

CHANGING IRELAND



NOT FOR PROFIT

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

WHY PEACE - LOVING PEOPLE TURN TO ACTIVISM:



"Drip-drip-drip"

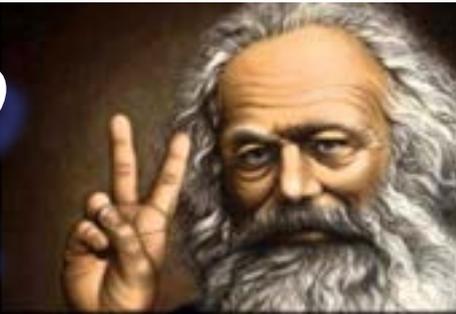
WELCOME FOR MOVE TO END HARDSHIP IN DIRECT PROVISION

VOLUNTEERS IN TESTING TIMES



• Volunteers wearing the required personal protective equipment at Tallaght Testing Centre.

READ OUR COVID-19 VOLUNTEER DIARIES



INSIDE - pages 11-15



This publication is produced by Changing Ireland Community Media CLG, an independent, not-for-profit NGO funded through the Department of Rural and Community Development.

LOCKDOWN LOTTERY

Our two volunteers were the only ones keeping public diaries

- Extracts from Harry's ups and downs, pages 28-30

Join us in retracing the steps of two volunteers, Harry and Ciara, who kept public diaries during the Covid-19 lockdown. Apart from people laid low with Covid-19, or in quarantine for a couple of weeks, nobody else in Ireland kept a live public diary throughout the lockdown. It was published daily on our website.

Who are these two volunteers?

Harry works for the fire service and his adrenalin was rolling as he anticipated the worst. He was already living a kind of semi-lockdown as a retained firefighter.

Ciara is a volunteer on environmental projects and working with people on the margins. During lockdown she became a carer. She works from home.

Both have ample experience in activism and volunteering. They like to party when times are good.

Ciara and Harry tell of their ups and downs and how lockdown changed them. Their writing also tracked how life in Ireland changed over two months.

Their conclusions are encouraging and they each were surprised how keeping a diary had a positive impact on their ability to cope.

We feature samples of Harry's writing in this edition (Ciara's will feature next edition). You can of course check out all their diary entries at: www.changingireland.ie

Our diarists remain anonymous. Perhaps one day we will publish a book from their work and they may step forward.



Editor Allen Meagher's account of lockdown - pages 31-33



Compassion is our new currency



The nameless volunteer on our front cover symbolises the many who stepped forward to volunteer in a time of acute emergency. Not all got to don a mask

as thankfully the tsunami was reduced to a storm surge. We locked down in time. Of course, the pandemic is going nowhere fast.

While the early days were scary, it was reassuring to see tens of thousands of people seeking to volunteer. People appreciated we truly were/are in a time of national and international emergency. People were/are brave.

Everyone who stepped forward, or wished to (dependable older volunteers were obliged to cocoon) deserves a round of applause. They almost overwhelmed the government with their goodwill.

The great cause for celebration is obviously that so many lives were saved. Only last March, a death toll of 80,000 to

100,000 people was seriously considered. What volunteers and community groups did is recounted in part in these pages.

Thankfully, community is strong in Ireland. Just think of the GAA's reach. Where community is weak, there is an awareness among voluntary groups, charities, local development organisations, religious groups and state agencies.

And that's before we mention neighbours. Most volunteering took place in ad-hoc ways within communities between people who know each other.

Meanwhile, there was compassion shown for those on the margins - through rent freezes, eviction bans, Covid-19 unemployment supports and so on.

By comparison, sandwiched as we are between Trump's hate and Johnson's populism, Ireland's light shone bright.

While we can celebrate with just cause, lessons must be learned across government, among agencies and at grassroots level, right down to the many community centres run by committees with a high age profile.

What would we do differently if we had our time again?

Now we have time to think, let's accept that there must be ways for older people to mind themselves and still volunteer. I think of nationwide classes traditionally run by older people for asylum-seekers and immigrants wishing to learn English. Incidentally, some residents in Direct Provision living in dreadfully cramped conditions were among the many to volunteer. Some made masks. Some entered the health service.

While nobody in DP has died from Covid-19 as far as I am aware, their situation demands urgent attention and, thankfully, the new government acknowledges this.

Compassion is our new currency. The more we have and the more we spend, the better for the whole country.

Allen Meagher

FILE A REPORT FOR US!

If you believe in Community Development and enjoy writing, why not file a report for us about your community project and what makes it unique. 300-400 words is plenty (and a photo if possible). Certain criteria apply. Your first point of contact should be the editor.



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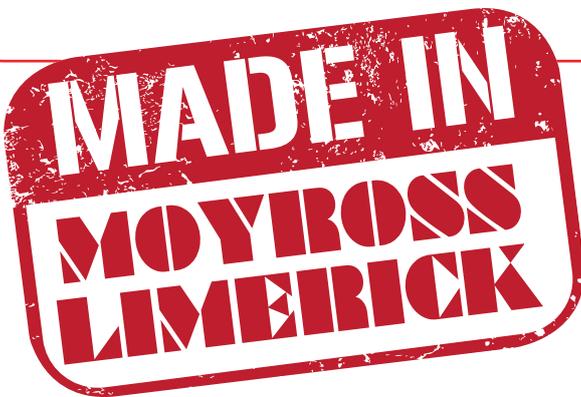
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DISCLAIMER

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by Allen Meagher | Nov 21, 2019
-  Seán Óg Ó hAilpín - 'I was a lost kid and they put me on a steady path'
by Allen Meagher | Nov 19, 2019
-  New-look ChangingIreland.ie launched by Minister Michael Ring
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-  ReStart: The social enterprise helping asylum seekers feel at home
by Kirsty Tobin | Sep 12, 2019
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by Eoin Murphy | Sep 10, 2019
-  Are pub hubs the answer to a lack of community spaces?
by Pat Kennedy | Aug 29, 2019

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Local Employment Service (LES) Mediator	Community Liaison Worker
DATE ADDED 17th August, 2020	DATE ADDED 12th August, 2020
DEADLINE 12pm on 4th September, 2020	DEADLINE 5pm on 4th September, 2020
 South Dublin County Partnership Páirtíocht Chontae Átha Cliath Theas	 ROSCOMMON LEADER PARTNERSHIP
Advert	Advert
Job description	Job description
VISIT WEBSITE	VISIT WEBSITE



Why peace-loving people turn to activism:

BY ALLEN MEAGHER

A well-intentioned volunteer initiative to welcome asylum-seekers housed by the Department of Justice in West Clare found itself pushed to complain at the highest level during the Covid-19 lockdown.

Last year, 35 men were given accommodation in a two-star hostel in the town of Miltown Malbay and arrived without knowing a thing about the place.

They were given a great welcome and soon found themselves ceili-dancing, cooking and even swimming in the wild Atlantic with members of a rapidly established local welcome group.

However, the welcome group's focus switched from support and volunteering to hardline activism this year as it emerged the people they befriended felt they were being woefully treated in their privately-run, State-funded accommodation.

The problems arose before Covid-19 struck and were exasperated by the virus's arrival.

The Miltown Malbay Welcome Group (MMWG) - speaking on behalf of asylum-seekers afraid at first to speak out themselves - wrote to then justice minister Charlie Flanagan and the matter was later raised in the Dail and Seanad.

The centre was 'The Central Hostel' on the main street of the small seaside town.

Conditions in the former tourist hostel were documented by the residents and the support group. The asylum-seekers said, "We feel like we've been treated like animals and slaves." They thanked the MMWG for making their lives outside the hostel "heaven", compared to the "hell" inside.

Together they highlighted issues including:

- Water running down the walls of bedrooms when the shower on the floor above is turned on.
- Ceilings leaking and water running through light fittings.
- A bedroom shared by two men with no door to the en-suite (no privacy).
- Inadequate heating and hot water during the winter months.
- A curfew placed on residents insisting they be in by 10pm. The residents were all adult men.
- Residents felt the food (described) was substandard.

• A voluntary group set up last year to welcome asylum-seekers to West Clare welcomed the Department of Justice and Equality's decision in August to close the emergency Direct Provision centre.

• On August 12th - the day the closure was announced - the Miltown Malbay Welcome Group thanked Minister Helen McEntee for her prompt action.

• Civil society voices who welcomed the move included Clare PPN's Sarah Clancy, author Ruairi McKiernan, and human rights

The hostel owner, Pat Kelly, told local media the allegations were false.

'Changing Ireland' spoke by phone to Mr Kelly and he was reluctant to talk long enough for us to go through the complaints one-by-one.

"Nobody's complaining here," he said.

It was put to him - even going back to last year - that residents reputedly had to be in their beds by ten o'clock at night.

"That's nonsense, will you," said Mr Kelly. He laughed at the notion.

"I don't want to talk anymore about it," he said, urging us to "contact the Department of Justice."

He repeated this advice and the line went dead.

In a statement issued to local media a few days later, the Department confirmed the centre in Miltown Malbay was to close. We contacted the Department of Justice and Equality - no further details beyond the initial statement were forthcoming.

Before the residents moved out finally, I visited the hostel. The corridors felt narrow, the air stagnant and the rooms confined. Mr Kelly was not available. An asylum-seeker - one of only seven remaining - was packing to



Drip...drip...drip

depart and we spoke briefly. While he had poor English, he was clearly looking forward to moving.

The result of the Department of Justice's decision - relief for the asylum-seekers and the volunteer group that supported them:

"We enjoyed a hugely successful integration with the asylum seekers, something which we are very proud of. Although we are saddened to think that we are losing the men who have added so much to our small community," the MMWG said, adding that it was "relieved" that the requests by the residents to be relocated had been approved. The group intends to stay in touch with the former Miltown Malbay residents.

The MMWG was full of praise for new Minister for Justice and Equality, Helen McEntee, for responding to their concerns quickly and effectively.

"We want to thank Minister Helen McEntee for acknowledging our calls that the centre should be closed. She acted swiftly and with compassion."

The MMWG congratulated the residents for thinking of others and for their "courage" in speaking out: "They collectively decided that they had a responsibility to ensure that the Irish Government knew of conditions in the Centre so that others would not be placed there."

The residents' concluded their letter saying, "We are afraid that this letter can interfere in our case. But we cannot take this anymore." (Letter in full: <https://bit.ly/MiltownDP>).



