Welcome to the 12th issue of the European Social Fund’s Newsletter and the final edition under the Programme for Employability, Inclusion and Learning 2014-2020. With funding of over €612m from the European Union, the PEIL 2014-2020 has helped over 400k people in Ireland since its inception in 2014.

It has been a year like no other that has brought about a variety of unexpected challenges for all of us. We would like to commend our partners, project implementers, project staff and of course our participants for their continued commitment and hard work throughout the pandemic. The majority of our projects were working remotely and yet providing more support than ever to their participants, including the delivery of distance learning. Some projects made PPE, others continued placements on the frontline, but one thing is evident, each of the projects pulled together to support each other, their learners and their community.

This edition showcases just some of the stories from the last year, including experiences of delivering projects during the pandemic and the experience of distance learning for participants. Thank you to all of the projects who submitted articles for the newsletter.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the European Union has agreed a series of unprecedented measures to support member states in tackling the pandemic. On 10 November, agreement was reached on a €1.8 trillion package to help rebuild a post-COVID-19 Europe.

This summer, in collaboration with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform and the three Regional Assemblies, we launched an online consultation process to inform the selection of priorities for the use of EU cohesion funding in Ireland for 2021-2027. Further details can be found here www.esif.ie.

Thank you again, to all who have implemented, managed, or participated in ESF projects and contributed to the achievements of the ESF in Ireland over the last seven years.

Take care and stay safe.
The ESF Managing Authority
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In February 2019, I decided to change my life completely. I had been working for the last 13 years in a place where promotion was not an option. With no opportunities for growth, I decided to quit my job. I wanted to become a healthcare worker; however, with my background in economy, I thought it was too late to change my career path. When I heard about the Social and Community Care Traineeship programme being run in Tallaght Training Centre (DDLETB), I decided to apply. I was pleased to hear that I was accepted.

I was full of self-doubt but then I quickly realised I was in the right place when I met my classmates and tutors. My main concern was submitting assignments in a language foreign to me. My fears turned out to be groundless because everyone I met on this course was more than helpful. I started the course in July 2019, and it was the beginning of a new life for me. Not only has this course changed my life completely but also it has made me a better person. I am more confident now and believe in myself, things I thought would never change. It did not only teach me how to prepare for my new role as a Healthcare Assistant but also showed me how to better myself. My tutors were very dedicated professionals and taught me everything that I had to know to start my work placement in St. James's Hospital in Dublin.

When the COVID-19 outbreak restrictions began to take place I only had one module left to complete. It was a big change for all of us and we needed to start learning remotely since Tallaght Training Centre had to be closed until further notice. At that time, I thought it will be impossible to complete all the assignments without class-based tutoring; however, my tutors adapted very quickly to online teaching. At first, it was difficult to get used to online tutoring but with the support and guidance from our tutors, it became a new norm.

I continued my work experience in the hospital that I started back in October. Since day one I knew this was exactly where I wanted to be and what I wanted to do going forward. I was a part of the Private 1 ward, a unit caring for patients with a variety of cancers and general medical conditions. I wore my uniform with pride and even after an exhausting day I was still smiling to myself, knowing that I made someone’s life a little easier today. They were wonderful people who made me feel like I was one of them.

At the beginning of my work placement, I was supposed to shadow one of the other Healthcare Assistants to learn the rules and responsibilities; however, in such a busy environment I also needed to use my own initiative and started to work on my own very quickly. My duties included working and supporting patients with their everyday needs. I was the link between patients and nurses. I started to apply my learning from Tallaght Training Centre - strict adherence to health and safety, infection prevention and control, confidentiality - all started to sound very familiar and I was impressed with myself.
With the COVID-19 outbreak, new rules were introduced to the hospital. Along with the recommendations from the HSE, we had to create a system that was safe and secure for everybody around us. With all staff looking like astronauts dressed in the PPE equipment it was difficult for our patients to recognise familiar faces. It was hard – we also could no longer spend quality time with the patients as we used to before the pandemic. We were communicating through the phones only to prevent the spreading of the virus. No visitors were allowed in the hospital – we still had to care for our patients but from the distance. Everyone was fearing the virus in one way or another. Almost half of the staff in my ward were in quarantine or self-isolating at one stage. People were awaiting swab results. We were getting wounds on our hands from constantly washing and rubbing alcohol in them. Our breaks changed; we could no longer have a meal together - meeting someone for lunch was not an option. It was truly a difficult time for everyone. I was very lucky to be able to continue my work placement in these difficult times, but I have learned so much so quickly. As a result of my work placement, I was offered a job.

I am so happy I decided to apply for this course last year. I can honestly say that if you are looking for a rewarding career that will change your life forever, please apply for the Social and Community Care Traineeship in Tallaght Training Centre. During my studies, I met amazing people who showed me that I can do anything if I am willing to put my heart into it. If it were not for my course and work placement, I would not be in my dream job.
Dublin and Dún Laoghaire Youthreach supporting learners through the pandemic

The Youthreach programme promotes independence, personal autonomy, active citizenship and helps create a pattern of lifelong learning. It provides opportunities to acquire certification through QQI accredited courses or to complete Junior or Leaving Certificate programmes. Dublin and Dun Laoghaire Education and Training Board (DDLETB) operate 11 Youthreach centres where students receive an allowance each week depending on age, along with transport and meal allowances. The curriculum can differ from centre to centre, is varied and focuses on the holistic development of the individual within a learning environment which is structured, challenging, student-centred and participant-led. During this pandemic, Youthreach was in a great position to connect with their students remotely, as many steps had been put in place to support online learning and virtual connections with students.

The online BKSB (Basic and Key Skills Builder) was in operation before the pandemic. It is an assessment/diagnostic tool that sets working levels for a student in English and Maths and is completely accessible through the Internet. Students can work independently through interactive lessons and resources or with support from teachers as they progress through different levels improving their literacy and numeracy skills.

Students could be contacted through their official email account, by phone or through the messaging services on a centres’ official business pages. Teachers quickly became involved in Teams, Zoom and Moodle to set up virtual classrooms. These platforms also enabled sessions facilitated by ‘Spun Out’ involving mental health awareness and DDLETB Psychological Support Services (PSS) were available on request.

When restrictions confined families to their houses and within a 2km radius, there was a lot of information flowing out. Students, parents and guardians were contacted, supported and informed using all communication platforms as each centre endeavoured to be as supportive as they could. Social media pages were awash with messages, links to, ideas about, suggestions and information on a wide range of topics! Links to virtual tours of European cities, museums and live webcams in cities and Dublin Zoo were posted. If you had to stay in, why not go virtually out! Planning your day charts and monthly healthy checklist (physical, emotional and mental) were uploaded daily as were numerous lists of free resources available to start a new hobby; play the guitar, learn a language, enter competitions or read/listen to free audiobooks.
Centres sent Monday greetings and positive goodbyes on Fridays with weekend wishes to all. Emma, a teacher from Youthreach YES Centre created a mural outside her home and a dance video with her colleague Martina promoting social distancing which was posted worldwide by a celebrity and picked up by RTE! ‘Online Student of the Week Awards’ were created and those centres involved in Gaisce, launched the ‘At Home Gaisce’. SENI centres continued mentoring their specific students while non-SENI centres assigned specific teachers to particular students so that no one felt unsupported. ‘Shout Out’ fifteen-second videos were created highlighting what each centre was doing.

As weeks passed, it became clear that the focus needed to change and information needed to flow in a different direction! It needed to come from the students and parents to see if the information and support was getting through. Their feedback was essential! Students were asked what tools they needed to help continue their education such as laptops, iPads, desktops and stationery packs. As centres were part of the ‘Schools Food Programme’ and students were still entitled to their meal allowance, food parcels were delivered. Students and parents stepped up to the challenges and replied! Videos were created with images showing students/parents’ comments and messages.

Students sent images they themselves photographed on the changing world around their homes and doing random acts of kindness to help their family - minding/entertaining siblings, cooking for the family, painting bedrooms, walking dogs, doing dishes and horticulture. Students arrived at centres to pick up laptops and stationery packs. Students could be seen logging onto the BKSB system and progressing through levels. Assignments were completed and emailed back. Centres posted images/videos of interactive sessions. Teachers, students and parents took part in a Spun Out virtual meeting to discuss all aspects of life in lockdown. Watch parties on FB following a teacher cooking to a recipe were created and then students submitted images of their results. Students sent in images of meals they prepared using food from the food parcels. These images were turned into a video by the catering teacher Deirdre in Youthreach Clondalkin to highlight the amazing results.

Freezer food from some centres and PPE from Youthreach Blanchardstown were delivered to charities and services. Short stories and poems received from students and teachers were given voice-overs and made into videos and placed on all sites. Student artwork, as well as some pieces from teachers, were collected from centres and through the month of May each week, art teacher Niamh from Youthreach Clondalkin created a spectacular virtual art gallery.
During National Drop Everything and Read (DEAR) Day, numerous images were received from students and teachers reading their favourite literature in their favourite places. International Bike Day 2020 came during the 5km phase and students sent in images of their great endeavours. ‘One Word Prompt Photos’ created by South Dublin Libraries caught the imagination of students and the images received contributed to ‘Creativity Day 2020’ including this beautiful image from Rachel in Youthreach Clondalkin!

Students went on their summer holidays mid-July and staff took a much needed, although a very short break. On their return, they researched, informed themselves and met up virtually with each other and management to discuss procedures and protocols that needed to be put in place for the safe return of staff and students. It was not long before students were back in their centres and happy! Their education continued both in the centres and online. Students adapted very quickly to the new systems and although they expressed how ‘strange things felt’ with ‘days being shorter’ and ‘one way systems in place’ as well as ‘distancing’, they still felt ‘Youthreach was still good’ even when wearing masks!

QQI External Assessments went ahead with folders laid out for the examiners and once results were confirmed, outdoor and virtual QQI awards were held. Maths week was an ideal opportunity for centres to move outside. The weather was great so students put on their Maths eyes and went searching in parks and along the coast. There was an even bigger focus on getting out into the fresh air which centres felt would help students’ minds as well as bodies. Some centres are located beside the beautiful Irish coast, others in historical villages and large parks, so they took full advantage of these free resources.

Youthreach centres will continue to provide a first-class education for all their students. We will continuously collect feedback from all stakeholders which will be analysed and acted upon to prepare for a new era of learning.

Youthreach centres will be prepared for the new educational future we will all be part of here in Ireland!

