do a little bit of coaching themselves, and bring the programme onto more children with special needs.

“Some of them, you could hire them, let them have their first job and they could go into schools and act as coaches to other kids with additional needs. The parents would see their child with additional needs going into a boxing academy, and all of a sudden they’re in a role like an instructor, going around teaching children with additional needs.

He would like to see many more young people benefitting and envisages children coaching other children, with support from adult coaches.

Volunteers can make this grow

Each group that takes part in High Five is a little bit different, he has found.

“Every class is different. You are dealing with all different types of children on the spectrum, and you have to cater for all kinds of needs. Some children wouldn’t like touching, some would have to wear earphones, have a sanctuary room, things like that. It’s a project that can grow across the country, all it needs is volunteers and I have to say hats off to every person who gives their time to it across the country. It’s about the children and their parents at the end of the day.”

Parents also benefit

He likes meeting the mothers and fathers of the children, and feels it offers them some benefits also.

“You start developing a rapport with the parents too, they’re there when the classes are taking place. It’s breathing space for them, some of them have very hard stories, they can’t sleep at night with children jumping around and breaking up stuff. It’s just amazing, the boxing sort of quiets them down, and that’s what it’s all about.”



• Paddy Dingle in the ring with a participant.



• Paddy Dingle with a participant and famous boxing promoter Eddie Hearn.

The magic of sport

One of the great joys of coaching at any level in any sport is seeing people make progress, and that’s something Paddy loves about High Five.

“You see the benefits it is having for those children. They are making friends with other children that probably would never have made friends before. They become little buddies, they form their own little group.

“You can have a really scared child coming in, they walk into a boxing club, don’t know what they’re walking into, see boxing rings, see boxers, see kids they don’t know. In four or five weeks they’re all playing together and joining in together.

“That’s the magic of it, they can’t wait to come again the following week.”

More information

More information on the High Five Boxing Academy is available on [their Facebook page](#).

Or visit: boxingireland.ie (formerly known as the Irish Amateur Boxing Association – it rebranded in January).

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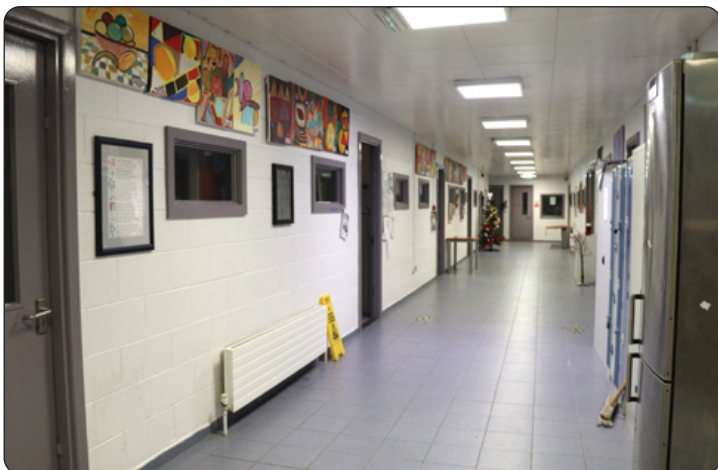
Art and education in prison



The photos here are from a visit by Changing Ireland to Limerick Prison to learn about its library and education services.

- TOP & LEFT: Limerick Prison and signage from outside.
- BELOW: Anita Dooley (back row, centre) with colleagues working in Limerick Prison's school and library.
- FACING PAGE: Artwork by students.

PHOTOS: ALLEN MEAGHER



More supports on release needed to make investment in people worthwhile

By Allen Meagher

As a journalistic endeavour, reporting from prison is complicated by the fact that – understandably – prisoners cannot be named. As such, the two main prisoners I spoke to will be referred to by pseudonyms Jim and Joe.

To find out why I ended up visiting Limerick Prison read the back page.

Head teacher Anita Dooley said that the school within prison has a 70 to 80 percent engagement rate among the prison population which is around 280 prisoners.

QQI levels are very important to them, she said.

Jim said about the courses: “They put me on a path for life. And when I get out of here, I have plans.”

Joe said of the prison experience, “If you give respect, you get respect.”

That was very important, all agreed.