• Left: Still from a video of a light bulb leaking water. Above: Volunteers in Miltown Malbay became activists. PHOTOS BY MILTOWN MALBAY WELCOME GROUP.



• Inside and outside The Central Hostel before the last residents were transferred. PHOTOS BY: A. MEAGHER

DEPT. OF JUSTICE STATEMENT:

In a statement released to local media, including Clare FM, the Department of Justice and Equality pointed out the following:

“Restrictions on transfers were necessary as a precaution during the pandemic. While transfers can now take place in limited circumstances, our ability to respond to transfer requests is contingent on public health advice and subject to availability within the accommodation system.”

Regarding the centre in Miltown Malbay, it said: “In line with the Department’s policy of moving residents from emergency accommodation to dedicated centres as soon as places become available, the residents in Miltown Malbay have been informed this week of their new accommodation arrangements.”

“Following the completion of transfers, the Department does not intend to continue its use of this emergency location.”

PRIORITY

It added: “Our stated aim is to reduce the reliance on emergency accommodation but given existing demand, that can only be achieved through increasing the number of dedicated Direct Provision bed spaces. The pandemic has impacted the Department’s ability to open new centres. However, the sourcing and provision of suitable accommodation to facilitate independent living for residents remains a priority.”

Government plans to end direct provision

Cathal Crowe, TD, was one of those who raised the treatment of asylum-seekers in Miltown Malbay in the Dáil recently. On learning they were to be transferred, he broadcast his thanks to Minister Helen McEntee, to the campaigners, and “to the people of Miltown for showing these people a true Irish welcome”.

Saying he was “very glad” of the commitment in the Programme for Government to end Direct Provision (DP), he said: “DP works on a short-term basis, offering safe shelter to people arriving into Ireland fleeing war, famine, oppression in their homelands. But over the medium to long term, DP is dehumanising and anti-families and young people.”

The new government seeks to replace DP with a new not-for-profit approach with human rights at its core. The Programme for Government (PfG) states:

“We are committed to ending the Direct Provision system and will replace it with a new International Protection accommodation policy, centred on a not-for-profit approach.

“We are committed to ensuring

that Ireland provides protection to those seeking refuge from conflict and persecution, as is required under international law.”

The PfG says: “This includes vulnerability assessments, the right to work, the ability to apply for driver licences and bank accounts, an independent inspection process, measures to reduce the length of time in processing decisions, mental health services, and the training of managers of Direct Provision Centres.”

The acceptance in the PfG that DP must be replaced by a more humane, non-profit-driven system follows campaigning for many years by activists.

The ongoing plight of asylum-seekers and refugees is a story we will return to. Our next edition will include an article about and by asylum seekers in Wexford who are supported by Wexford Local Development and others.

Around the country, Family Resource Centres, Public Participation Networks and many other groups lend support.

If you wish to contribute, email: editor@changingireland.ie



UNHCR welcomes publication on Direct Provision

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has welcomed the publication in August of new draft standards for direct provision centres. It also now believes non-profit organisations in Ireland should consider providing accommodation services for those seeking sanctuary.

The Department of Justice and Equality currently provides accommodation and supports to over 7,000 people under direct provision - a system due to be reformed. The 73 page draft standards report was published for public consultation on August 16th.

Enda O'Neill, head of UNHCR Ireland, said: "As the government continues to implement the recommendations of the 2015 McMahon report, the creation of a thorough and robust system of formalised standards will raise

standards and ensure consistency in the provision of services to people living in direct provision centres."

"These national standards will be used for the purpose of inspecting all centres and set objective benchmarks for all those working in the area. A companion document will also set out in plain English what the standards mean in practice for residents of accommodation centres so that they are aware of their rights and can make suggestions or complaints without fear of adverse consequences," he said.

The draft standards were developed by a multi-disciplinary team of civil servants working with a number of NGOs and UNHCR. They describe how accommodation centres should ensure dignified living conditions and provide high-quality services which meet the needs of residents.

This 'person centred' approach,

which emphasises the rights and diversity of each resident, will inform the tendering process for future accommodation centres and be used to create contractual obligations for each service provider.

IRISH NON-PROFITS COULD TENDER

The UNHCR called on the government to now move forward with the creation of an independent inspectorate, as recommended by the 2015 McMahon report.

This would be "a significant step forward in the protection of the rights of people living in direct provision centres," said O'Neill.

The UNHCR believes it would instill confidence in the standard and quality of services provided. It also said it "hoped that its creation will give confidence to more organisations, including not-for-

profits, to consider engaging in the tendering process."

"Ireland is unusual among EU Member States in that NGOs and civil society organisations do not operate accommodation centres for asylum-seekers," said O'Neill.

"As the 2015 McMahon report noted, the potential benefit of the not-for-profit model is that profits are reinvested in the facility rather than paid out to shareholders."

Feedback is welcome from the public. The draft standards document can be downloaded here: <http://bit.ly/DPdraftstandards>

• Below: A poster from Monaghan County Council's 'Know Me' booklet published in 2018 to combat stereotyping, racism and discrimination. Full report in Issue 60 in our archive at: www.changingireland.ie



My name is Rala. I fled home in Sudan after the civil war that had raged for years finally came to my village. I chose to flee south to the Ugandan border. I turned into a waking nightmare. Everywhere I walked I saw bones, the terrible smell of bodies rotting. My husband was killed. They caught him and tied him to a tree. Then they beat him and they set fire to his body. My journey ended in Ireland. I am an Asylum seeker. I live in a direct provision centre while I wait for the government to process my application for asylum and decide if I can stay and become a Refugee. I receive bed, breakfast, lunch, and an evening meal and a weekly payment of €21.60. It's lonely but I am safe. I am so grateful to Ireland for giving me peace and safety. I do hope I can stay. People sometimes shout things at me on the street. They tell me to go back to where I came from. If only they knew I would love to go home.

My name is *Rala* and I am an **asylum seeker**

My message to YOU, **'KNOW ME'** not the Stereotype

"SCAMMING THE SYSTEM OVER HERE IT'S RIDICULOUS"
"WE SHOULD LOOK AFTER OUR OWN FIRST"

DISCUSSION: Anti-racism

COMMUNITY WORKERS CAN HELP ERADICATE RACISM

BY CHLOE CAREY

Community Work Ireland (CWI) held its AGM remotely, on July 14th, and used it as an opportunity to discuss anti-racism work in Ireland.

Three speakers presented their experiences of racism, their ideas and their suggestions for community workers specifically to help eradicate racism.

REPORT

Newly appointed **Senator Eileen Flynn** represents the Traveller community and comes from a background of community development work. She discussed the importance of community work, saying she would not be the woman she is today or have attended Maynooth University had it not been for community development work.

She talked about collective action and the usefulness of spaces like the CWI for people to work together to create changes in policy and help stop discrimination in Ireland.

She said that she's "tired of fighting against racism" and wants to shift her attention to fighting for equality and she encouraged others to follow suit.

The second speaker, **Ruben Hambakachere, from Cultúr Migrant Centre**, regularly campaigns to end direct provision. He said fighting for inclusion is "not a single project" done on an individual basis, but through collective action. It is also something one has to do everyday, as anti-racism is a habit.

He stressed the importance of supporting ethnic minorities to take up leadership roles, as it challenges the stereotypes and shifts the narrative.

The final speaker of the meeting was **Anastasia Crickley**, who firstly pointed out that there is no such thing as race and that the very belief that race exists gives permission for racism to take place. Instead, she refers to ethnicity and ethnic minorities.

She challenged community workers to "be part of the difference not the difficulty". She posed three questions to attendees at the meeting:

- Who do you work with and why?
- What do you need to stop doing and why?
- What do you need to start doing and why?



• Anastasia Crickley speaking last year in Ballyhaunis. For more: www.communityworkireland.ie

PHOTO: A. MEAGHER

She wants community workers to self-reflect and ensure their practices are anti-racist. She believes there is a limited window of opportunity to ensure community workers are part of the difference, and that resources need to be applied to create conditions for justice and equality.

She highlighted the importance of language in people's perspective of ethnic minorities. For example, Anastasia is against the word "vulnerable" to describe a (socio-economic) group of people as she feels it creates a charity mentality and seeks no accountability from those who have created such vulnerability.

When asked for an alternative term which could be utilised, she said she uses the term "marginalised" as it recognises that a group of people are actively excluded from society. However, not covered by Ms Crickley, which would be interesting to note, is how a marginalised group feels about the term "vulnerable".

OPINION

From my perspective, a member of generation Z, a lot of interesting points and opinions were discussed and, given the current political climate, now more than ever we need to have more of these conversations.

Thankfully, discussing the topic of racism isn't reserved solely for community workers or people working in that discipline. Due to the Black Lives Matter movement, more and more young people are having these conversations. We have learned that it is not enough to not be racist; we must be actively anti-racist.

You can see this ideal presenting in the younger generations as millennials began to express their unhappiness with (members of) older generations being racist. That philosophy was passed down to the next generation, Gen Z, who have begun not just expressing unhappiness, but expressing outrage and challenging those who are racist, whether that be a stranger, friend, or family member. Millennials paved the way for a new wave of activism over racism and broke the mould, but I think it is gen Z who will be the ones to shape a new mould.

As a Traveller woman, Senator Flynn was “empowered by community development”

BY ÁINE RYNNE

Aine Rynne also attended the online panel discussion organised by Community Work Ireland on anti-racism. Her observations add to what Chloe (left) recorded:

Senator Eileen Flynn’s opening words shaped the conversation to follow. She said, “Racism in Ireland has become normal and what is needed is collective action in challenging racism and discrimination, in order to change policy in this country.”

She pointed out that, as a Traveller woman, she “wouldn’t be the woman she is today without being empowered by community development”.

What was really evident by her contribution was just how significant her recent selection as the first Traveller to become

a senator really is. She has a clearly passionate and proud approach to her activism with an unwavering determination to represent her community to the best of her ability.

Reuben Hambakachere from Cúlur Migrant Centre spoke about the need for spaces and platforms for ethnic minorities and how integrating into Irish society without these in place can make it very difficult.

Anastasia Crickley spoke about racism from a more academic point of view and spoke about creating an economy of belonging, which is needed to address the issue head on. What racism does is create “a toxic global discourse” because it divides and marginalises and legitimises hatred.