Left: Kelsey Doyle, Youthreach Blanchardstown
Youthreach Blanchardstown students were thrilled to be selected to strut down the catwalk for the Junk Kouture semi-final in March. The event, sponsored by RTE, saw 35 schools enter the competition with 80 semi-finalists performing in the Helix. Celebrating ten years of inspiring young people to play their part in a sustainable environment for their future. Junk Kouture encourages young people to get creative in developing a concept on an environmental issue, designing an outfit using recycled materials and marketing their concept through posters, videos and social media.

Since the spring of 2019, Youthreach Blanchardstown stopped using single-use plastics and with this in mind, the students focused on this issue and painstakingly gathered materials needed for their outfits. Our ingenious Junk Kouture teams used paper, spoons, cardboard and cups to create two amazing outfits, ‘Dark Fairy’ modelled by Paulina Nkrumah and ‘The Warrior’ modelled by Ange Mputu. The Warrior team was successful in reaching the final and Ange gave an amazing dance performance inspired by his tribal culture.

The Junk Kouture grand final was postponed in April, but the organisers have come up with a solution to ensure that the finalists still have an opportunity to strut their stuff in a socially distanced manner. The final will be hosted by RTÉ 2FM presenters Laura Fox and Emma Power and will be broadcast on the RTÉ Player. The finalists are currently busy creating videos and working on their performances. The ESF Managing Authority would like to wish the finalists all the luck in the world.

Success at Youthreach Clondalkin

This year the Young Social Innovators (YSI) Awards had 6,400 participants who were involved in over 400 social innovation projects from all around Ireland. The standard was really high, so it was a major achievement for Youthreach Clondalkin to win the YSI Award for ‘Make Our World Healthier (Mental Health)’ challenge. They went on to the final round of judging to compete for the overall title: Young Social Innovators of the Year 2020 Gold, Silver, Bronze. Due to COVID-19, this was the first ever digital Young Social Innovators Ireland Awards streamed live on the 20th October 2020 and hosted by Zara King with special guests. Although they did not win the overall title, the systems implemented in the centre as a result of their research and project, will benefit all the students and staff now and into the future.

Read more on their project here https://www.youngsocialinnovators.ie/resources/ysi-blog/positive-positive-wellbeing/.
My name is Colum O'Hagan. I am 18 and I live in Bray, Co. Wicklow, Ireland. I left school after I completed my Junior Certificate in 2018. I have always loved cars, fixing them and learning how they operate. To help me reach my goal of becoming a mechanic, I joined Dun Laoghaire Community Training Centre in 2018, to study for a QQI Level 4 Major Award in ‘Industrial Skills’.

Towards the end of 2019, as I was nearing completion of my Major Award, I spoke to Donal, the Bridging/Work Experience Coordinator and by lucky coincidence, a local, long-established and well respected motor sales and repairs company, Carroll Kinsella, Blackrock (CKB) were seeking a young person for a work experience placement with a view to an Apprenticeship if the person proved to be suitable after a trial period.

We (Donal and I) attended the interview in December 2019, where expectations were made very clear to me as to the level of commitment I would need to make in order to prove myself. It was agreed, I would start my work placement in January 2020, which I did. I worked hard, arrived on time every day and showed commitment to my work colleagues and by early March, Mr Ciaran Giles, the General Manager, indicated to Donal that CKB were in a position to offer me a position as an Apprentice employee. Naturally, I was delighted at the prospect of what was, for me, a great opportunity with a really dynamic company.

Unfortunately, later that same week, the increase in the COVID-19 infection rate forced a complete lockdown of all social, educational and employment environments here in Ireland, the EU and indeed, throughout the whole world, as we all know. I was very sad about this as I felt my great opportunity would be lost.

You can imagine how delighted I was to receive a phone call from Mr. Giles in mid-May, to say that CKB were resuming operations and that they still had a place for me. I started my new job and I am beyond thrilled. I feel very fortunate, especially given the very difficult time we all face coming out of COVID-19 and the world economy has suffered such enormous setbacks.

My COVID-19 story is one of hope in a time of great adversity and proof that if you work hard and dedicate yourself to whatever you are doing, you will get there!
In February 2020, prior to the COVID-19 lockdown, we had the opportunity to visit the Mardyke Sports Arena with our centre football team and two of our teachers. This was part of a University College Cork (UCC) programme developing community links with designated areas around the city.

It was an action-packed day. First, we spoke with the UCC Sport Development Officer and he told us all about the sports complex and facilities available. We then had a game on their full-size AstroTurf pitch which ended up a very close game. We won 5–4 in the end.

After this, we got a full tour of the centre of excellence, the gyms, indoor playing areas and indoor rehab areas for amateur and professional athletes and students.

Before lunch, we were given instructions on using their indoor climbing wall. With the help of instructors, we each took turns trying to climb to the top. This was really tiring but a great challenge. The complex then provided lunch for us and we got to watch UCC’s ladies soccer team in a cup semi-final vs Maynooth University. It really was an excellent day, one I will not forget.
Jordan Walsh tells us about his experience in Youthreach O’Connell Avenue.

Here at Youthreach O’Connell Avenue, it is more than just a further education and training centre. I like the way staff and students treat each other. From my very first day, I was made to feel very welcome.

Even though I was nervous when I started here I was encouraged to do my best and to get involved in other activities and events which might be of benefit to me. All the teachers and the coordinator were approachable and encouraging. My career guidance and the mentoring team have played a pivotal role in helping me to explore future paths.

I was encouraged to do an introduction in barbering course and I absolutely loved it. Currently, I am completing an advanced QQI Level 5 in barbering at Limerick College of Further Education and I am hoping to start part-time employment soon. Once my exams are over I will pursue a full-time career as a barber. I am fortunate to be in a centre where I am respected and encouraged to do the best that I can do.

The list of positive benefits to Youthreach O’Connell Avenue are endless, but for me, the most important one is the fact that I know if I need help with anything the staff are there to help me along the way. I cannot emphasize enough how much time they have taken in preparing me for the next step in my life. I could write pages and pages for the ways Youthreach has changed my life but I still would not do it justice. I owe everything to the staff of O’Connell Avenue for encouraging me to have a realistic goal and to pursue that goal.

Cycle Against Suicide-Student Leaders Congress 2020

Five learners from Youthreach O’ Connell Avenue attended the ‘Cycle Against Suicide - Student Leaders’ Congress at the City West Convention centre in Dublin on 17 January. The learners took part in a positive mental health education day for young people in a fun environment. There were a number of high profile speakers including Alan Quinlan and Rory (Rory’s stories) and music acts including United Vibe and Chasing Abbey. This is the second year that learners from O’ Connell Avenue have attended this event and it was enjoyed by all.
The Liberties Training Centre is a Community Training Centre based in Dublin 8. It has delivered vocational training to early school leavers, aged between 16-21 years of age since 1986. All of our programmes are developed to meet the needs of both our learners and the local economy. Currently, we deliver QQI training in catering, engineering, woodwork, hospitality and tourism.

In mid-March, Liberties Training Centre closed its doors and moved its operations online due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It was a huge challenge for us, as it has been for all educational organisations and we didn’t have much time to prepare. Our team embraced the new technology, engaging with any CPD on offer on Technology Enhanced Learning and Google Classroom. It has worked well for us, the learners finding the new Classrooms easy to navigate and Robbie, a woodwork learner, “likes having it (resources) in one place to look at and help answer questions, …. I can ask Frank a question really easily. I’m missing the workshop though.”

As time went on we got a lot more confident in our ability to deliver training online but it’s been a steep learning curve, both for the team and the learners. One of our instructors, Barry, has been shocked by the lack of basic digital skills of some of our learners and feels that we’ll need to prioritise digital competency. Molly, one of our learners said, “I found it really hard at the start, I couldn’t even open the Meets video tool to join a lesson, now I’m flying,” Our learners will need to develop these skills, as online learning will be a key feature of all courses in the future.

Remote learning also highlighted the digital divide, with only 10% of our learners having access to a PC, laptop or tablet; the remainder using the Google Classroom App on their smartphones, which was far from ideal. We were able to rent four laptops from Limerick City Colleges for learners that had no access to a learning device and we were able to re-engage these learners as a result.

Barry spoke about his experience working at home and juggling home-schooling and other responsibilities, “we’re all out of routine and sometimes it’s hard to get a stretch of quiet time to focus. It’s also changed the way we think about delivering training, with the design of the online content becoming more important than ever, in the centre we can use gestures, demonstrations and body language, etc, I feel like I’m talking a lot more in the online lessons, my jaw is even getting tired.”

Our learners are also struggling with routines, missing the training centre, the mainstay for their timekeeping. Mostafa has found a way to manage it, “I need to set a time every day to log-on.”

We supported our learners by creating milestones for their week with daily assignments with deadlines and online lessons at the same time each day. We also offered online counselling and hosted mindfulness lessons throughout the week to support the well-being of our learners.
Community Training Centres

However, this isn't always achievable for some of our learners, who are also struggling with chaotic home-lives, mental health issues and worries about friends, family, or their own futures.

Mostafa has lived in Ireland for nearly two and a half years and still has family back in Sudan that he worries about and sometimes it's hard to get clear information about what's happening there, he says, “I'm lucky, so far, everyone is ok.” Mustafa is well on his way to completing his Engineering course and hopes to study Aircraft Maintenance.

We've had some fun over the lockdown, hosting a Kahoot quiz for our learners and a photography competition, “My 5km” on Instagram. They've helped us build a sense of online community. Even our youth committee has continued their work online, contributing to the development of our new strategy. We've learned a huge amount from this experience, it will shape our future direction and change the way we think about technology in education.
Kay Gavin's perspective on engaging with Crumlin Adult Education Centre

My name is Kay, I would like to tell you about my time as a mature student at the adult education courses run from the Adult Education Service at Crumlin College, Dublin. Going back to education was not an easy decision for me to come to, as I had bad memories of early school days in the mid-fifties, which were cut short through horrible treatment. However, five years ago I decided to go to Crumlin College and enquire as to what was available to me. At this time in my life, I was very nervous about anything to do with the teaching system, as memories of my childhood experiences flooded back to me. When I arrived I was introduced to lovely tutors, who between them taught several different subjects at whatever level you were comfortable with. I was made very welcome by these people and was put at ease as they explained what was involved.

At this stage of my life, the simple matter of signing a document sent me into a panic but I signed up straight away and have not looked back on this decision. I was pleasantly surprised to discover just how many people of my age and younger, were in the same position. I began studying English, reading, writing and spelling. The next term I moved onto basic computers and maths and I am moving onto art classes this term. With each year I completed, I felt myself becoming more confident and began to look forward to the next year's challenge.

At the end of the school year and once you have completed your course, you are awarded a certificate showing your progress in your subjects, it's a confidence builder.