Prison students win Gaisce awards

Every year the school has 15 participants seeking bronze, silver or gold Gaisce medals. The week before I visited one of the students won a Gaisce award. I met the prisoner who won the gold – and he was chuffed.

Anita said the Education Department is linked in with the Youth Services Programme. It ties in with the Red Cross and other projects. They link in with Limerick Prisons Education Unit for providing courses. They offer courses from QQI levels 1 to 5 and prisoners can earn certificates. At present, four prisoners are doing Open University.

Anita said, “Limerick Prison has been very supportive of the school. We're rated very highly on the management plan.”

As Jim said, “School gets you off the landing.”

Both agreed there was “a good vibe in the library and in the school”.

It is good to have ambition.

Joe said he plans to become a professional boxer when he leaves here. He's been boxing since the age of five and he hopes to win competitions when he gets out. He has also been making up for a lost education while behind bars.

The first prisoner I met was most welcoming. He shook my hand, gave me a warm welcome, and spoke up for the place.

The first prisoner I met, Jim, was most welcoming. He shook my hand, gave me a warm welcome, and spoke up for the place and was positive, yet real.

He said: “You learn here to look out for each other and to be kind. It's the little things we have that matter.”

They talked about chocolate and how some people just don't have any money.

Prisoners are allowed to get money sent into them, but not all prisoners have somebody to send money into them. So they do look out for each other.

Anita gave an example from the bingo held the previous day. The prisoner who won the bingo shared his prize, which was chocolates, with another prisoner who he knew had no money.

Loneliness of prison

The wit and banter in Limerick prison keeps people going, but they are still locked up for an awful long time each day.

Jim said, “I don't like being in prison. I find it very hard to tell the truth.”

He said, “It can be very lonesome.”

The school and all its services closed for two weeks over Christmas. Easter and summer are also tough when staff take leave.

Art/Craft Room

Arts and craftwork created by the talented inmates of Limerick Prison.



(Continued from previous page)

“It’s hard time for the prisoners when they don’t have any school to go to,” said Anita. “They’re also supposed to get out in the yard three times a day, but it could be just once a day if staffing is an issue, and that means spending more time in the cells,” she said.

“Not all of us are bad”

Joe quietly but firmly pointed out that not all people behind bars have done dreadful things. “Not all of us are bad” was how he put it.

Also, for many of them, as Jim pointed out, it was the circumstances they grew up in that led to them being here. Jim explained that he wished he could turn back the clock, but one regrettable incident led to him getting a prison sentence.

Art & craft exhibits

While meeting staff and prisoners, I felt proud for one young man in particular who showed me his artwork and read from a speech to mark the opening of the craft fair in the school library. Visiting ETB personnel were due to meet the prisoners and hear the same speech that afternoon.

I was told the best work had been taken back to people’s cells, but what was on view was fantastic so pure works of art definitely live behind Limerick Prison’s high walls.

Support drops to near zero on release

There is a gap in the services and supports when prisoners are freed.

I learned that there are great services provided for prisoners while they’re in prison, but when they get out there is very little. Anita said because of that people can fall back into their old ways.

So, while there is great investment in education and support services for prisoners while they’re in prison, sometimes the good work is lost because it’s not followed up after people leave prison.

“We’re linked in with the Further

Education and Training Boards,” she said, but that is not enough. She lamented that there are not better links with groups such as Limerick Build that are keen to support prisoners when they are released.

“We don’t join up the dots when it comes to community liaison and development,” she said.

Rehabilitation works, said Anita, when it’s funded properly.

Many have no family support on release

Jim and Joe both appreciated having family to support them after they are released. They agreed with Anita when she said, “A lot of people have no family to support them, no home to go to and nothing to do or look forward to when they get out.” She said they can easily “fall back on old ways”.

That is where Damien Quinn, founder of Spéire Nua, is doing great work. He often arranges meetings with newly released prisoners - to link in with them and see about getting them work if that’s what they want.

“They shouldn’t even get an education”

Prejudiced views often heard in public, including from some people Anita knows, would argue that prisoners should not be entitled to an education in prison. They should be doing forced labour, some would say.

She abhors such views.