She criticised the constant narrative of assessing “local needs” and said we also need to pay closer attention to the use of language when talking about racism.

Eileen Flynn picked up on this point about language asking Anastasia about the use of words, in particular the word ‘vulnerable’ when describing the impact of racism on minority groups. Crickley responded by proposing the use of the word ‘marginalised’ instead of ‘vulnerable’ as it is an active verb describing ‘being pushed out’.

The discussion was really engaging and brought



varied approaches and theories to the table. Racism is not new, yet we are still coming up with challenging strategies to deal with it on a societal level.

• ABOVE: Senator Eileen Flynn on Twitter: @LoveIsolidarity

Popular Poem: Chloe's spoken words on body shaming go viral

A survey of 2,500 teenagers by Reachout and the Irish Examiner in 2017 found that 72% of them found body image issues caused them difficulties. Chloe Carey from Tralee was one of those struggling at the time.

Now studying sociology and criminology at NUI Maynooth, Ms Carey published a “spoken word” video on the subject in May of this year that went viral.

She writes: “Body image has been a huge source of mental health issues for me. I think a big reason for this is due to lack of media representation and societal standards.”



Her poem ‘The Serial Burglar’ reflects on that: “I hope you can find this poem relatable and perhaps it’ll even help you and make you feel less alone, as that is my true goal with this. I also want to acknowledge that men experience similar body image problems, but it didn’t feel right to talk about - I don’t want to write about anything that I’m not qualified to write about.”

She put a lot of hard work into her spoken words and viewers didn’t let her down. The video has been widely shared. Join in!

Listen to Chloe’s spoken words here: <https://bit.ly/Chloespoem>

CASE STUDY

Marie's stories of old have legs

- Tale written for a friend in a nursing home led to a national initiative promoted by volunteer centres

One woman's wish to create a diversion for a nursing home resident she was friends with grew during the lockdown to become a national initiative. As we now know, Covid-19 has had a lethal impact on nursing homes in particular.

It began when Marie Conlon, who volunteers as chairperson of the Kildare branch of the Alzheimer Society of Ireland, started writing stories about past traditions and events for her friend.

When nursing home staff heard and became interested, to Marie's delight, they began reading the the stories aloud to small groups of residents. The group afterwards discussed the stories, adding tales of their own.

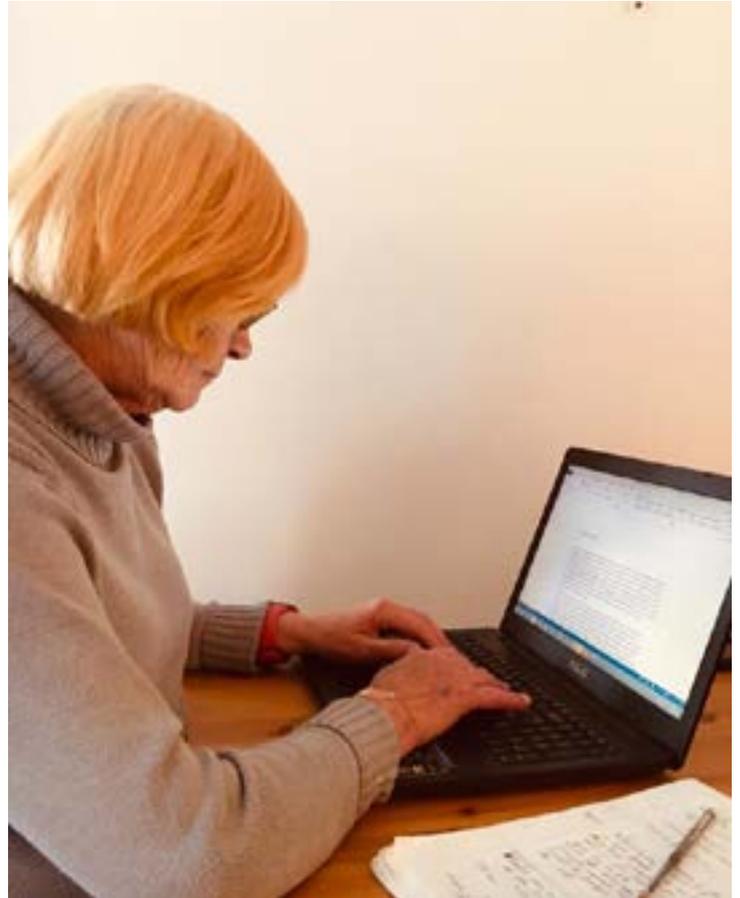
It became a weekly phenomena with topics covered by Marie including 'The Big Freeze', 'The Mission Mass', 'When Television Arrived' and 'The Wake'. As demand grew, Marie invited her friends to contribute stories and the project took on a life of its own.

The Kildare Volunteer Centre became involved. It began to collate the stories for distribution electronically to nursing homes around the area. The VC also began to share the idea with other volunteer centres, asking them to seek local stories to engage nursing home residents in their own communities.

And so a national story-writing, reading and discussion initiative was born.

Mick Power, manager of Kildare Volunteer Centre, said, "The benefits include opening up new conversations among residents. It encourages people to reminisce about times past and have some quality time away from thinking about these disturbing times. It also gives them something new to look forward to each week."

For more information, contact Mr Power. T: 045-449156. M: 086-8865266. E: mick@volunteerkildare.ie W: www.volunteerkildare.ie



• Marie Conlon turns an old story into new for nursing home residents.



• **LEFT:** South Dublin Libraries staff member Aoife reads live online for children. Across the country, during lockdown, 'Storytime' videos by our libraries were viewed 648,135 times.

‘Hope for Laois’ project sprung up the second local needs rose

- Volunteers spurred by desire to give back

At the height of the lockdown, the ‘Hope for Laois’ project provided weekly food hampers to over 130 families, elderly and self-isolating individuals across the county.

It was inundated with volunteers as well as requests for help and temporarily opened a packing centre on the main street in Portlaoise in a premises provided by a local church.

‘Hope for Laois’ sprung up as a collaborative community response to Covid-19 involving local community activists, volunteers, community groups, local businesses, churches and religious groups, agencies and a local homeless support group.

Bolaji Adeyanju, one of the organisers, said, “The question was - Do we fold our hands and just watch people, and not pay attention to their needs and wants? Or do something. So we said ‘Let’s do this for the community - let’s show we’re all in this together.’”

He said the project quickly grew to support families in Portlaoise, Mountmellick, Portarlinton,



• Bolaji Adeyanju.

Clonaslee, Mounrath, Kilcavan, Abbeyleix and Rathdowney.

“We had so many volunteers,” he said, paying tribute to the households they supported.

He said families showed appreciation for anything they got and never asked for too much.

SUPPORT FOR VOLUNTEERS

Initially, Laois Volunteering Information Service helped out when the local activists approached them. It advised on best practice, on insurance cover and on safeguarding procedures. It also assisted by helping in recruiting,



• Hope for Laois Volunteers and Laois Partnership staff at work.

interviewing and screening of the volunteers involved.

Laois Volunteering is managed by Laois Partnership and it connected Bolaji and fellow organisers with staff in the Partnership and with national charity FoodCloud.

Through the Partnership, the Hope project was able to avail of PPE, hand sanitiser and the support of Partnership development workers who also packed and delivered hampers and hot meals every week.

At the same time, FoodCloud ensured that a consistent supply of

fresh food and essential products were provided for distribution in hampers. Volunteers from Laois Civil Defence travelled to Galway each week to collect the goods from FoodCloud.

REACHING ALL

One of the project’s main aims was to be certain nobody in need was let go hungry during the lockdown.

To ensure this, the project linked in with community development workers employed through the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme, with

Family Resource Centre workers, Tusla staff, and with volunteers from Portlaoise Action to Homelessness (Path). The Path group received special praise from the activists.

With the easing of COVID-19 restrictions, Hope for Laois wound down operations on Friday, June 26th.

In closing, Mr. Adeyanju said, “I wish to thank all the volunteers from all walks of life. They were amazing for the support they have given. Without them, Hope for Laois would not have been possible.”

COMMUNITY HUBS

Libraries kept delivering

• *Libraries pride themselves on being community hubs and they fulfilled this role in a multitude of ways.*

BY PATRICIA MCDONNELL*

When the government announced the closure of all public buildings on March 12th due to Covid-19, neither librarians nor users were certain what form the public library service would take in the months to come. But, as it transpired, it actually opened libraries up to a whole new audience and made existing members aware of an array of services which they had not used before.

One of the initial challenges was that many librarians were redeployed to assist with the Community Call helplines.

Despite this, the libraries continued to provide a customer service via telephone and email.

Another challenge was that physical access to libraries was no longer possible, so access to library online services became crucial.

Changes were implemented which allowed people to register online as full library members, and this resulted in an upsurge in membership and an increased demand for online services, particularly newspapers, magazines, language courses and online learning.

To address the unprecedented demand the Department of Rural and Community Development invested €400,000 in additional eBooks and eAudiobooks.

Libraries also created their own online content to entertain and educate during the lockdown - from Lego classes to virtual coding. They also ran STEAM workshops - covering aspects of science, technology, engineering, the arts and mathematics.

The onset of Covid-19 also impacted on the 'Spring Into Storytime' reading programme which is held in libraries nationwide every April. As this was not possible this year due to the restrictions, the library sector responded by delivering the entire programme online instead. The results were outstanding, with 1,045 storytime videos being viewed 648,135 times - compared to total attendances of 20,500 in the library branches during last year's entire programme.

The libraries pride themselves on being community hubs and they fulfilled this role in a multitude of ways during the crisis. They printed unemployment claim forms and made them available locally for those without printing facilities. They also loaned their 3D printers to assist with the manufacture of PPE.

But it was the delivery service where libraries showed community spirit at its finest. First, protocols for the handling of materials were agreed with the Department of Health to ensure the deliveries would be safe for everyone. Then, the libraries began delivering items such as books, CDs and DVDs to the housebound,



• *Delivering a library parcel in Newbridge.*

women's refuges, Direct Provision centres and other vulnerable communities.

The service was appreciated both by the beneficiaries and the wider community and featured on RTE television reports. As one Kilkenny library user put it to us, "It redeems my faith in people to have this contact with this Library Service at this time".

Many of the delivery services around the country wouldn't have been possible without the volunteers whose selflessness meant that those who were cocooning were not left isolated.

as part of Phase Two of the Government's Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business, firstly by providing a 'Contact and Collect' service in selected branches, before expanding their services to offer browsing services in many branches.