Don't let embarrassment or shyness hold you back. The courses cater for all ages, so use it to your advantage. I got so much from these courses, I have no regrets. I would encourage anyone that's looking for something to do to go along to your local Adult Education Service and talk to someone. You will have no regrets and you will meet lots of new friends! Believe me, you will love it, it was the best move I've made in my life.

Jennifer Stuart's reflection on delivering a catering course during the lockdown

I am a 'Food and Cookery' tutor for the CETB Adult Education Service. I deliver a catering course called 'Short Order Cookery' at QQI level 4. I deliver this course with a wonderful group of ladies in Saint Kevin's College, Crumlin. This course allows students to enter employment directly in the sector. Learners on this course gain a focused education in catering and develop their practical skills and enhance their catering knowledge.

The initial concern upon closure of the schools was how I was going to continue with a class that has such a practical aspect to it. My learners cooked in practically every class. Luckily we had most of the practical learning outcome requirements covered. It turned out that my learners showed as much enthusiasm from home as they did in the kitchen/classroom.
As a group, we continued without a break after school closures. I sent worksheets and helpful information to help complete these worksheets via WhatsApp to the group. My students do not have access to printers so they wrote out the questions, completed the work, took pictures with their phones and sent the completed work back to me. I then printed and corrected the work, then added this to their folders. I communicated individually with students via text and phone calls to assist with the work as all, were at times, at different stages of completion.

My students successfully upskilled on new technologies e.g. Zoom, sending documents via email, etc. When cooking at home myself, I took pictures of all stages of cooking some meals, completing ‘mise-en-place’ and presenting the dish as if I was serving to a customer. I compiled these pictures into a video format and these were sent to my learners. Some tried out these dishes with tremendous success. I have received many pictures of my students preparing a meal from beginning to end and successfully adhering to all that was learned in the kitchen during training and assessments.

The outcome of this new approach to delivering material to my students can only be described as being so much more successful than I originally thought it would. It has been so important to continue regular communication to ensure that the students knew that they were supported. This may well be the first qualification some have tried to access and it has become so important to them. It was imperative that I facilitated this achievement for my learners to the best of my ability.

The result of the work I completed with my students during the pandemic has proved a success. It has greatly showcased their own talents and skills. It encouraged the students to think more for themselves and gave them more of an opportunity to complete additional independent learning. They have shown drive and dedication. My students have expressed great pride in their work and love sending me pictures of their prepared meals. Added to this is the involvement of their children which demonstrates a ripple effect of their learning.

Nothing really compares to the hands-on teaching, learning and social impact that takes place in the kitchen. However, there has been learning to both tutor and student in regards to the possibility of delivering mainly theoretical material online, discussions on zoom calls, video making and how students can be more independent when required and allowed to be.

Learner Aisling Carroll’s experience

Before I did the cooking course I always just cooked dinners that my Nan taught me, like potatoes, meat and vegetables. But now thanks to Jennifer and the cooking course I am much more confident and I am exploring much more at home. The kids are loving it. Jennifer has been amazing in helping me finish the course during the COVID-19 pandemic. Thanks to Jennifer I have finished my assessments and theory work as she has sent me the materials I needed to complete what I needed to do.
Donegal ETB's Further Education and Training (FET) Service welcomed three female students to its Basic Welding course in Gweedore in the winter of 2019/2020. It's the highest proportion of women the centre has ever had in a welding course and a positive step in the right direction. The current cohort undertook this course for practical reasons.

Danielle Burns, came into welding to gain useful skills for her work as a circus performer as she wanted to work on her own props for her fire throws.

“I fell in love with welding,” Danielle said. “It's a useful skill for anyone to have. Particularly for women, it's a great trade to get into. It's empowering in a way, you make your own money, you can travel with it and you have the opportunity to grow and develop.”

Danielle enjoyed the hands-on side of the course as students learn the basics in MMA, M.I.G. and T.I.G. welding.

Donegal ETB prides itself on creating a supportive atmosphere for women in trades. Welding may still be a male-dominated sector, but there are many young women keen to make their mark.

Sarah Louise McGinty dreams of being a mechanic or a welder. That's my end goal, but I know from experience that people don't take you seriously when you're a girl and want to do mechanics. I started with welding to show my interest in mechanics. I love it and in the back of my mind I’m debating staying with welding.”

Sarah Louise always saw the value in trades through her father's work as a mechanic. Despite wanting to enter the sector from a young age, she didn't get the encouragement she needed early on, “When I was in school my careers teacher put me off mechanics, saying would I not do beauty, but there are not enough girls doing this and I would tell others thinking about it to definitely go for it,” she said.
Dominie McDyer says she wished she had done this welding course years ago. A qualified goldsmith and silversmith, she had worked in jewellery repairs before looking for a change. She was between jobs when she decided ‘it’s now or never’ and pursued her interest in engineering and bigger metalwork. Welding, Dominie said, is a tricky skill to learn. “It’s not easy, it takes a lot of hard work, but it’s taught brilliantly here in a very relaxed and easy environment. Everyone is brought along at their own level. This is the most instruction I’ve ever had in a course,” she said.

The course is geared towards equipping students with the skills and safety certificates they need to start off in the welding industry. Students also take on three weeks of work experience to finish the course and many pin their hopes on gaining work contracts afterwards.

“A lot of us are interested in going further or going for the Intermediate Welding course in Letterkenny,” Dominie said.

The appeal of welding, for Dominie, lies in the plentiful work opportunities in the industry. Dominie points out that women, by nature, have two of the most important qualities needed to be a good welder - a steady hand and patience. Women pushed through the glass ceiling during wartime when they were needed in factories to support the war effort.

“There is a major recruitment drive in America at the moment for female welding. The average age of an American welder is 55 and with a lot of those men ready to retire, there is going to be a major skills shortage. I would say it's the same here,” Dominie said. “You find now that people with degrees come back and learn the trade.”

Danielle’s own experiences showed that a degree is not a sure-fire route to a job. She studied Anthropology in Maynooth but soon found that she got more work from her circus skills. “There is a lot of opportunities in welding. Every industry needs welders really, you can go into shipyards, food, agriculture, motor mechanics, aerospace and there are so many opportunities to travel.”

People may still be surprised by women choosing welding, but Danielle said the reaction has been always positive and she hopes more women will follow suit.

Donegal ETB’s FET Service also provides intermediate and coded pipe welding courses as well as an engineering operations traineeship – further information is available on their website course finder [https://www.donegaletb.ie/further-education-training/course-finder/](https://www.donegaletb.ie/further-education-training/course-finder/).
The learners within the Health Service Skills course chose to still complete their work experience supporting frontline staff within the healthcare setting. Below are just a few pictures of LMETB learners all kitted out in their PPE ready for a very hard day's work.

LMETB would like to thank all of their learners who have continued on with their learning online and provided vital support to frontline staff.
WWETB was contacted by Zurich who asked for assistance in producing personal protective equipment for the healthcare sector. Zurich was in a position to provide acrylic sheets and acetate sheets to the project and WWETB agreed to contact a number of health centres across the counties of Waterford and Wexford and to produce the protective headgear.

A committee was set up which included the FabLab coordinators Olga Donoghue and John O’Leary, Fablab Programme Manager Mary Walsh O’Shea, Unit Manager Shay Cummins, AEO Mary Walsh and the Innovation and Development Manager Michael O’Brien. This is an excellent example of cooperation across the ETB services – Enniscorthy FabLab is operated through Training Services and New Ross FabLab is operated through BTEI.

WWETB’s FabLab in Enniscorthy and New Ross set about designing the headsets for the visors on the sheets to maximise the number which could be attained from each sheet and a matching design to cut the acetate sheets in order to fit the headset.

In total, 25 acrylic sheets and 1400 A4 acetate sheets were donated by Zurich. A total of 255 headsets for the visors were produced. The PPE equipment was washed in alcohol and packed to ensure sterilisation and distributed to eight health centres.

WWETB Chief Executive, Kevin Lewis asked to pass on his thanks to the committee and expressed his hope that the visors will make a real difference to the community groups to whom they were supplied to.

BTEI and Community Education practice social distancing through An Post.

When Public Health restrictions paused face to face communication with learners, WWETB Community Education Programme worked hard to continue connecting with learners by using other methods such as texting, phone calls, emails and Facebook, etc. However, due to issues with access to mobile technology and broadband for a number of learners, programme coordinators had to adapt.

Some time ago WWETB had produced a set of four postcards showcasing learner’s work. The opportunity to not only practice communication through social distancing but also increasing our footprint by using the postcards presented itself.
In accordance with public health guidelines, 370 postcards were delivered to community education learners in Co. Waterford, Waterford City and Co. Wexford on 3 April.

The personal message of the coordinators was the importance of checking in with learners, to ensure they were safe and well and to let them know that their coordinators and tutors looked forward to seeing them again soon. The feedback has been amazing; comments include:

“Got mine today ladies, thank you for caring about the community and stay well”, “Thank you for my postcard which arrived this morning”, “Fantastic, your passion for community education and keeping everyone linked-in is so evident. Keep up the great work”.

The WWETB Adult and Community Education Facebook posts were picked up by Aontas (The National Adult Learning Organisation) which sparked discussion regarding postal services in rural areas:

“The importance of the postal service is something that successive governments have tried to eradicate, in rural areas particularly, we now see its relevance and importance. It is only through the post that we have been able to send course work to our learners in order for them to complete their programme” (Aontas FB Page Comment). So our simple postcard started a conversation regarding access to technology, rural broadband and Irish postal service. Community education at its best – new conversations, new ideas, new ways forward.

WWETB also used An Post to ensure learners had access to the learning resources they needed while taking part in their BTEI courses at home, including course reading and information. An Post delivery of course-related documents proved really useful for BTEI learners who did not have access to printing at home. Sometimes reading from a screen is useful and other times it’s just lovely to have the paper in hand.

One of the BTEI Level 5 Healthcare learners in New Ross said, "As I am not very up to date with technology and a lot of the course work is being done online due to COVID-19 this was all very alien to me. I found that having the information printed and sent to me made a huge difference. It meant that I could hold the work in my hand to read it, make notes on it and I did not need to keep going back to the laptop and through emails to find what I was looking for which to me personally was causing a lot of extra stress and anxiety. I feel that WWETB New Ross really understood my level of learning and has done everything possible to facilitate me".
As the COVID-19 pandemic closed classrooms globally, students of the Kerry College and Code Institute’s Diploma in Software Development switched to online learning overnight. By managing to avoid disruption or downtime the students were able to pick up the course and complete their assessments remotely.