“Are we for retribution or for rehabilitation?” she asks. Those views also do not add up, she says, pointing to research and U.S. experience where the recidivist rate is very high among prisoners who were jailed solely as retribution.

Ireland is different. We seek to rehabilitate people.

And Limerick Prison – all in all – was clean, friendly, fun and bright. Yes, there were a lot of locks and doors, but it did not feel as oppressive as I expected. I was only in for three hours in fairness.



NEWS BRIEFS

Social Inclusion Forum 2026

This year's Social Inclusion Forum (SIF) will be held on May 27 in The Aviva Stadium in Dublin.

The SIF is part of the Government's structures to monitor and evaluate the State's strategy to address poverty and achieve social inclusion. This annual event is part of the institutional structures put in place to underpin the implementation, monitoring and on-going development of the Government's social inclusion agenda. It provides a forum for discussion on issues, in particular for people experiencing poverty and exclusion and the organisations that work with them. The Forum also provides for engagement between officials from government departments, community and voluntary organisations and people experiencing poverty.

Do we look after asylum-seekers?

Report raises concerns



A new report called 'The Reception Gap' raises concerns for people living in state-provided emergency accommodation, giving a voice to residents about the conditions and lack of oversight.

It says that "lasting harm" is caused to people by "prolonged congregated living in Ireland's international protection system".

The 170-page report by support group Doras compares living conditions for asylum-seekers in permanent accommodation with the experiences of those who are placed in emergency accommodation.

As Doras also says, "While permanent centres have faced scrutiny in recent years, emergency accommodation, which now houses the majority of international protection applicants, remains largely unexamined, weakly regulated, and without independent oversight."

"Emergency accommodation was meant to be temporary," it points out, calling for reform and for full inspections, national standards, and for all asylum-seeker accommodation "to operate within a social care framework".

"Children seeking safety deserve space to grow, and families and individuals deserve a chance to thrive," says Doras.

You can download the report from: <https://doras.org/>

Inside Limerick Prison Library

Prisoners tell of pride in their craft and artwork

By Allen Meagher

Anita Dooley is employed by Limerick and Clare Education and Training Board as the head teacher in Limerick Prison and I am grateful to her for recently inviting Changing Ireland to visit Limerick prison.

She wanted to show some of the fabulous arts and craftwork produced by prisoners and to discuss their educational pursuits with them. The people I met included dedicated and talented individuals who have won gold in the President's Gaisce Awards. In all cases, they were most welcoming and engaging.

"Show the same respect to every prisoner you meet that you would afford to your mother, father or brother"
- Prison chaplain

Prior to visiting, I phoned my Aunt Margaret, because she, until retirement recently, worked as a prison chaplain in London, often meeting young Irish prisoners there.

She said without hesitation: "When you go in you must show the same respect to every prisoner you meet that you would afford to your mother, father or brother (I have no sisters). No less."

With that solid advice in mind, I went through the same sad entry route followed by the relatives of prisoners. Being part of a community project based in Moyross means that now I have seen what many others in our area have seen – visiting relatives.

I really felt for one mother from a rural area visiting her young daughter who had become involved at a low level in illegal drugs distribution and was now behind bars. Our reasons for being there were different.

Some prisoners I had known who spent time in Limerick Prison were anti-war activists who had climbed the fence at Shannon Airport to make their views known. Some years ago, I protested outside with others in solidarity with them. I had tried to imagine what it was like for them inside.

The majority of prisoners, however, come from poverty-stricken socio-economic areas.

Nowadays, although the prison facilities have been upgraded, overcrowding is a bigger issue than ever. I did not see the accommodation areas on this visit, but prisoners talked about it. They did their best to make little of it, despite the obviously cramped living conditions. In almost every way, they talked up their experience of prison life and spoke about the rapport among prisoners.

"It is not like you see on television," they said.

With their big welcome and good spirits they made me feel very comfortable on my short visit.

I would like to thank everyone I met and congratulate all involved among the teaching staff and the students whose work I was privileged to see.

To those competing for Gaisce Awards, best of luck! To those sitting Leaving Cert subjects, best of luck! To those already released since we met, best of luck!

See also photos and report on pages 26-27.



• Paintings and arts and craft work by inmates who attend Limerick Prison's Library and Education Service.