The past few months have seen a lot of changes, but one of the things that has stayed the same is that libraries are still the beating heart of the community.

** Patricia McDonnell works with the Libraries Development Unit in the Department of Rural and Community Development.*

Public library buildings began re-opening

• For the first time, people were allowed to register online as full library members. Thousands of us did just that.



• Library staff in Dungarvan.

“Many of the delivery services around the country wouldn’t have been possible without the volunteers whose selflessness meant that those who were cocooning were not left isolated.”

TOP 10 COURSES IN ROSCOMMON

• These are the top 10 courses accessed through the library service in Roscommon during the national lockdown. • Libraries nationwide have over 500 courses on offer.

While we were closed this is what you were learning with your local Roscommon Library

Rank	Course Title	Icon Description
1	Excel 2019	Excel logo and computer monitor
2	Clutter Control	Cluttered room and a person cleaning
3	Assertiveness	Person with gears and a speech bubble
4	Typing and Keyboarding	Person at a computer keyboard
5	Confidence Building	Person with arms raised in a victory pose
6	Nutrition	Pyramid of food and cutlery
7	Building Self-Esteem	Person with a shield and a trophy
8	Weight Loss Management	Person with a heart and a scale
9	Vegetable Gardening	Person in a garden with vegetables
10	Housekeeping 101	House cleaning supplies like a bucket and broom

• Digital books, e-audiobooks, newspapers, magazines and courses are all free with library membership.

• What else is new? You can sign up for library membership online.

Link - <https://lgma.iii.com/selfreg>

#LibOnline

#takeacloserlook

BEHIND THE SCENES

Department rushed to support volunteers & community groups

BY JENNIFER KELLY*

The Department of Rural and Community Development committed from the beginning of the Covid-19 emergency to supporting the community and voluntary sector and put extensive plans in place to support our communities during these challenging times.

A Community Response Group was quickly established. It comprised of members from various Government Departments alongside a wide spectrum of sectoral representatives. Its overarching purpose was to encourage and facilitate community engagement in response to the needs of vulnerable people, including older people or people with disabilities, living in the community.

ACTION PLAN

With assistance from the Community Response Group, on March 20th the Department published a 'Covid-19 Action Plan'. It set out three areas of initial focus:

1. To let people know how and where they could volunteer - through its partnership with Volunteer Ireland and the network of Volunteer Centres.
2. To provide community supports for older people - by providing funding to ALONE for their crisis telephone support line and follow-through practical supports,
3. The launch of a new email helpdesk facility run by the Department to assist smaller community groups with their queries.

PRACTICAL ADVICE

The Department also produced a 'Covid-19 Communication Pack for Communities' comprising of seven leaflets offering practical advice and information on topics ranging from sensible volunteering to information on community supports and vulnerable persons to the prevention of fraud and theft.

FUNDING THE RESPONSE

The Department subsequently funded measures arising from the Covid-19 Action Plan, including:

- €500,000 for a Volunteer Support

Programme, administered through Volunteer Ireland, to scale up Volunteer Centres during the Covid-19 emergency.

- €200,000 for a Senior Alert Befriending Initiative operated by POBAL in partnership with ALONE. It allowed participants in the popular Senior Alerts scheme the choice to receive calls to check on their wellbeing during the crisis.

- €450,000 for a Covid-19 Community Outreach Programme co-ordinated by The Wheel and Irish Rural Link and supporting 31 Community Champions working with local authorities to ensure all local organisations in every community were linked together.

- €2.5 million for a Covid-19 Emergency Fund - administered by local authorities - for community groups partaking in the 'Community Call'. The 'Community Call' was an unprecedented mobilisation of both State and voluntary resources to combat the effects of Covid-19: coordinating community activity, directing community assistance to where it is needed, and marshalling the volunteering energy of the country.

- €35 million for a Covid-19 Stability Fund to provide immediate, short-term cash flow to qualifying organisations that provide critical services to the most marginalised in society. Funding was to be prioritised for organisations most in need, having seen their trading and/or fundraising income drop significantly during the crisis.

- Also launched was the €5 million Philanthropy Fund 'Innovate Together' which focused on supporting responses to the Covid-19 crisis that require innovative and adaptive solutions to existing and emerging challenges.

SPIRIT

The Government works closely with organisations throughout the community and voluntary sector and is committed to facilitating and supporting the volunteer spirit that is alive in our communities during this period of unprecedented challenge for our country.

How many thousand?

Since March, many thousands of people have volunteered, registering through the I-Vol app, or helping out informally in their own communities, supporting family, friends and neighbours. This response demonstrates that a large number of people are engaging with volunteering, through the network of Volunteer Centres and more informally on the ground.

If you want to get involved in volunteering, details of the network of Volunteer Centres are available at www.volunteer.ie

* Jennifer Kelly works in the Department of Rural and Community Development in the section responsible for Community and Voluntary Supports and Programmes.

VOLUNTEERING



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

'The Community Call' was aimed at everyone of us

The 'Community Call' was described at its launch in March as an unprecedented mobilisation of both state and voluntary resources to combat the effects of COVID-19.

It was funded by government, managed by local authorities and delivered by community groups, staff and local volunteers. With national coverage, it was in place quickly and responded to every genuine call received.

The Community Call was co-ordinated by local authority CEOs who hosted dedicated meetings with community, voluntary and State representatives in their area. The ultimate aim was to respond as best as possible to the needs of people cocooning at home.

In coming up with this plan in a hurry, a template for any future emergency now exists.

Speaking in the Dáil, in June, then minister Michael Ring said:

“While a whole-of-government, co-ordinated approach is the backbone in planning and managing the effects of this emergency, solutions are ultimately implemented at a community level.”

He said, “Because of the partnership approach developed by my Department with the Community and Voluntary Sector, we were well placed to respond quickly and effectively to the challenges presented by the Covid-19 crisis.”

STATE & COMMUNITIES

It is recognised that partnership and collaboration between the community and voluntary sector and the State is key to co-ordinating and responding to the needs of our communities. Such actions ensure that the most vulnerable among us are supported and that people living in the community can continue to have their needs met, particularly when their usual sources of support become unavailable.



• 'Community Call' leaflets were delivered to homes countrywide.

Ensuring no-one went hungry during lockdown

Food redistribution charity FoodCloud partnered with the Irish Local Development Network (ILDN) to establish new food banks rapidly to get food to communities in need during the lockdown.

With onset of social restrictions, FoodCloud and ILDN together examined if they could plug distribution gaps across the country. The ILDN represents 49 not-for-profit Local Development Companies (LDCs) and the collaboration allowed Foodcloud to create 17 new Food Hubs in 15 Counties for those in need.

In two months, the volume of food redistributed by FoodCloud doubled, driven in part by the new collaboration that saw food services rapidly ramped up across the country.

FoodCloud CEO, Iseult Ward, said, “With the economic fallout of Covid-19, there is an increasing demand for food from new sectors of the community. Maintaining operations with our current charity partners was our first priority. But with the increased demand regionally, we created these new on-the-ground partnerships.”

She said ILDN members brought with them



• Cavan Local Development’s networking paid off.

“extensive local contacts and knowledge” while also having the storage “to ensure ongoing distribution to those in need”.

As a result of the rapid scaling up, 28 tonnes of food went directly to 17 LDCs or their partner organisations - supporting an estimated 4,078

individuals weekly across 15 counties.

In other counties existing provision was augmented where necessary via the partnership.

The plan is to continue with the collaboration.

Cavan County Local Development was one of the first to pilot the new partnership and set up eight food hubs across County Cavan.

Its CEO, Terry Hyland, said it was all made possible by “a huge community effort” involving staff and volunteers from LDCs, the local authority, St. Vincent De Paul, the GAA, the Public Participation Network, the Gardai and the Civil Defence.

As a result of this rapid scaling up, Local Development Companies are now working with FoodCloud in 22 counties. New food bank services have been established in counties where this provision was not available and in other counties existing provision was expanded where necessary via the partnership. LDCs are also supplying staff to Food Cloud distribution hubs in Dublin, Galway and Cork.



FoodCloud was established in 2013 by Iseult Ward and Aoibheann O’Brien and it uses technology, warehousing and good relations with community groups, government and with businesses to ensure that surplus food is not dumped, but distributed.

FoodCloud’s ambition is to make food redistribution to charities the norm in Ireland and beyond. Its technological approach connects retailers with food to donate on a daily basis directly with local charities. Meanwhile, its approach to warehousing results in the rescue of large volumes of surplus food and its redistribution to charities and communities across Ireland.

FoodCloud makes use of several government programmes such as Tús (providing labour) and the Community Services Programme. It is also now linked to an EU-wide programme to help people take their first steps out of poverty and social exclusion, namely the Fund for European Aid to the most Deprived (FEAD).

FoodCloud was previously awarded funding from the Social Innovation Fund (which is supported by the Department of Rural and Community Development and AIB).

Non-profits partnered up to create 17 new Food Hubs in 15 counties

• FoodCloud CEO, Iseult Ward, with Irish Local Development Network manager, Joe Saunders, at Foodcloud's warehouse in Tallaght.



REASSURING: Ireland now has better food availability, storage and distribution

Joe Saunders, manager of the Irish Local Development Network (ILDN) which is the representative body of Ireland's 49 Local Development Companies (LDCs), said, "The focus has been on increased food availability, storage and distribution to those in need."

He says the arrangement is an ideal fit for LDCs: "They deliver the national social inclusion programme* and support over 13,000 community organisations across the country through Tús, the Rural Social Scheme and other programmes. As such, their staff are ideally placed to identify local needs as well as physically deliver a service where required," he said.

LDCs have taken action around the country in various ways since Covid-19,

networking with community groups, local authorities, government departments and State agencies. They have responded to needs as they arise - from food scarcity to moving training online to handling the rise in demand for mental health services.

We will look in more depth at the work by LDCs, Family Resource Centres and others in our next edition.

* *The Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme.*



ON THE GROUND: Tallaght

We overcame all hurdles to manage a volunteer-run Testing Centre

The first community-based Covid-19 testing centre established in Dublin was run by volunteers.

- How did it go?
- What were the hurdles?
- What lessons were learned?