Students joined the first 2020 cohort following a five-step coding challenge which assesses applicants’ suitability. The course is open to those without technical experience and those wishing to update or expand their coding knowledge. The class was chosen from over 100 applicants — the final 13 consisted of people from various different backgrounds including a teacher, a fireman, a waiter and a builder. Some had never typed a line of code before but all had something in common: they each displayed an excellent capacity to learn to code. The class ran successfully from December 2019 until the COVID-19 pandemic required all schools and colleges to close. The course is designed to be delivered 100% online, which meant the class was not impacted: they simply continued to work at home to completion of the programme.

Uniquely, for an online learning course, the Code Institute has developed its own proprietary tool AMOS (Analytical Monitoring of Online Students). This gives the student care team an aggregate view of students’ progress through the course which enables them to deliver proactive support and improves completion rates and outcomes. So, once lockdown commenced, the students simply switched to remote access and learning continued. This was hugely beneficial as the class was two-thirds the way through the course and working on their final assessments.

Ahead of completion students benefit from a dedicated careers’ week programme. This gives students one-to-one advice sessions in employment, software development and social networking. Students receive guidance on CV preparation, portfolio presentation, technical interviews, networking and career pathways. Kerry College was able to provide the students with a completely online ‘Careers Week’ where we arranged for a CV review clinic, mock soft skills and technical interviews, a networking prep workshop and a professional portfolio presentation one-to-one with Senior Software Developers. It's meant that the class managed to finish on time and students have graduated with a diploma and are now interviewing for roles in software development.

For Kerry College, employability was a key factor in adding the course to the syllabus. As John Herlihy, Admissions Officer for Kerry College explains: “We want to offer a practical programme that gives students job-ready skills along with an academic qualification. Code Institute’s Diploma in Software Development is the only University credit-rated coding Bootcamp in Europe, so our students can be assured they are getting a quality education. What's great about this intensive programme is that students develop a portfolio of work, essentially this will help them showcase their skills to employers. In-demand languages such as Python are taught, these are skills that are highly sought after in the region and beyond.”
ETB TRAINING FOR THE UNEMPLOYED

Being able to deliver these skills regionally is vital in making high-level technical training available to more people. It makes sense that people live locally, reduce or eliminate commuting and remain connected to their community while they study. Local employers see the value in this too. Siobhán O’Sullivan of Aspen Grove Solutions attests to this when she says: "We would have a lot of people that are working with us that are travelling as far as Dublin to acquire some of these skills, so it’s great that it’s something that is an initiative here locally for people and that Kerry ETB is on board with that as well." Therefore, the fact that online learning can enable access to training from anywhere at any time is hugely important.

Our careers’ services put students forward for full-time, part-time, contract and remote positions. Online education equips students with the discipline to self-motivate and to work remotely, both very valuable assets in the current market. This opens up a world of opportunities in cutting-edge software development roles around the world.

One such student, Orla Breslin put the situation into context when she speaks about her own background in the arts and hospitality – both fields beset by uncertainty and highly vulnerable in periods of economic uncertainty. After a string of short-term roles, Orla realised that she wanted more career certainty and the ability to work remotely. Therefore, she needed to up her tech game: "I saw the course advertised and applied! I love being able to use my design background and merge it with code. I am looking at specialising in front end development and/or UX and am excited at the opportunities this Bootcamp has opened for me. The team at the Code Institute are incredibly helpful and supportive."

To date five of the 13 from the new class are now employed!

To find out how your college or training centre can work with Code Institute to deliver Software Development training and improve the employment prospects of the local workforce, contact Ciara Browne at the Code Institute www.codeinstitute.net.

Success for Kerry College Graduates

2019 was a busy year for Kerry College's Monavalley Campus. Their second graduation event of the year took place on 12 December at the Rose Hotel, Tralee with 550 certificates issued to graduates who attended on the night with their families and friends.

A joint special award was presented to Digital Journalism and Radio Production students Barry O'Donnell and Dara Ó'Cinnéide - who are both visually impaired and who inspired the class group to produce a short feature ‘Cluas Chiarrai’ about the sounds and soundscapes of County Kerry.
Barry O’Donnell is originally from Dublin and living in Tralee. He studied Computer Science at Trinity College Dublin and worked as a Technician with CIÉ for 20 years. Living with sight loss following an acquired brain injury in 2007, Barry attended rehabilitation courses with both Headway and the National Council for the Blind. This gave him the skills to travel independently and to use assistive technology. Barry is a disability activist and has contributed to numerous radio and TV programs and is passionate about all things radio and in particular radio drama. Barry recently completed the one year Digital Journalism and Radio Broadcasting course at Kerry College’s Monavalley Campus and has, to date, presented several radio shows on Phoenix FM, a community radio station in Dublin.

Dara Ó Cinnéide is 27, from Tralee and has been a Guide Dog owner since 2011. He is currently working with his second Guide Dog, Hansen (aka Handsome) who has been by Dara’s side throughout one of the most important years of his life, as he took on his biggest challenge yet when he started the Digital Journalism and Radio Broadcasting course at Kerry College’s Monavalley Campus in September 2018. Dara has gone from being the shy guy in the room to making documentaries for Radio Kerry and being comfortable to sit behind a radio desk and present a show.

The short feature ‘Cluas Chiarraí’ is based on Barry and Dara’s experiences in navigating their respective worlds via sound. The series won Gold (Short Feature) and Bronze (Innovation) at the IMRO National Radio Awards in Kilkenny in October 2019. Winning these awards truly proved what is possible.
Social distancing sees young people with intellectual disabilities (ID) embrace technology to interact with their peers and communities

When schools closed in March due to the COVID-19 pandemic, young people with intellectual disabilities (ID) and their families were seeking alternative education sources and new innovative ways to socially interact.

Blossom Ireland launched a suite of digital services for young people with ID including a new pizza making video and step-by-step tutorial in partnership with head chef Richie Wilson of Fire Restaurant in Dublin and his son Ben (16).

The home cooking tutorial ensured all young people across Ireland were included in the home cooking craze that swept up amidst the lockdown. Auveen Bell, Blossom Ireland CEO, said “Young people with ID struggle to live a life like any other. Our partnership with Richie and Ben demonstrates that with the right environment and accessible tools; they can achieve as many things as their peers.”

The tutorial is bolstered by accessible online resources on themes such as daily planning, time management and how to use messenger apps such as WhatsApp. Simple language, pictures and symbols are used throughout to make them accessible to all. Parents and guardians are encouraged to join but the hosts are directly interacting with the young people, which is a unique approach. Blossom also launched zoom yoga classes and Digital Café meetups for Blossom’s service users.

The new supports saw a surge in activity on Blossom’s online channels, with website traffic up 900% month on month. Blossom is the only charity in Ireland offering supports of this kind to young people with intellectual disabilities and believes that the lockdown has proven its potential to expand its services to young people beyond Dublin via online channels in the weeks and months to come.

All resources are available for free online: https://blossomireland.ie/blog/
Step Ahead

Step Ahead is a national service to support young people with an acquired brain injury back to work, education, or training. The Step Ahead service provides one-to-one support including CV development, confidence building, interview skills, organisational skills, interpersonal skills and empowering clients on how to self-advocate for supports. Like any rehabilitation programme, it is important to say that there are no quick fixes and it takes time to work on goals but, the results are worth it!

Chloe’s experience of Step Ahead

Chloe Harris, aged 26 from Ballinteer, Dublin, suffered a brain injury as a result of a road traffic accident. Her goal is to find stable paid work within her area of passion as an actor and has so far found part-time extra work. Chloe highlighted the challenges of having a hidden disability which is a challenge many of the Step Ahead Clients face: “Having a secret injury will be a lot more harming than just voicing it. Now, I see possibilities..”

Chloe also described how the return to work process can often be lengthy when recovering from a serious accident and injury, she said: “It’s very difficult to imagine being proactive when you’ve been so passive for such a long time that you may not even remember why you want what you want or why you even want to go back to work. There are so many steps to getting there that Step Ahead can help you with and bring you to the point of realising your capabilities. It is about you and you are important. Step Ahead wants to help you.”

Embracing the national government restrictions due to COVID-19

To continue facilitating the delivery of the project, the nationwide Step Ahead service in Cork and Dublin commenced conducting partial initial assessments for new participants and offering remote vocational rehabilitation to existing participants over Zoom. Although the full assessment requires the use of an equipment set, completing a partial assessment still allowed the participants to commence the groundwork and learn rehabilitative strategies in preparation for their return to work/education, etc.

A new participant said "Without online help from Step Ahead, I would be stuck in limbo for an unknown period of time with no idea where to start”. By continuing to take on new participants, Step Ahead for more efficiency for when they fully opened again as ¾ of the work was already completed and waiting lists reduced.
For participants who were already actively engaged in the service, prior to government restrictions, some chose to temporarily disengage from the service for various reasons. These participants have instead been availing of a monitoring service, whereby Step Ahead checks in with the participant every 3–4 weeks and answers any vocational queries as they arise. One participant shared that “It’s nice to know I haven’t been forgotten about” and “It’s good to know there is someone always on the other side of the phone”.

Other participants wished to continue with their vocational rehabilitation goals over Zoom.

**Conor McCormack**

“I was referred to Step Ahead/ABII by Cappagh Neuro Rehab Unit. Thankfully, I was discharged home before the COVID-19 pandemic hit, but ‘Lockdown’ meant my appointments were postponed. So, when Emer at ABII offered me the opportunity to continue my appointments over Zoom, I was very happy I could continue my vocational rehab from the comfort and convenience of home. I look forward to my weekly Zoom call with Laura and the support she offers in preparing me for returning to work. I feel very optimistic in my recovery. I am very grateful for the support from Step Ahead and ABII.”

**Emma Doran**

“I suffered a brain injury a year ago and Step Ahead has given me invaluable support. Even in lockdown, we are connecting virtually and I would be lost without the team to help me achieve my goal to return to college”

Step Ahead is a nationwide programme and accepts referrals from all counties as long as the person can travel to Dublin for the specialist assessment. Please do not hesitate to contact Emer Duffy on 086 603 7353 or eduffy@abiireland.ie. For more details on referral criteria, see [www.abiireland.ie/stepahead](http://www.abiireland.ie/stepahead).
DCU Ability's focus is to support young adults with any disability to gain work skills and work placement experience, preparing them for employment. In the first year, the DCU Ability team has developed a best practice, structured 16 week ‘train-place-train’ programme of activity which included work experience and reflective learning as part of the young person's career action planning process. With the outbreak of COVID-19 and the introduction of social distancing, the structure of the training and especially the work placements were parts which had to be placed on hold until the restrictions were lifted.

So how did the team respond? For young adults who they have worked with and who have undertaken work placements already, the team was able to develop activity packs bespoke to the individual. Here the young person used their work placement learning and was taken through the reflective learning activity with their support network during the lockdown. This was usually a mum, dad, brother, sister, or granny and they did this at their own speed and when they wished to do it. Activities were varied and always fun.

For those young people who had not yet started with the DCU Ability team, online learning was offered, providing access to some of the learning material and activities in a digital format. This was also accompanied by Zoom meetings and discussions which helped support the learners and their support network.

The DCU Ability team has had a busy year so far, winning the DCU 2020 President's Award for Engagement, at a virtual ceremony on 27th May 2020. They were shortlisted for an Aontas STAR Award and launched the first online DCU Ability course that began on the 22nd of June.
As I cast my mind back to the Summer of 2019, I can quickly recapture the feelings I had then. Life was at a standstill, I felt I had done it all, married at seventeen, reared a family, ran a business with my husband and worked in retail with a multinational store for thirteen years. Busy all the time, I always was last, so self-care wasn't a habit I had ever developed. Now at 58, I felt redundant in every aspect of my life. All I knew was that I couldn't remain in this place of waiting. I had to think of something.

A friend suggested that I attend the Moving On information morning in Aras An Phobail in Tralee. No further explanation given. So full of trepidation I made my way in there and there the change started.

I met ‘the two Lisa's', lovely women full of kindness and understanding and an assortment of other ladies, some of them had completed Moving On and were a great endorsement for the programme. A programme to help us hone our skills and gather more to enable us to get employment. Did I want a job?? I wasn’t sure but felt at least that this would point me in the right direction. I put my name forward for the interview process and for the first time in a long time, I came away feeling that now I might have options, new things to explore.

Once the ball started rolling it was like a rock coming down a snowy mountain, ever getting bigger. More and more opportunities, week by week. Personal development, computer courses and brilliant motivational talks from business people. Forever planting seeds of possibilities in my mind. It became so easy to be open and honest with ‘our’ Lisa's because they were open and honest with us. I have discovered so much about myself that was buried along life’s way. I was encouraged to get involved in everything, to take part in the Christmas Craft Fair with my crochet and with endless support for my writing. I love ‘scribbling’ as I call it but never felt it was very good, but I have been given so much support and encouragement that I feel I want to concentrate on this now and see where it takes me.
In February of this year, Moving On facilitated us in doing the STEPS course with Dee Keogh. This has been another amazing journey of self-discovery and I would encourage anyone that gets the chance to do it. It is impossible to describe STEPS but it is enough to say that I found ‘me’. It gave me permission to believe in myself and my self-worth. Now I have tools to enable me to enjoy life and be kind to myself.

In March everything came to a standstill with the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic. Life will never be the same again but sometimes change can be positive and I feel I was never as well prepared for isolation. COVID-19 didn’t stop the Moving On. We got the same support and information only differently, via Zoom connection, (God Bless technology) with both the Lisa’s and our newfound Sheila, an amazing, gentle, super-efficient addition to the team. Alone, yet together, it all has made a remarkable difference to my mental health and the way I am able to deal with other challenges in my life.

Moving On is so much more than finding a job, it is nurturing and encouraging our abilities, to believe in ourselves and our value. It has given me back my self-respect and my desire to follow my dreams, to take care of myself and to start to love myself.

So, to everyone who has been part of my journey since the Summer of 2019 and that first anxious morning, I say thank you all. It has all been so worthwhile. I now belong. I have been gifted an amazing opportunity.
EMPOWER Programme

Gillian Berry from PerCen Technologies

The EMPOWER programme is targeted at female entrepreneurs from Galway, Mayo, Roscommon, Sligo, Leitrim and Donegal. EMPOWER aims to address specific challenges that hinder females and will help to fast track female-led businesses. The programme is run by the Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology (GMIT) Innovation Hubs.

Gillian Berry from Westport is a qualified clinical nurse specialist and was a participant on the inaugural Empower Start programme in 2017, “I was still working in the HSE and had visited the GMIT Hub to see what supports were available for entrepreneurs. When the EMPOWER programme was set up I was invited to apply. Which I did and both the learning and peer support was invaluable. The peer support still continues this day through WhatsApp and social media channels."

When asking Gillian of her experience of the EMPOWER Programme she said, “The EMPOWER programme was my first step in the entrepreneurial process. I had been an entrepreneur in the HSE. It provided me with an understanding of the journey, gave me real-world learning from others who had started their own business. Gave me the courage to step forward and work on my innovation. The Empower programme was my first steps in entrepreneurship and the foundation in my start-up."

Gillian founded PerCen Technologies in 2019 in response to challenges that she felt were not addressed in Healthcare. PerCen pronounced ‘Person’ and represents ‘Person-Centred’ Technologies. It was set up to create person-centred innovative solutions to clinical unmet needs. Its aim is to use scientific knowledge and the latest technologies to complement clinical evidence-based practice.
PerCen Technologies is currently collaborating with the Tyndall Institutes in Cork under the Celtic Advanced Life Science Innovation Network (CALIN), funded by the Wales-Ireland programme 2014-2020 through the European Regional Development Fund. CALIN is a unique network of world-leading higher education institutes and global market leaders that will provide access to emerging technologies; expertise, knowledge and skills; routes to market; and venture forums and technology workshops. According to Gillian,

“this has provided the investment in expertise, resources and finance to the research and development of our solution. A proof of concept has been developed and a prototype is being developed.”

Gillian was one of 33 health innovation enthusiasts selected to participate as a wildcard in the EITHealth Hackathon. She competed in Amsterdam for a prize pot of 4million euro. She has since participated in the EIT Health digital health validator programme at Trinity College. Gillian was also selected for IP Training which was a partnership between the EIT Health, the EPO and 4IP. She participated in the Codex4SMEs event in Paris, a European Interreg Project collaboration, which plans to improve healthcare by enhanced adoption of Personalized Medicine in North-West Europe.

Gillian was concentrating on obtaining funding to get a sustainable R&D SME Instrumental funding model when COVID-19 entered the equation. Gillian having 25 years’ experience in health care and all her post-graduate education Cardiac, infection prevention and control, clinical trials management, medical affairs, patient safety and quality and her last two years in medical device and digital health validation, gave her the tools to create a rapid response to the global pandemic. The aim was to transfer her knowledge using a defined process that she had created to make a contribution and brake the chain of infection.

Gillian has spent her time diverting her skills whereby she co-founded OSVX Open source Volunteers as a rapid response to global and societal needs for the global pandemic with Dr Roisin Lyons Assistant professor of Innovation DCU. 1,500 STEM professional volunteers, Academic institutions, SME's and Multi-National companies joined their slack channel and worked on 30 defined projects from PPE, digital Health, CovEd guidance, process and medical devices. She has since collaborated with multi centres UCD and the Mater Surgical group to gain funding for valuable rapid COVID research.

Gillian is 100% committed to the global response, a lot of valuable solutions were achieved, third level institutions were involved i.e. UCD, DCU and LIT. Gillian is continuing to collaborate with UCD and LIT at present and also had secondary and primary school involvement at a lesser degree.
Career and Healthcare Opportunities for Women is targeted at women in Cork and Limerick who have been out of work and are interested in returning to the workforce. Ballyhoura Development leads the project, working in partnership with SECAD (South and East Cork Area Development) and also with Limerick and Clare Education and Training Board and Cork Education and Training Board respectively.

After a period of animation and recruitment in December and January, the personal development aspect of the programme began shortly afterwards. This element of the programme is designed to build confidence and self-awareness through the identification of personal qualities and transferrable skills while also addressing areas for support.

Our Croom group was well established and had nearly completed the tailored, digital skills course when the COVID-19 restrictions were imposed. Classroom delivery came to a sudden halt. Now, more than ever, our participants needed our support. Through a series of phone calls and emails with the participants, a way forward was agreed upon through the use of the online video platform, Zoom.

Participants’ abilities and resources were assessed with a view to moving the training aspect online. The Midleton group, having access to broadband and computers and intensive digital skills supports, were happy to proceed with the online delivery of ‘Infection Prevention and Control’. The Croom group, from a wider and more rural geographic spread, did not have equal access to quality broadband and it was decided to defer the training aspect until September.

Participants in Croom were supported to update and complete job searches, letters of application and CVs. Mock interviews were held on a one-to-one basis via Zoom and group meetings continued to be held weekly. The focus remained on the needs of the participants, building confidence and skills that will enable them to be work/education ready.

Three online workshops, each focusing on facilitating women to return to work were successfully rolled out by Ballyhoura Development. The first workshop focused on finding and applying for a job by creating effective letters of application and CVs. The second provided guidance on how to complete a successful interview, be it online, or in person. The final workshop delivered information on the basics of infection prevention and control to enable participants to protect themselves and others in the workplace. All eligible women were offered one-to-one supports in their area of need. We had 37 women registered for at least one workshop, with many interested in all three.

Two of our participants, Johanna Carey and Tara O’Callaghan have shared their stories.
My name is Johanna Carey, aged 39, I am a mother of three, to two girls and one boy and I am married to Ger. I am also a carer to my son Conor who was diagnosed with ASD when he was 7 years old, which brought a new change to our lives.

Before having kids, I worked in shops and factories. When I was expecting my third child, who is now 11 years old, I decided to stay home with my kids. I was working in Dell at the time but due to childcare expenses, I felt I would be better off at home.

I also train underage kids in camogie, for the last 7 years, with my local club Granagh/Ballingarry and have completed a number of coaching badges. I really enjoy this and it gives me a great sense of pride in myself and in the team.

I have been out of employment for the last 12 years, but early this year it was in my mind that I would love to return to employment. I was browsing courses one night, on the internet, when I came across Healthcare Opportunities for Women on the Ballyhoura Facebook page. I felt I already had some experience in healthcare to bring to the course and this would help me with some modules. I have been caring for my son with ASD and also for my mother. From a young age, I had to help a lot at home and on the farm as my mother had a stroke when I was 9. This change had a major impact on my life and meant I did not get the chance to complete my education. My mother has experienced several strokes over the last couple of years and I still help out. Growing up with this experience and also caring for Conor were strong influences on my decision to get a healthcare qualification.

I was very nervous but I picked up the phone the next morning and rang Nichola at Ballyhoura Development. We met to talk about the course and after leaving that day I felt excited to begin a new chapter in my life.