This story comes from a case-study by a volunteer centre:

On March 13th, South Dublin County Volunteer Centre (VC) received a query from the HSE in relation to help with recruiting volunteers to deliver a meet and greet service for a new testing centre to be set up in Tallaght Stadium.

As the VC already had experience in managing volunteers at events, we decided to give a provisional “yes” to doing so (on the proviso that we could get a sense of if it was safe and appropriate for volunteers to be involved).

On the weekend of March 14/15th, two staff members from the VC spent the weekend working alongside HSE staff and members of the National Ambulance Service as they set up the test centre.

Our recce was to establish if there was need for volunteer involvement and see what the role involved before we invited others to volunteer. We established that the volunteer was to be a first point of contact for people arriving for testing, ensuring they were met by a friendly face, gathering essential bio-data from them, and answering questions that people might have before testing.

We felt that the VC could step into this space and manage a team of volunteers in a safe and risk-averse way. As our centre already had a Volunteer Corps Programme in place, we had access to high vis jackets, hats, sweaters and other clothing to keep people warm and dry. We also had a volunteer management database that

“Within a few days, the National Ambulance Service withdrew from the new Tallaght Stadium Testing Centre as we had things under control.”



• A volunteer calls on people arriving for tests to move forward.

would help us with managing the schedule of a large team of volunteers.

Over the next few days, we recruited a team of 30 volunteers via I-Vol. They were supported for the duration by five staff from South Dublin County Partnership who were seconded to our centre.

In recruiting volunteers, we established that people needed to be in good health, have really good spoken and written English, had to be able to stand for long periods and be calm and reassuring under pressure. All the volunteers, on their first shift, were shown how to put on the requisite PPE and manage risk in terms of dealing directly with people, many of whom

would be Covid-19 positive.

The team quickly got into a pattern as we finessed the role and the work. Within a few days, the National Ambulance Service withdrew from the new Tallaght Stadium Testing Centre as we had things under control. During the first week, we received a call from the HSE who had heard great feedback about the test centre in Tallaght. Their request was for us to establish another volunteer-run test centre in Lucan.

We were conscious of not over-stretching the team, so we invited our colleagues in Dublin City Volunteer Centre to take up the management of the site in Lucan which they duly did.



Five months on and our volunteers are happy to be there. They also get great satisfaction from feeling that they are able to do something in a time of crisis. In some respects we have become part of a new family.

“There’s a view that volunteers are an add on. Here, they have been a crucial and essential part of the team and the centre wouldn’t be the same without them.”



CLEARING HURDLES

- Initially it was difficult to get clarity on insurance and expenses for volunteers from the HSE. It was understandable - we were in the midst of an emergency pandemic. We were clear that the volunteers were volunteering for the HSE and so needed to be covered by their insurance and expenses. Our persistence paid off and we finally got confirmation from the HSE that volunteers were included in their blanket insurance and expenses would be covered for volunteers.
- A second issue was that role descriptions and risk assessments (normally the duty of the organisation) were not in place. So these needed to be put together by the Volunteer Centre. Our colleagues in Dublin City VC prepared these and we tweaked them in South Dublin as our centre was slightly different.

LEARNING ON THE FLY

- Volunteer Centres with the right resourcing can be well placed to manage volunteer programmes directly such as event volunteering programmes. Our centres were in the enviable position to have a funded Volunteer Corps worker in place who could hit the ground running (and the necessary equipment and resources).
- Volunteer Centres have a particular expertise in development of policy and procedures around volunteering. This stood to us when we had to establish this programme “on the fly” - with help from South Dublin County Partnership.
- Volunteers bring so many skills to volunteering (lots of which are overlooked or underestimated). Our team consists of recently retired gardai, community worker,

teachers, emergency medical technicians, fitness coaches and beyond. They are professional, capable people.

- There’s a view that volunteers are an add on. But in our testing centre they have been a crucial and essential part of the team and the centre wouldn’t be the same without them.
- There is something unique in involving volunteers in a programme. They bring a different perspective - they are there because they want to be there - not because they have to be there. This brings a different attitude and experience to the programme. We have received so much feedback (via social media and email) from people who have attended the centre who valued that caring, friendly face.



• *Volunteers in Tallaght.*

ONLINE COMMUNITY EDUCATION

An Cosán was well positioned to continue to support learners

WRITES MARIA FLANAGAN

Responding to the Government's public health guidelines regarding the Covid-19 pandemic and the announcement to close all education centres on 12th March, An Cosán immediately moved our adult education face-to-face programmes and workshops fully online.

We were better equipped than many organisations to do this as a result of our innovative model of virtual community education.

Our organisation has a team of over 135 people including community education tutors, education technologists, early years educators, counsellors and support staff. We quickly adapted to working remotely.

From March 12th to mid-July, An Cosán

delivered over 30 online programmes including a range of unaccredited and accredited modules at Foundation level and Further Education Levels and up to NFQ Level 7 in Higher Education. In that period, almost 300 learners from 24 counties engaged in education through our model of online learning.

An Cosán recognised the challenges that many learners faced with access to and proficiency in digital technology. We ensured all learners could access their programme and continue their lifelong learning journey online.

We also offered support to community partners by providing access to an online

workshop on our Digital Skills Toolkit (i.e. Skills to Succeed Academy and Digital Stepping Stones Assessment Tool). Community organisations can in turn, use this to support their learners to improve their digital skills. We have continued to hold those workshops.

An Cosán continues to harness its power as a leader in the field of digital learning to deliver our adult education services and wraparound supports to our learners in communities all across Ireland.

** Maria Flanagan works with An Cosán as its Community Partner Lead.*

The student experience during Covid-19



"Because our studies were largely conducted online, we experienced no disruption as a result of the Government restrictions on travel due to the COVID-19 crisis. (The continuing studies) have certainly been a welcome "normality" in the midst of uncertain times!"

- Patricia Frayne, co-ordinator of Portlaoise Enterprise Centre and a student with An Cosán.

"The advantage with An Cosán is that you can study online. It helps me a lot because I'm a family man. It is helping so many people out there who cannot attend classes face to face."

- Sabelo, student.

"The An Cosán education experience is unique."

- Wael, student.

Empowerment
through Education
Online Open Days

Follow the path to a brighter future by
studying with An Cosán!

An Cosán offer a range of affordable short and accessible Foundation Level courses, with progression options to Further and Higher Education including programmes in early years education and care, community development, leadership, addiction studies and social enterprise.

An Cosán are holding a series of online Open Day General Information Sessions about the application process and to give you an opportunity to ask questions.

Register to attend on
Eventbrite: <https://bit.ly/AnCosanOpenDays2020>

E: info@ancosan.ie T: 01 462 8488 W: www.ancosan.ie

How kindness delivered a calm new sensory world

The Sensory Cubbie Hub

Temple Street is the proud first home for the Cubbie Sensory Hub – a new, imaginative environment for people with autism and related conditions.

The Cubbie Sensory Hub was created after David and Diane McIntyre's daughter Ava was diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder. David remembers the early inspiration for the idea:

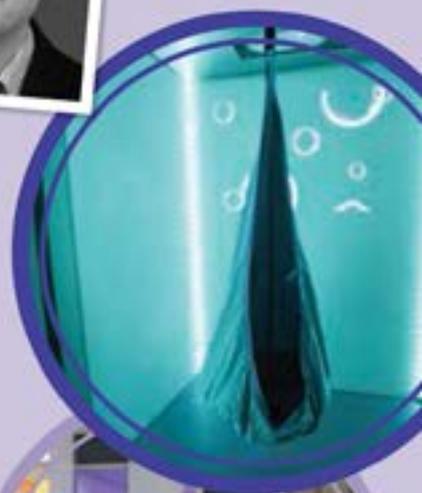
"We met other parents and started to hear about the barriers they faced. It was at these meetings that we decided to try and help people with Autism."

David and Diane embarked on years of research and came up with the Cubbie concept, a sensory system that promotes participation and inclusion to all people with sensory processing needs. They demonstrated the cubbie to Temple Street for World Autism Day in 2018. As Orla Heaney, our Autism Nurse Specialist recalls:

"It was clear that the cubbie could be an asset to the patients – a system that fits in any space and adapts to meet the sensory needs of each person. We found a great sponsor in KPMG so we now have the hub installed in our outpatient department and we've had amazing feedback from families."



David McIntyre, along with his wife Diane, developed the Cubbie Sensory Hub.



You can be part of Temple Street's wonderful Circle of Care

Make a Donation

Every gift helps to change the life of a sick child. You can donate by phone, by post or online.
www.templestreet.ie
01 878 4344

Volunteer

Volunteer your time and help at one of Temple Street's events or collections.

Fundraise

Despite the travel and social distancing restrictions, you can still do virtual challenges or host your own **Great Irish Bake or Trick or Treat for Temple Street!**

Leave a Loving Legacy

Leaving a gift in your Will is the most powerful way of caring for sick children today and for generations to come. To learn more contact info@templestreet.ie

Increase your Gift's Power

If your donations total €250 or more in a year, they could be worth up to €112 more to us under Revenue's charitable tax relief scheme. To find out how, and get your tax reclaim form, simply contact us at info@templestreet.ie

The Cubby project was developed with assistance from the BTWEA and SICAP through Mayo North East LEADER Partnership. It was a national finalist in the ILDN National Enterprise Awards 2019.



Logical that community is favoured over individuals in The Gambia

**BY CIAN Ó SÍOCHÁIN*
IN FAJARA**



A retired Irish couple first visited the village of Bafaluto during a visit to The Gambia on holiday during Christmas 2007. They entered the village during a walk through the forest from their base at a nearby eco-

lodge. Struck by the conditions they saw, they returned in 2008 and learned from the residents of the village what were their greatest needs.

Working with the villagers and a Gambian community development activist, they established a project and cleared a five-acre site, fenced it and sunk six irrigation wells, enabling the set up of an efficient vegetable garden. At the same time, funds were raised to sink a borehole and install solar panels to power a submersible pump connected to a water storage tank.

Initially, 1,200 metres of distribution pipework was installed. This was extended by the community over the years. From that first project emerged a self-funded NGO and UK-based charity called People in Need Gambia (PING**).

After the pandemic struck, PING received word from the village - where unemployment is high and savings little - that it was in dire straits and facing food shortages. On April 9th, PING delivered 1,000kgs of rice to Bafaluto as a stopgap measure to avoid malnutrition. The few men working in the village had been supporting the community, but were no longer in a position to continue given their enforced unemployment.