The course started in February, with personal development. I was nervous walking in on my first day. Nichola and the rest of the group were very welcoming and I enjoyed going to the course every Monday and Wednesday. The women who are doing the course with me are brilliant and the personal development helped us to bond as a group very quickly.

But on March 13th the course was stopped due to COVID-19 sparking another change to our lives with lockdown, social distancing and becoming the teacher as well as being a Mum. It has also been a big change for the kids. Conor’s routine of going to school provided a much-needed structure for someone with ASD. He missed the routine and his friends and this massive change created lots of ups and downs. The girls missed their sports and socialising with their friends. As we are big fans of hurling in my family, we all really missed Limerick matches too, but the main thing is that we stay safe.
My course continued on Zoom once a week with Nichola where she prepared us for interviews and helped us with our CVs as part of our now ‘remote’ personal development module. I had never done a CV before! The last jobs I worked in, it was basically pick up the phone and you were offered an interview. I was delighted to have my first CV done and I have also learned how to use a computer more. I have gained confidence as a person where I lacked confidence before I started the course. Healthcare for Women which is funded by the European Social Fund has brought a new chapter to my life and also to my family.

Tara O’Callaghan’s experience with Career and Healthcare Opportunities for Women

My name is Tara O’Callaghan. I live in Ballingarry, Co. Limerick with my husband and our two girls. I have been a full-time carer to my daughter who has Type One, Diabetes for nearly 10 years. She is nearly 18 years old so I wanted to get back into the workplace again. I felt like I wanted to achieve a qualification and thought hard about what I wanted to do. I did feel like as I was out of the workforce for so long that I might not be able to achieve this. My life has always been around school life and sports with my family and we were on the road every day and that was with me at home! I didn’t think it would be possible to commit myself to something extra, especially a full-time course.

Then, I saw an advert online about the Healthcare course with a QQI, Level 5 certification. I had previously done a Childcare course and also an SNA course and wanted to get into healthcare. I knew I just had to bite the bullet and ring to enquire. I spoke to Nichola, the Development Officer with Ballyhoura, on the phone and she straight away eased my nerves. She was very positive and gave me all the information I needed. She explained that as I was a family carer that I could apply for the course. She told me that it was two, half days a week and that we would be doing the course alongside the primary school calendar, which meant when the schools were off we would be too. This was amazing as I would still be able to be there for my girls but that I also could do something for myself too. I met with Nichola and registered the next day and started the course three days later.

The first day I was so nervous, but Nichola was there again with a smile and there were other women there in the same situation as me. Our first module was personal development which was a lot of bonding and getting to know each other along with confidence building and computer skills. It made coming into class much easier as the weeks went on. We got to do computer work and look at our CV’s also. When the COVID-19 ban came in I thought that the course would stop and I was devastated. But Nichola organised phone calls, emails and Zoom meetings to keep us all engaged and connected. We managed to complete our letters of application and our CVs. We even got the chance to do a mock interview on Zoom, which was a great experience. Our group has set up a WhatsApp group for us all to keep in touch also. I have learned a lot about myself and made new friends.

Tara and Johanna are now back in the classroom with all of the other participants. They are halfway through their first module, Safety and Health at Work and all is going well.
Zkriat Sadig's Story

My name is Zkriat Sadig and I have been a member of Cultúr for seven years now. I first found out about Cultúr through one of my friends who referred me to their women's group in 2013. In 2014, I became the leader of the women's group but I stepped down as leader last year, due to personal reasons. The women's group is a safe place for women to go to talk about their issues and struggles with people who can empathise and help them with some of their issues. It is a place where women feel empowered and make new friendships.

Other than being a part of the women's group, I have also taken part in many other courses and events with Cultúr such as a jewellery making course in March 2018, integration training in June 2018 and a personal development course in 2019. I also participate in Cultúr’s monthly migrant forum. These courses were very beneficial to me as I picked up many skills that I now use in my everyday life. I have also met many of my friends through these courses and find all the teachers to be very helpful.

In the beginning, I found these courses to be especially hard for me as English is my second language. I had struggled greatly with English but through Cultúr I joined some English courses. English courses that I have taken part in included Cambridge Business English commenced in August 2017 and Cambridge English attended by me in 2018 and 2019. I feel these courses have really helped me to improve my English. The possibility to continuously attend consecutive course levels assures students' progression in learning English.

Through Cultúr I have also been given many opportunities to further my education. I have started a community development course at LMETB and I am now on Level 5. In the future, I hope to continue on with my education and find a place of employment.

Svetlana Litvinskiene's Story

My name is Svetlana Litvinskiene and I am from Lithuania. I have been living in Ireland for eight years. Before I took part in Cambridge English at Cultúr I was nervous about speaking English, I would usually get stuck repeating the same sentence over and over again. I was afraid to say any words, I was afraid to open my mouth, I was afraid to make a mistake. I would stand in the corner of the room just to avoid any questions or conversations.
I now speak English at the beginner level, but I rarely use it in my daily life. I work as a housekeeper in a large hotel and most of my day-to-day work is with Polish or Lithuanian people. At home and with my friends I mostly speak Lithuanian.

I went to English classes in Navan twice a week because I really wanted to improve my English. I had a dream of getting a new job, but I know that my English level was not high enough. I wanted to enjoy my life, to become stronger and confident when speaking English.

Deciding to take the Cambridge courses, was my best decision. I am still a little nervous but now I am not afraid to speak. I have learned some strategies and I know that I can do it step by step.

After completing the Cambridge English course, I have participated in meetings and made presentations and now enjoy talking with others. I think the most important thing is I have stopped feeling shy.

Ewa Bona’s Story

I participated in Cambridge Business English Course Vantage Level (B2) that took place from August to November 2019. This course took place twice a week for 12 weeks. The classes prepared me for the Cambridge Business English (BEC) Vantage Exam that I took on the 30th of November 2019. During this period, I have had a chance to meet other adult professionals who wanted to improve their business language skills. This course was essential for me as I was between jobs at that time and carving social interactions. I met great fellow students and we had the opportunity to learn from each other as well.

Classes were not limited to grammar and vocabulary. We also had a chance to improve speaking, presentation and writing skills and get a good knowledge of several business topics. During this time, I also took part in a career planning session. Which gave me the chance to get help with developing my CV. I also had a tremendous mock interview session.

The overall atmosphere and very positive feedback from my tutor John and job coach Pauline helped me to be more confident at interviews. I could now apply a more strategic approach and get better prepared for job interviews. After several rounds of these sessions, I got job offers from two separate companies Microsoft and Kaseya.

I took the course quite seriously and I studied at home a lot. As a dyslexic person, writing poses the biggest challenge for me. Therefore, I created several texts for possible topics and my tutor was happy to correct them and give me useful tips.

I feel the exam went really favourably for me and I secured enough points to get an A mark and a Cambridge Business English Certificate BEC on a C1 Level.
Sameera’s story

Sameera is an engineer from India and has a Masters in rural management. Back in her country, she worked as a technology consultant and participated in a diverse range of socio-economic policy and practice projects with various state governments. When she moved to Ireland in October 2017, she was not allowed to work due to her visa status, so she decided to apply for MBA programmes. Later, her husband changed jobs and became a CSEP holder, so her visa status changed and she started looking for a full-time position. She attended a few interviews, but she was mostly offered short-term internship roles: “I didn't really hear back from many, even if I did hear from people it was mostly internships, one or three months periods. There was a lot of ambiguity, so I didn't know if the problem was with me or with my visa”.

Sameera learned about our EPIC Programme in October 2018, but she could not join until May 2019, due to her status. In 2019, a new visa was introduced for dependants of CSEP holders and thanks to our funders, we were granted permission to expand the eligibility criteria and support people like Sameera with high skills and vast professional experience that have a lot to offer to the labour market and still face a number of challenges to find employment.

EPIC (Employment for People from Immigrant Communities) is a programme that supports migrants to gain meaningful employment and access education and training, making an impact on diversity and social inclusion in Ireland. EPIC training is six weeks long and covers CV and cover writing skills and interview preparation. “The training is perfect! Once I enrolled in the training is when I got to know what my mistakes were. It was so technical I realised what a mess I was making. Before that I used to have comprehensive CVs. And just because I didn't get feedback, I used to think what I was doing was right”.

Integration is another key component of the programme, as participants have the chance to meet other migrants in a similar situation; “The peer group is so diverse and they come from such diverse backgrounds. I think that gives a very nice social bonding, you’re not alone. Sometimes I used to doubt my qualifications and myself but seeing people around me with similar or maybe better qualifications and backgrounds and still struggling, that kind of gives you a sense that you're in this together".
Another service of the EPIC Programme is individual meetings with our experienced Career Counsellors. Our participants are assigned a Career Counsellor on the first week of training and they meet with them weekly for the duration of the training; “It's a very tailored approach, it's totally about me and my shortcomings. My Career Counsellors were very supportive and gave me very helpful insights”.

Business in the Community Ireland (BITCI), the organisation that manages the EPIC Programme, has a network of businesses that provide different services to our Employment Programmes, such as workshops, company visits, mentoring and mock interviews; “All the guest speakers add value to the training and I found helpful how they take time to try to demystify things and what they expect out of a participant. I think that makes a huge difference, especially when you hear it from the recruiters”. These supports give our participants the opportunity to learn about the job seeking process from a recruiter's point of view, get useful advice and expand their social and professional networks.

Sameera has expertise in a very niche sector and she applied for a position in her area in BITCI in 2019. She has been working with our organisation in the role of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) Executive advising our members on sustainability and CSR. This is how she describes her overall experience with the EPIC Programme: “That's my dream. EPIC programme totally was like that. It actually gave me confidence and put me on track. Things just started rolling after the EPIC Programme”.

BITCI is the leading adviser on sustainability and CSR and also works in the areas of education and employment. Regarding employment, BITCI runs programmes tackling issues on integration and social inclusion, working with businesses, the government and the non-profit sector. The EPIC Programme supports migrants to become economically independent and more socially integrated in Ireland. Participants develop job seeking skills through pre-employment training, one-to-one support and work experience opportunities. Since its inception in 2008, over 3,200 people from 101 nationalities have engaged with the services and 67% of clients have secured employment or entered training or volunteering positions.

Helping ease the COVID-19 crisis for Roma and Traveller Communities

Empower's mission is ‘To enable positive change by offering leadership, partnership and innovation to individuals and communities across Fingal. To respond to unemployment and social exclusion through relevant and appropriate programmes and services. To empower the voices and actions of marginalised people and groups by coordinating and delivering innovative social inclusion initiatives. To improve the quality of life of those we serve through brave advocacy and anti-poverty measures. To lead, facilitate and coordinate the anti-poverty and social inclusion strategy across Fingal’.

Through the SICAP programme, Empower engage with the harder to reach target groups. The SICAP programme guidelines specifically state ‘Roma people will face many issues commonly experienced by the Travelling Community but both communities have distinct and separate needs that require collaborative and distinct methodologies’.

The concept of a family within the Roma Community extends to cousins, uncles and aunts who may live in the same accommodation. Findings from a study (Roma in Ireland) revealed that up to 20% of respondents are marginalised from services and supports, living in extreme poverty, in sub-standard accommodation, sometimes with no bathroom, kitchen or cooker. For this group of respondents, accommodation is overcrowded, with reports of rats, damp and sewerage problems. Respondents reported children living in these situations of extreme poverty and deprivation, with children being sent to school hungry and with no lunch.

Although ethnic surveillance is not routinely collected, a number of COVID-19 outbreaks involving the Roma Community have been notified to the HSE.

Manouche is the National Roma Centre in Ireland and seeks to engage, support and advocate for members of the Roma Community. Empower SICAP staff have worked closely for a number of years to support and build the capacity of Manouche. Empower now employ a number of staff members from the Roma Community. Due to the low levels of trust Roma have in statutory bodies and the discrimination they experience, the presence of Roma staff has encouraged Roma engagement with Empower. According to George Anghel, “We’re being helped in the best possible way obviously by Empower”. Fostering the independence of Manouche is having a positive effect on this target group not only among themselves but among the wider community.

From the very earliest days of the COVID-19 pandemic, Manouche has been reaching out to the Roma Community across Dublin, Fingal and beyond to counties Monaghan and Louth.
Since mid-March, more than 50 families with over 300 people have received food parcels, delivered jointly by staff of Manouche and Empower through SICAP. Each parcel contained a HSE COVID-19 leaflet translated into Roma. Some families have received food deliveries on eight separate occasions over a wide geographical area, which takes coordination and investment of time and resources. Some of these families also received resource packs with cleaning and sanitary materials and activity packs with games, colouring books and pens for children. In the absence of these essential supports, the psychological and mental wellbeing of the Roma Community would have been even more disproportionately affected. “Without building the capacity of leaders within the Roma Community such a rapid response would not have been possible” Giuseppe Pruteanu, CE Supervisor in Manouche.

Below are a few quotes from members of the Roma Community that have received food supports in recent months.

“George and Giusepe thank you both so much, we will forever be grateful for what you do for us every week” Carrickmacross, Co Monaghan.

“God bless for what you have done for us and the Roma Community and being at the forefront of it all.” Balbriggan Town.

“Sergiu what you, Giusepe and George have done for the community not only in Balbriggan but as far as Blanchardstown, Dundalk and even Carrick during times like this is truly amazing”.

For further details, please contact George Anghel at 083-0950971 or ganghel@empower.ie or Sergiu Pruteanu at musicantiadublin@gmail.com.

If you are from the Roma Community in Ireland and need information on Coronavirus (COVID-19), you can call 087 126 4606 from Monday to Sunday, 9am until 9pm.

Dacă sunteți Rromi (membri ai comunității Roma) și locuiți în Irlanda și aveți nevoie de informații despre Coronavirus (COVID-19), sunați la 087 126 4606, de luni până duminica, între orele 9 dimineața și 9 după-amiaza.

The Balbriggan Travellers Women’s Group operates from St. Macullins Park, Matt Lane, Balbriggan in North County Dublin. Since 2017, Traveller women have come together as a support group to progress and advance common issues affecting their community. Empower initially supported this group of women to receive personal development supports, voter registration workshops and training supports. Four of the women also attended a QQI Level 6 Intercultural Community Course with Technical University Dublin that was organised by Empower and supported through SICAP.
Margaret McDonagh, Development Worker, with the Balbriggan Travellers Women’s Group has since gone on to attend a Bachelor of Social Science (Community and Youth Work) at NUI Maynooth. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, she has been a key contact for reaching out to the Travelling Community. With the support of a SICAP Community Development Officer, they have jointly organised and helped provide COVID-19 resource packs to 51 Traveller families living on sites in Balbriggan, Skerries and Swords. The Travelling Community were unable to source cleaning products in local shops and due to the close living quarters on sites, there was a genuine fear of catching the virus, so Empower organised for the purchase of these materials from wholesalers and the delivery of these packs in collaboration with the Development Worker of the Traveller project. Easter eggs, colouring books, pencils and crayons were also contained within the delivery packs to provide supports to children living on the various sites across Fingal.

A National Traveller Helpline to deal with COVID-19 queries for the Travelling Community, has been set-up by the HSE and the Traveller Health Unit. It is available seven days a week.
Phone or Text: 083-1006300.
The COVID-19 pandemic had an immense and immediate impact on the delivery approach of enterprise supports from the second week of March. All Monaghan Integrated Development (MID) group training and one-to-one face meetings were suspended on March 13th. At the date of suspension of group meetings, a ‘Planning for Self-Employment’ training course was being delivered with three sessions out of five still to be completed.

After liaising with the external trainer, the outstanding modules of the course were delivered online via Zoom during April. During the first online session, the tutor felt there was less engagement from the group compared to the training room setting during the first two modules of the course. However, as the participants started to feel more comfortable within the online setting the level of engagement increased. Feedback from the course was very positive considering this was a new approach for the trainer and many of the course participants. Feedback from one participant “I found the online course great as I wouldn’t be 100% confident at public speaking so I preferred the online classroom. I don’t think it needs improvement Gordon and Patricia done a fantastic job”

All MID enterprise development supports switched to online from April via Microsoft Teams and Zoom. These included

- Group Information Sessions on the range of SICAP self-employment supports available to unemployed individuals.
- 15 Hours ‘Planning for Self-Employment’ training delivered over 5 sessions via Zoom.
- Pre Start-Up: one-to-one client mentoring meetings covering all aspects of business start-up.
- Post Start-Up: one-to-one mentoring meetings to identify what additional supports or training the individual may require to ensure the sustainability of their enterprise.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, all of the above supports were provided in a training room setting and client meetings were face-to-face. The transition to delivery of all enterprise development support services online has been a very positive experience both for the enterprise support staff and clients alike with no reduction in productivity rate experienced.

There are many positives to be taken from our time spent as a remote service, the excellent methods that we have learned will no doubt be continued long term for our service efficiency. One of the major drawbacks of an online service and indeed this pandemic overall is the lack of direct human interaction. During our sessions, participants can occasionally become emotional when discussing certain topics. On both a personal and professional level, it is very difficult to sit behind a screen and not be able to comfort someone in distress by simple acts such as offering a tissue or a cup of tea. Nothing can replace direct human contact in these moments.
Peter was referred by his Juvenile Liaison Officer Therese Flannery to Ennis Garda Youth Diversion Project (Ennis GYDP) when he was 16 years old. He remembers coming into the Junction to meet a member of the Clare Youth Service Youth Work Team, Shane Mulvey. He came to “sign the papers” and admits he didn’t know what to expect from the project. Reflecting back to his life before he came on the project he laughingly said he was definitely in “more trouble back then”. He was hanging around the streets a lot more and was getting into lots of physical arguments with people.

Peter was six months out of school when he came on to the project and hadn’t thought much about getting into any course. While chatting with staff members he agreed to try a pre-Youthreach course in the summer months and proved he had the commitment needed to earn a place in a Youthreach course that was due to start in September of that year. Peter excelled in this course and was sent to Dublin to represent the Clare Youthreach at a weekend youth seminar.

Peter expressed an interest in taking the RSA Driver Theory Test. He was told that the project would pay for the exam if he put in the effort each week. He showed great determination and when he took the exam he passed with flying colours. He remembers thinking he wouldn’t pass and commented “I felt more than proud when I passed”. Clare Youth Service and An Garda Síochána teamed up to bring the UPS Road Code programme to Shannon. UPS Foundation’s global road hazard awareness programme involves classroom-based instruction and time ‘behind the wheel’ of a driving simulator. The aim of the programme is to help young people consider how to be safe in and around cars before they even start learning to drive. Peter completed this programme and also completed his Essential Driver Training and the project was happy to book his driving test after the commitment he showed to getting on the road. Peter recently completed his driving test and he passed with flying colours. Peter was dedicated and determined through the entire process and the project couldn't be more proud.

Peter was on a court-appointed curfew when he first came to the project, having to sign on in the station each week. He was encouraged by staff to stick to it and did so and after a period of time, this was relaxed. Looking back on how the project helped him, Peter said that the project was “good for his head”. He enjoyed using his time to chat about things that were important in his life. One very important thing in his life was the arrival of his baby girl. Reflecting back, he remembers chatting about how becoming a father was going to change his life. We both reminisced about how nervous he was in the car on the way to the hospital and he knew things would have to change. The Ennis GYDP helped him keep “his head screwed on”. Getting into Youthreach was vital to having an income for his family and staying out of trouble “settled me for becoming a father”, he remarked. He feels the Ennis GYDP project was great for him saying “it helped to get me on the road with a family on the go”. Being able to drive is a great asset in a young man’s CV and this will allow him the ability to get to his place of employment and helps out hugely with his new family.
Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day, teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime. Peter’s fondest memories of the project are being taught how to fish. He was very quick to learn and fishes himself now. He feels it is a great way to pass the time and thanks the project for getting him into it. He feels it “keeps me occupied and out of trouble”. He remembers being proud of arriving back with fish to eat and recalls how “catching gets your blood pumping”. He like a lot of fishermen feels peace and quiet is good and enjoys “chilling”. “Tight Lines”, is a term often used to wish fellow fishermen good luck when fishing, we at the Ennis Garda Youth Diversion wish Peter “Tight Lines” as he navigates through adult life.
During these volatile, uncertain and ambiguous times it is very easy to look at what cannot be achieved in youth work. Yet there are a lot of positives amongst the challenges. At the beginning of the year, we focused on our annual plan in youth work practice; this had to be revisited when restrictions were put in place. Many of our plans were now unrealistic. Nevertheless, COVID-19 has challenged us as youth workers to be creative so we did not postpone some of the programmes we had planned but have found different methods to implement them.

One of our favourite programmes is Music Jam. We devised this programme with Music Generation as a whole family intervention six years ago. Music Jam provides music tuition to over 90 young people from ages 6-18 every Wednesday. The programme is an example of Youthwork Ireland’s integrative model of youth work, where EYE project participants, their younger siblings, parents and mainstream young people learn to play a variety of instruments and put on shows in summer and at Christmas for the local community. When the initial restrictions were put in place, Music Jam moved online - utilising our social media platforms. Our music tutors provide weekly guitar and ukulele pre-recorded lessons enabling young people to continue to enjoy and play music at home.