“Test, test test,” was the advice given by the WHO when it declared a pandemic on March 11th. At this time, West Africa was unusual in a number of ways.

Firstly, the number of confirmed cases was relatively low (the first case confirmed in The Gambia was on March 16th) and, secondly, most of the countries in the region simply do not have the medical infrastructure to carry out such an exercise.

On the ground in The Gambia the government mounted an admirable effort to contain the spread of the virus, but faced difficulties on a number of fronts. Even by comparison with other nations in the region,



• *The distribution of rice was organised by the Water Committee headed up by Samba Bah, who until recently worked at the airport. He has no idea when he will receive his next “monthly” pay cheque of 3,000 Dalasis (€50).*

The Gambia has an extremely fragile and underfunded medical infrastructure which is incapable of dealing with an outbreak on the scale seen in Europe, Asia and the Americas.

Secondly, years of negative experiences has left a population suspicious of what might be considered standard medical interventions in the West. The third, and perhaps most important issue, is the poverty which chronically besets the country.

The first Covid-19 positive patient in the Cape Point area of Bakau (a heavily populated area close to the capital Banjul) did not have any known contact with identified cases, so it raised the spectre of the virus being in the community and potentially spreading undetected.

Immediately, the Ministry of Health, in conjunction with the National Youth Council of The Gambia (NYCG) carried out the first mass testing in the country of around 500 people.

As well as the testing, youth volunteers started a sensitisation campaign calling from compound (home) to compound in the area. According to Lamin Darboe, CEO of the NYCG, 841 compounds were visited by a group of 31 youth volunteers to help

dispel people’s concerns and encourage them to come for voluntary testing. Asked what concerns people in the area had he said, “How the testing will be done; will they be injected? And, for political reasons, a belief that this pandemic is not a real thing.”

This final point regarding the medical veracity of the threat is not confined to those in Bakau as there is an unfortunate rise in anti-vaxxer beliefs which have been spreading globally in recent years. Despite this threat to public and community health, the most recently available WHO/UNICEF figures (June 2019) indicated that child vaccination levels were close to 100%. If there was a drop in these levels, it could lead to catastrophic outbreaks of formerly contained infections such as measles, diphtheria and polio.

Just as this crisis has highlighted the powerful sense of community here in The Gambia, there have also been examples of fear affecting this solidarity. Reports in early May suggested that a community the village of Numuyel threatened to banish the family of a positive case of Covid-19 in the community.

“It is not uncommon for one to three bread winners to feed entire villages through their wages.”

According to the acting director of health services, Dr Mustapha Bittaye, “The ministry of health has intensified psychological support in a village (Numuyel) as the community threatens to banish the family of the only confirmed case in the village.”

While this news is distressing, it underlines to me the centrality of community in The Gambia; the priority of community over individual safety. Given the daily struggles faced by communities all over the country, particularly in rural areas, there is a utilitarian logic to the reaction of the community in Numuyel. It is not uncommon for one to three bread winners to feed entire villages through their wages, which have now been lost. The Government has begun food distribution, but it comes after an extended period where many communities were managing without income.

As for the diaspora, Gambians throughout the world on whom so many depend to send remittances - just as the Irish did for so



• Each bag of rice costs €22.50 and Ping promises to ensure it is delivered where it is most needed.

many decades - are now facing the crisis in their new countries of residence.

According to the most recent World Bank statistics, The Gambia is the second most dependent country in Sub-Saharan Africa on remittances as a share of GDP (12.47%). The inevitable decrease in this income along with the complete shutdown of the

tourism industry which, according to the World Bank, contributes 9% directly (22% indirectly) to GDP, will inevitably lead to devastating consequences for communities all over the country.

While confirmed cases remain relatively low in The Gambia, the indirect consequences will have deep and long-lasting effects. Communities in The Gambia, the government, and the population as a whole, are only just beginning to come to grips with the socio-economic consequences of this pandemic.

** Cian Ó Siocháin is a journalist, editor and anthropologist from Quin, Co. Clare. He lives with his wife Dr Helen Brotherton and their two children on the grounds of a medical facility in Fajara, outside Banjul, the country's capital.*

Cian's article was written in June when Gambia had one of the lowest death rates worldwide. Despite lockdowns, curfews and border closures, the virus is spreading. Four cabinet ministers recently tested positive and the death toll is now rising fast (54 dead as of Aug 15).

*** Ping's website is honest and upfront in telling how the development project that began in 2008 is working. To find out more about Ping, how they are continuing their work despite the pandemic, and should you wish to donate, visit: <http://pingcharity.co.uk/>*

Pirogue fishermen grounded

Long known as ‘The Smiling Coast’, The Gambia is famous in more recent times for having voted a vile dictator out of office.

Allen Meagher revisited* the country in 2018 shortly after the dictatorship was ended by the popular vote and public protests backed by regional political pressure.

He filmed and wrote about the country he once lived in, showing for instance what it is like to be a traditional fisherman in a small pirogue (boat) working 10-hour days in the dangerous seas off Gambia.

Pirogue fishing is a way of life severely threatened by EU and Chinese supertrawlers, now compounded by Covid-19 which has tied down local crews during repeated lockdowns.

Among those currently out of work is Omar Jallow who features in the film coverage - a young father and fisherman now struggling to pay bills.

“They don’t allow crews out because we work closely together and could spread the virus,” he said. He had received no State support.

Nationally, Government corruption is an issue, even during the pandemic, with the new regime being compared to the dictatorial one on that basis, though without the violence. Elections are due next year.

* Meagher travelled to The Gambia with support from the Simon Cumbers Media Fund.



Meagher's reports & videos:
<https://meaghersbar.wordpress.com>

READY TO RISK LIFE FOR ANOTHER:

Retained firefighters are men and women who are on call to respond to a range of emergencies. Many retained firefighters have other full or part-time jobs, but when the call comes they are ready to drop whatever they are doing and become part of a team, ready to face any emergency. Harry is one such person and he likes to volunteer.

Lockdown gave him lots of time to think. While there was one tragic fatal accident (non-Covid related) he was not called on to the extent expected at the outset.



My son's planning to get the virus Harry's Diary – Day 37 (Mon, April 20)

BY HARRY

My younger son is not happy. Health Minister Simon Harris's plans to reopen school - even if it's for one day a week - puts a spanner in his "Covid holiday".

Currently he's concocting a plan to contract the virus in that eventuality: "I'll have to self-isolate on the couch."

Which means I'll have to go live under the stairs.

His team of crack 'Fortnite' players, gathered from the four corners of the world are having a right good time at the moment.

"We finished in the top 20% in the world Dad. In The W-O-R-L-D."

One lad is from Sheffield, he's particularly close with a lad from South Carolina, and God only knows where the rest of them are from. One has "the covid" which apparently is hilarious.

Online gaming has made social isolation easy for him. They are like proper friends. They laugh and giggle endlessly as boys and girls that age do.

He has his headset on. He forgets I'm in the room and it offers a great snapshot into his social life: "I like aggressive players but sometimes you have to use tactics," he said to



a lad named 'Gobbo' - problem-solving and social skills rolled into one. I could never be so diplomatic, even today.

"It's Ok, I was just frustrated," he admitted to another, displaying an emotional vocabulary I'd need to see a therapist about first.

Outside of the gamers, May 5th must seem like a little beacon of hope for people desperate to get back to their lives. I can't see it though. It's not going to magically all go away.

I wonder how long it's going to last? If I ran a small business, I'd be worried. As it is, I'm worried myself. I'm still on a probationary contract. There are no guarantees that will be renewed.

My landlord is being very sweet when I pay the rent into the bank. "Thanks - appreciate it - stay safe xxx," he texts me - he never says things like that.

There's an electric air of foreboding: Harry's Diary, Day 1 (Sunday, March 15th)

BY HARRY

Diagnosed cases now number in the hundreds. There are certainly more. Soon there will be thousands and after that, who knows?

Rumours abound. Official denials of army lockdowns have not stopped viral chatter through the messaging apps. A rumour shared on a Whatsapp group that the fire service and army will be mobilised this coming Wednesday is the catalyst for me to write. Everyone has seen it at this stage. I'm receiving it from loads of unrelated people. I have heard nothing of the sort officially. It's probably a hoax.

I cannot presume to know how other people feel. There is obviously fear and anxiety. Videos from Temple Bar show many are not allowing the reported crisis to stop festivities. We react how we react - these are unprecedented times. Myself, I can't help feeling an excited anticipation and I make no apologies for that. Evolution throws different personality types into the mix, the building blocks of societies. All our personality types have a purpose. There is an electric air of foreboding in the calm before the storm.

The first troops into the melee are the workers in the supermarkets. Stoically going about their tasks as they cheerfully tend the crowds and restock the shelves stripped by buyers in varying degrees of panic. As social separation and self isolation becomes the new normal, voluntarily or otherwise, these unwitting heroes will be essential in delivering our food supplies; the bulwark between peace and chaos. Healthcare workers, paramedics, soldiers, gardai, firefighters, we signed up for this s**t. No one would blame shop staff from phoning in sick to protect themselves but they have become the first frontline. I hope, when this is done, we honour them.

We are witnessing other good deeds. Local business' closing before it is enforced on them or offering deliveries to those who need them, as are citizens. I am surprised to feel hope that people have what it takes in the face of a crisis. I had rather given the species up as a lost cause. I might



WED, APR 1 AT 12 PM CDT
MARCH TO STOP THE
SPREAD

INTERESTED

have to review my prognosis of humanity. The coming weeks and months will tell us a lot.

I suspect things will be different on the other side. Healthcare systems will surely prove inadequate in their current form. They will be forced to evolve rapidly. The economy too will grind to a standstill if the rumoured lockdown comes into effect. How will people pay rent, mortgages and utilities in the interim? Questions are being asked of the gig economy. Can people with no security and no savings be expected to voluntarily give up work and if they do will they be provided for? It seems a period of forced socialism will be inevitable.

Other pandemics have changed the course of history. Will there be a great recession in the aftermath of this current one. Will society boom as it did after the great influenza pandemic of 1918 or will Covid-19 simply fizzle out with minimal consequences as we seamlessly transition back to normal? These are questions that will be answered in time and not by me. All I intend to do is keep a journal of life as a rookie firefighter during these most unusual of seasons.



• By Day 44, the virus had jumped to cats in New York. Harry wondered aloud in his diary - how are we supposed to keep cats locked down? Cat photo graciously supplied by one of Harry's pals.

VOLUNTEER DIARY: Father / firefighter

WANTED: Just & imaginative people

Harry's Diary, Day 46 (Wed, April 29)

BY HARRY

I wouldn't be a great one for looking in the mirror or maintaining my physical appearance. Seeing what I look like is sort of unavoidable though, when I'm constantly on Zoom meetings looking at myself staring back.

The recent sun has bleached my hair blonder than its winter shade and the lack of open barbers means it's starting to look rather unruly. I've also picked up a bit of a suntan on my river strolls.

I'm beginning to look like a Boris Trump hybrid. If I put on any more lockdown weight, the metamorphosis might be complete. What is more frightening is that I might be beginning to think like them too.

I always considered myself a bit of a socialist, sometimes an extreme anarchist in my more imaginative moments. Definitely, certainly, 'eat the rich'. Possibly because I'm always poor and always hungry.

In retrospect, the change in thinking might be more pragmatism than any sense of social justice. Practicalities aside, I'm worried I might be lurching to the right - in more ways than simply looking like a populist despot.

The good people of the world tell me I should be more worried about life than economic collapse, but my fears seem to be focused on financial implications. Do I lack something in the morality department? Why am I so concerned about fiscal matters?

Of course I'm concerned about people's physical condition. I wouldn't put myself through the anxiety-inducing unknowns of firemanship if I wasn't. There are far better paid, more consistent ways to earn a crust that require less commitment.

Part of firefighting's appeal for me was the very Marxist ideal of being directly connected with the fruits of my labour - in this case, helping people in their most vulnerable times.

Of course I want people to live. I've thought it through. Yes, I'd risk myself to help another.

But, I also remember the recession. I did a lot of work around community development and have dipped in and out of social activism. Not as much as others, but without revealing my identity I would be familiar with the sector.

As such, I saw austerity:

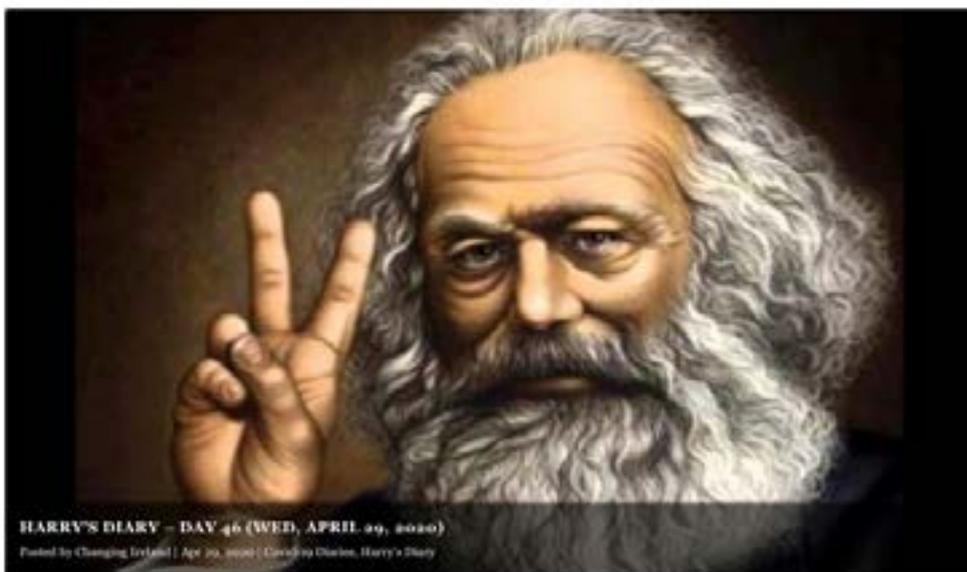
I saw the bust after the boom.

I saw what it did to already marginalised communities.

I saw it in my own communities, in my own family.

I know what it did to me. Working hard and then being thrown on the unemployment scrapheap. All these years later, I still haven't fully recovered my mental health 100%.

I am not interested in the investors and the landlords and the balance books of corporations - so long as it doesn't lay more hardship on the people who have suffered so much since 2008.



Maybe I'm too disillusioned after the last ten years to hope for much, but I envisage a cruel post-Covid world - one without healthcare systems or State pensions for my generation and below. A world without basic social care.

I'm almost expecting a dog-eat-dog era where we will likely die on the streets the day we're not strong enough to fend for ourselves. A 1930's style US depression where the people who missed out on property will shelter in corrugated shanty towns in parks in city centres.

I'm talking neo-liberalism on crack.

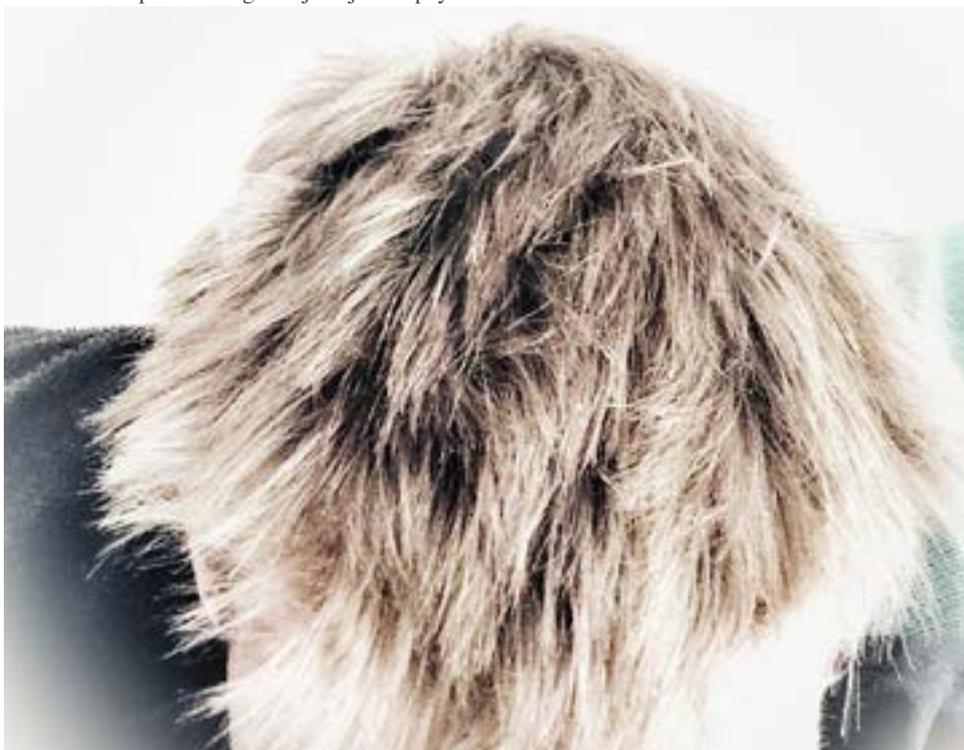
I'm basing this on my own experience and the experience of others I have seen. It seems that things have got progressively harder over my adult life. People working two jobs just to pay

the rent. Foregoing family time to keep them housed. And now, even that has all gone bang.

Is my lack of imagination the problem? Maybe - after all this - a new and equitable economic system will spring from the Covid ruins. I had hoped that's what the General Election's surge to the left would represent.

Maybe, new and revolutionary politics will be conceived by just and imaginative people to help us avoid the quagmire predicted on the front page of my internet browser. I pray that happens.

I don't know. All I know for sure is that I really need a haircut.



The Covid-19 family newsdesk

- Wonder, despair, dog rescues, burnt meals & Zooming out

BY ALLEN MEAGHER

Everyone's story is different and the outbreak of Covid-19 marked the first time in nearly 30 years in journalism that I felt cut apart from a story that I was at the centre of.

LOFTY THOUGHTS

A lot less people than feared have died in Ireland from Covid-19. However, the disease continues to spread and the poorer or older you are the more likely you are to catch Covid.

I think of people working in meat packing plants, living in tight accommodation and the most vulnerable. Of the tens of thousands whose jobs are gone for now.

I think of Dr Tony Holohan, our medics at home and Irish doctors abroad who came to serve the nation (a much larger outbreak was feared at that time).

I also think of friends in poor countries where malaria and malnutrition are bigger threats.

I have development worker friends abroad who work or have worked in Ebola and cholera zones. Now - like in poorer parts of the world - many community workers in Ireland have also been on the frontline facing disease. They've linked with vulnerable people in the community and supported them. While staying physically distanced, they kept them connected and got people help when they needed it.

Like medical staff, there are only so many community workers. Many of them were flat out.

OH, SO PREPARED!

At first, I thought I was more prepared than most for a global calamity:

- In my late 20s, I was one of a group of Irish who volunteered for a few years in the civil service of a poor West African country going downhill under military dictatorship. I thought that experience would stand to me, somehow.

- I had been expecting some kind of world calamity, or European disaster. I'm an optimist, but since neither Iraq, Syria or the Amazon are sacred anymore, then nowhere really is.

- When the virus shut down factories in China in February, I hurried off to buy a new iPhone (ahead of expected supply disruption). I was almost chuffed with myself.

- I did my major shopping weeks before most others.

- Seeing it was serious while others dismissed it as a minor blip coming our way, I worked hard to get the Spring edition to print before lockdown.



• *Competing duties.*

COVID DELIGHT

All of my more vulnerable relatives had family that would take care of them. We all had a home. I worried, being a parent, about becoming a Covid victim. But I saw positives too:

- When Covid-19 broke, Madonna put out a video saying, with a glint in her eye, how this will level up the West with the rest of the world. I shared that feeling. As a rich society, our insulation from early mortality was gone.

- It's a mean way to think because Covid is a killer, literally - but I welcomed it politically. Extreme capitalism destroys more lives and kills more people than diseases do. Also, we don't give enough credit to people living constantly with health risks in poorer countries. It is a crying shame, for instance, that 20 million people annually - mostly children - die from measles, a preventable disease.

- This would deal a blow to extreme capitalism. I'm into people working together for common social and environmental goals. Yet, everything was being monetized: Here - care for the aged; in the USA, even prison work was made profitable. Across Europe, everything from healthcare to rescue services and even community services faced privatisation. Now, the virus would turn that around and heap great responsibility on states. We would learn to value strong communities supported by good government.

Covid broke like a tsunami and got here quicker than all us non-medics expected. At least I'd seen it coming and had begun working from home a week before the lockdown announcement.

When the Taoiseach announced the lockdown, my wife and I were most relieved. I could relax now. I had been working flat out. Now, I had time to focus on family, home, neighbours and what the coming changes meant for us all.

LEAVING MOYROSS

I was concerned about being cut off from Moyross for the first time in 20 years, curious about how that would go.

Community workers across Ireland believe in communities passionately. We believe in people acting collectively, in empowerment and social change. We see hope and despair in people's lives as communities are in turn embraced and abandoned by the State.

In Moyross, we published solid, pro-community magazines. Moyross is a community that grounded 'Changing Ireland' as a project and me as an editor. It's a place I'm at home in.

In 20 years, I had only once lost the feel for what was happening in Moyross, in Ireland's communities at large, or in the community sector generally. That time I was away visiting favelas

OFFICE TO HOME

Covid-19 family newsdesk (cont'd)

in Brazil for six weeks. This was to be a much longer break.

I looked fondly at the community centre and then drove off home, to semi-rural Limerick, with most of the office's computer and camera equipment in the car.

COVID - THE RELIEF OF LOCKDOWN

For us, however, the relief on those first days of lockdown lasted a mere 48 hours.

Very quickly, my wife developed a persistent cough. One of her closest colleagues at work - Fiona - had a cough the week before. Fiona's son had returned from a school trip to Italy and brought Covid-19 back with him. Two weeks later they were all sick. I was angry Fiona didn't stay home. Now Mrs M was coughing.*

So instead of relaxing, feeling safe for a few precious weeks in lockdown, we wondered was Covid possibly in the house. After a few days, my wife's cough eased and next thing my daughter - who's never sick - came down with a temperature. That passed in a day. Then our son - who sometimes gets a cold but rarely a cough - got a cough.

In response, I mislaid my glasses (essential for reading/computers) and the car keys. I had everyone searching for them. This was around the same time as medics made the apocalyptic prediction - endorsed by An Taoiseach, a doctor himself - that 80,000-to-120,000 people in Ireland would die if we didn't contain the virus. It all freaked me out. Way too close to home. I don't need to go into it, but medically I felt more vulnerable than I should for my age.

Thankfully, I had support from a fabulous team of board members and other great people. They had their own concerns, but they gave me support too. For that I was grateful, as I focused on family first, locking down and checking in on relatives.

I - with regret - ignored emails with great suggestions from people in UCC, Mahon, Dublin and elsewhere on stories and work we could collaborate on.

Thankfully, we had hired in the support of a superb social media producer - Aine Rynne (pictured here) - just before the virus



• The sweet, green grass of Moyross - homes to the left, new community centre to the right, with Clare hills in the background.



• Listen to this and other stories in podcast format - <https://soundcloud.com/user-388076050>



swept in. She ensured our social media stayed fresh and useful to readers - even if I felt anything but fresh editing it from home. Meanwhile, two community activists wrote Covid-19 diaries for 50 days that I could publish from home each day (they are brilliant and unique - see www.changingireland.ie).

ZOOM V WILL

Like everyone else, I embarked on a tech-learning curve and downloaded Zoom. However, I

was more focused on domestic matters. While preparing rooms for self-isolation, I wondered how to get a will done without physically meeting a solicitor. What if we both went down at the same time?

Setting up a room for self-isolation meant clearing years of accumulated toys and clothes and sorting them for handing onto others. I don't throw items of value out. However, my sister-in-law with two young children of her own wouldn't touch anything from us.

"Ye might have the virus", she texted. (Weeks later, when her fears eased, she graciously accepted them).

In the meanwhile, I stopped watching dystopian movies. I used to be a fan. Now, we were in one.

AMBITIONS V REALITY

I could see clearly how our journalism could be helpful. I used to think - I'll get my camera, take the tent and head off travelling for stories.

Local Development Companies, Family Resource Centres, even local authorities were doing great things, Twitter told me. And phone calls with colleagues.

Staff from the Department of Rural and Community Development were apparently firing

on all cylinders.

"I'm going to take the car and go to Cork and interview community workers," I said to my wife.

I thought of going to Dublin also.

"You're not supposed to go anywhere. The government said so," she says.

"But I'm an essential worker," says I.

"You can do it on Zoom like everyone else."

It was hard to argue with, but I accepted her point.

Years ago, I and others went through a failed coup attempt and we learned that staying at home is a good idea in an emergency. That thought comforted me.

Then I'd turn on RTE News and see a journalist interviewing someone on Mizen Head at the appropriate social distance.

Had he someone at home minding the kids and the pets and doing the cooking and shopping? He hardly abandoned his. Either way, I felt guilty. And that never helped productivity.

* * * * *

This was different. This time, you're not out covering a story at a distance. The ship you're on with small children is at risk of sinking. Western society is teetering. What comes first - your work, or your preparations for who knows what!?

Sounds dramatic. Tis. Anytime I thought I shouldn't think too much about it, I went around in my head in circles trying to figure out a strategy. Around this time a friend reminded me that every day you obey the government guidelines, you've put in a good day. We were all very good.

ARGUING OVER SCHOOLWORK

I wasn't isolated. I had my wife, two children, two dogs, three rabbits, a fox wanting to meet those rabbits - and the hedgehog we found one night.

But I got stuck. I'm used to being on the road, working with people, hearing their stories.

I can do a certain amount of time alone, more than most. But then I need people.

I got work done in bits and pieces - the essentials, nothing outstanding. Instead of being a cheerleader for all the hard workers, I was arguing with the missus over the children's schoolwork at home. And not one Zoom call did they get from their teacher. One wouldn't have hurt. I believe this craic of working from home while also teaching caused a lot of stress in households around the country.

In the old normal, I often worked late in the office. I rarely cooked. My father-in-law minded our children. But that was history. Due to their vulnerability, my wife's energetic, loving parents were unavailable.

* * * * *

My father-in-law didn't fully cocoon. He came by every day to chat to us at length through the window. Wasn't it supposed to be the other way around! Cocooning was hard on older people who strictly followed the guidelines.



• The people behind Pullough Community Shop in Co. Offaly made a big impression on me and on readers last year. I wondered how they were getting on during the national lockdown. They're still going strong - most recently they were looking for new volunteers.

WHAT'S EVERYONE ELSE DOING?

I thought of events, places and people I had visited last year, from a social farm in Monaghan to a community shop in Pullough, Co. Offaly and community projects in Dublin.

Of Dublin, where my brother lives. How were they getting on there in the flats, in shared rented houses? Was everyone playing yard bingo?! We talked a lot by phone.

I thought of people in Africa, Asia and South America. I rang or messaged those I could to see how they were doing.

And then, like magic, the virus level nationally dropped to near zero. It was game on. Or was it? Unfortunately, no, this story keeps rolling.

It's especially hard on carers and working parents of very young children. Sometimes when I had the head down working at home, unexpected stuff happened. One day, during the heatwave, I saved the puppy from drowning.. Another day, my wife pretty much blew up the lawnmower (twice).

Yet, another day, the puppy went missing. I had four emails to send, but finding the puppy became No. 1. After a long search, we tried the garage (which was closed) and there she was surrounded by some contributions she had made.

"How did she get in there?" my daughter wondered. (The wind, etc).

I got one email out and forgot the phone calls I was supposed to make. That night, I prioritised ringing and comforting a relative who had heard bad news (non Covid related).

At 11.30pm, I received a text from one of the people I had been meant to call. I was glad they texted. The wheels must keep turning. It's just easier in an office!

SCHOOLS OUT - MOJO BACK

I'm getting my mojo back. We've come out of the lockdown. The kids are now on school holidays (no teaching, whew!).

My wife's employers are not of great help, but she has holidays coming up, which will free me.

We're opening up (too much?) as a society. Community is now where so much is at.

Community workers (eg Community Work Ireland) are advocating for national policy that supports the most vulnerable communities of all - those of us in crowded accommodation including Travellers, prisoners, migrants and many city and town residents who live in poverty. Community workers are directly helping the most vulnerable members of society on the ground with immediate challenges.

We must all be responsible, locally and nationally.

Nationally, we've had stellar leadership, but even Leo was saying he expected it to get more fractious.

There are very big tests ahead for Ireland and community is to the fore. B.S. must be called out and reported. Not everyone is in this equally and everyone's story is different.

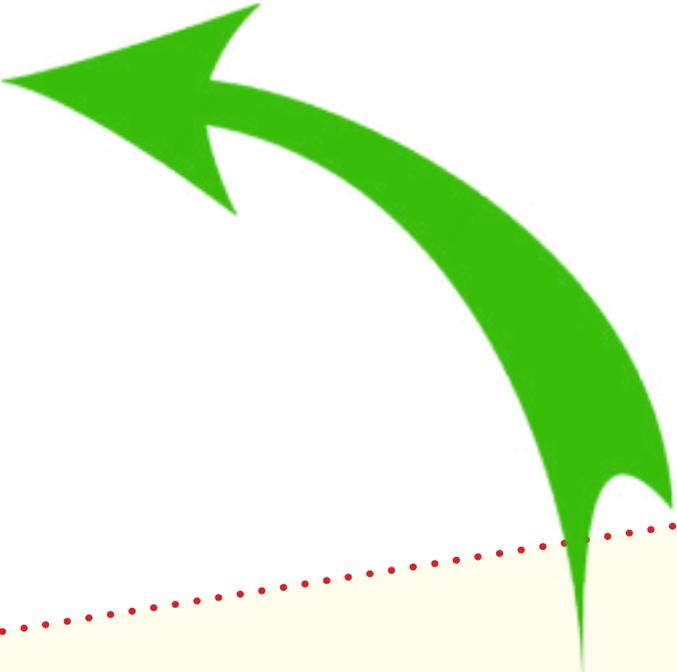
We're all getting to understand a new normal. Keep encouraging each other. Keep playing your part. Keep the head folks. One day at a time!

** I talked earlier about my wife's work colleague - Fiona, and her family. Fiona isn't her real name, but just to say that it was later confirmed by testing that Fiona's family all had Covid-19. They were amongst the earliest people in Ireland to catch it. It took them weeks - and the dad temporarily lost his sense of smell and taste - but they all came through it.*

Celebrating Diversity: Our Future Together

Ballyhaunis Integration Seminar
18th October 2019





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