Another area that was very successful pre-pandemic was song writing workshops. These sessions aim to encourage young peoples’ creativity, boost confidence and raise self-esteem. The participants create their own songs with the guidance of the musicians who mentored the programme, including members of the Blizzards, Fallen Lights and Music Generation. Oran and Zahira wrote and recorded their song with the help of Offaly Westmeath Music Generation and our brilliant volunteer musicians, you can view it here https://www.facebook.com/eyeyouthworkirelandmidlands/videos/758639884943106. The Music Jam Originals Album was conceived during lockdown and is indicative of the amazing creativity and resilience of our young people in Mullingar EYE and YoYo Youth Café. Rachel and Savannah wrote and performed ‘Back to You’ for the album. Take a listen here https://www.facebook.com/eyeyouthworkirelandmidlands/videos/401834224314619.

When virtual youth work became our only interaction with young people, a very successful and fun initiative we facilitated was tune in Tuesdays/Thursdays. Here we created a digital youth café via Zoom, where the youth workers and young people complete challenges, quizzes, scavenger hunts, guess who, heads up and charades. This has been extremely positive and great fun, it was then followed by a chat and check-in. The youth work team was very creative in thinking of alternative fun activities for the young people to enjoy every week. These evening events helped to discourage our young people from breaking isolation restrictions. Winners of our various online challenges received prizes, delivered outside their doors, every week and participation movie packs went to those who did not get into the top three prize winners. There were great numbers of young people engaged weekly.
GARDA YOUTH DIVERSION PROJECTS

The biggest challenge we have encountered to virtual youth work with vulnerable and at-risk young people is that not all have access to broadband, with some not having devices to allow them to log in to interactions online with us. We have found that one extended family from the Travelling Community that we work with (17 young people), has just one phone which is the extended family phone, reliant on 'pay as you go' top-ups for data access. Previously these young people, when they could access the phone, used hotspots to interact online, or used our projects computers and Wi-Fi. We have had a lot of challenges in keeping communications open with this group and have supplied them with an iPad, helped them launch WhatsApp and ensure their 'prize' included top-up vouchers.

Through these measures our young people were able to join in on our mindfulness, isolation badge, group chats, one to one WhatsApp ‘talk about it sessions’ for issue resolution and our regular tune in sessions. However, we had issues contacting a number of our younger participants as they don’t have Facebook or WhatsApp accounts – our youth team connected with these young people through a form of detached youth work outlined below.

We identified severe financial needs of most of our young people’s families during the COVID-19 restrictions and, with their agreement, delivered regular food packages to the most in need/at-risk families we work with using school meals funding and support from FEAD to maintain this service. We have registered our youth café as a community call hub where twice every month food packs are delivered to the doors of 30 families that are associated with the young people who attend the project. These deliveries allow our youth workers to have socially distanced interactions with our young people.

Another area that we had to adapt and create a digital platform for was learning - both informal and formal. At the EYE project, early school leavers have the opportunity to complete QQI accredited health-related fitness tasks and achieve recognition for their learning through badges designed online. This allows young people to complete tasks such as basic exercise, health and well-being and basic nutrition in addition when they complete the tasks they achieve a badge.

There is also a QQI personal effectiveness online module which sets out clear tasks that learners can complete online. We have worked to find creative ways to complete assignments e.g. video diaries, creative journals and blogs. It was a challenge to get the learners to fully engage in these online modules when the news broke that state examinations were cancelled. The news impacted the motivation of young people.

Engaging young people through social media platforms is something that can enhance the project's interactions with young people. However, it must be acknowledged that there is no online method of interaction as effective as face-to-face relationship building between a youth worker and young person.
Throughout the lockdown, Boyne GYDP continued to engage young people, using digital youth work to provide online supports and programmes.

These included:
- Movie and quiz. The first young person to complete the quiz correctly received a pizza delivery to their house
- Driving theory test online
- Life of Choices Programme
- Work to Learn Programme quiz online
- Motivational interviewing online
- CV prep quizzes
- Drugs and alcohol quizzes
- Creating and delivering care and hygiene packs for young people in the project

In addition to the above, the project held the Great Boyne-Bake Off – an online cooking session with young people. Justice workers cook/bake at home and send a step to step photo guide to the young people. The ingredients were then dropped to the participant’s front door and they were able to follow the guide and make their own food.

The young people sent their pictures of the completed meals, which were shared on Facebook. More and more young people engaged in the Great Boyne-Bake Off, even the young people who were reluctant at the start saying 'They can't cook'. The initiative was kept simple. The young people learnt new skills and grew in confidence. This programme worked very well and the young people really enjoyed this and dishes they have made include pizza, pancakes and fajitas.

One of the young people got employment with Noonan Cleaning in Our Lady of Lourdes hospital in Drogheda and the project has been doing regular check-ins with him and praising him for working on the frontline during the pandemic.
A Springboard+ student who decided to start studying professional accountancy in 2018 has been successful in winning an ACCA global scholarship for the completion of her remaining studies. With over 400,000 global students in 160 countries eligible to apply, Ms. Catriona Cox, a student with Professional Accountancy Training (PAT) was successful in securing this coveted student award. The Simpson Scholarship was set up in 1997 after Ms. Muriel Simpson bequeathed in her Will a scholarship to recognise the achievements of high calibre ACCA students.

We sat down and spoke to Catriona (in a socially distant manner!!) and chatted with her about why she decided to study ACCA with PAT under the Springboard+ programme.

"Every new year, instead of making a resolution, I pick one word that will be my theme of the year. In 2018, my word was purpose. I'd helped to bring in as many improvements as I could in my job but lacked the qualifications for promotion. It niggled me too (perhaps as a graduate during 2010's financial crash) that my experience was all within the one sector and that sector was Dublin centric.

I asked myself am I being purposeful with my time and more importantly with my energy? Is my work serving me, both in the daily tasks I complete and is it serving the future I want? These are the questions that led me to the ACCA Diploma with PAT. With the funding via Springboard this mitigated the fears I had about starting a new career from scratch in my 30's. I started with ACCA Diploma in Accounting and Business and in the first year was successful in completing all three programmes. Buoyed by this – it encouraged me to then progress onto the PAT and ACCA Ireland Diploma for the next three modules for 2019 and 2020.

In hindsight many of us would have a few choice words with which to describe 2020, however on January 1st, I chose process. I used to focus on the relief and sense of achievement on exam results day. That feeling though was too far off to motivate me to sit down night after night with the books; especially this year when many of us had exams delayed and extra demands put on our time and energy due to COVID-19.
Process focuses my mind on the value in every day; what can I learn, be challenged by, or achieve today. It gives me a sense of always moving forward, of getting better with each try rather than aiming for perfection. Making mistakes is part of the process.

I'm fortunate that this approach is valued by ACCA itself (this idea formed the basis of an essay I wrote which recently won ACCA's Muriel Simpson scholarship) and championed by my school at PAT. By practicing 'active learning' it's industry-led lecturers support students not just in what they learn, but how they learn."

Catriona has successfully completed her second Springboard+ PAT ACCA Diploma and is now studying for the ACCA Advanced Diploma with PAT.

Gemma Mc Donnell's experience at PAT

Starting the ACCA has been on the list for a very, very long time, it went on the long finger for so long, I always had an excuse ‘next year’ or ‘too expensive’ then the ‘recession’, ‘I'm traveling’... then ‘pregnancy and motherhood’.

I always had a major fear about starting ACCA and not being able for it. But there’s something magical about returning to education after having kids and being older. The fear is still there and maybe even worse but the tools to handle the fear are a lot better.

I never would have thought I had the mental capacity to get through the first ACCA exam. When I was younger any normal life issue, with exam worry, would have knocked me off my tracks for sure. I would not have had the confidence as I have now to say I need extra help. I now know this is normal. I put the work in every single day and it paid off. The fear will always be part of me and part of my success.

Once the original exam was cancelled due to the pandemic I thought sure more study time - but as I'm sure many of you know how it goes with home-schooling, pre-schooling and toilet training - it was not going to be easy for me to be as study focused as I hoped. Sometimes when I would sit down to do work, instead of answers coming out, the theme song for ‘Paw Patrol’ did instead!! But who doesn't love a good episode of Paw Patrol?

It was a struggle to get over the finish line, sometimes I felt like I was repeating and forgetting over and over but at the same time it was still a bit of ME time during all the craziness and I could never have done it without the help from my amazing college, Professional Accountancy Training, who were always ready to answer any questions any time. The support has been above and beyond even down to the staff in the background, Rasita and Lisa checking in on us keeping us updated, Gerry's inspirational messages and Breda still checking in. I feel so lucky. Thank you all so, so much!
Laura McGibney, is an Online Engagement Advisor at the School of Education and Lifelong Learning in Waterford Institute of Technology.

“I started a new role in January 2020 looking at ways to engage people who studied online. Then in February, along came a pandemic that engaged the whole world! How was I going to compete with that?

I consider myself part of the furniture in WIT having started work here in 1993 as an eager 18-year-old (and I like to think I’m still an eager 45 year old!). I moved to the School of Education and Lifelong Learning as Online Engagement Advisor this January. This role is primarily to look at ways to enhance the online experience and to support students around the non-academic aspects of online study. One of the reasons I was attracted to this role is that I completed a certificate, diploma and degree in Computing (part-time over 7 years) while working, so I know very well what it is like to juggle work, study and life over a sustained period. While on a career break from WIT, I worked as a HR Manager in a software company that would be typical of those who take on interns and employ graduates from WIT. In addition to that, I qualified as a life and business coach with the Irish Lifecoach Institute and I saw this role as an opportunity utilise these skills.

I began working with the HDip in Computer Science (Springboard+ programme) as this is the largest fully online programme in WIT. This course, while in existence for eight years, has been fully online for the past three so it would be reasonable to think the COVID-19 restrictions wouldn’t pose much of a problem. To be fair, things were already set up: classes are delivered online, they have a customised educational content delivery platform and already communicate with each other online via Slack, so there should be no problem, right?

It wasn’t so clear cut. The majority of students on the HDip are in employment and some also have children. Fitting the classes and study into their busy lifestyles was already something lots of the students were struggling with. Now we all (staff and students) found ourselves adjusting to working from home while, in many cases, caring for dependents.

The HDip also welcomed 58 new first-year students (from all over the country) to the course. They were just settling into the course when the restrictions came along. The course team considered various options to support all the students across the programme. These students have 6 hours of lectures plus 6 hours of labs every week and we knew this pace was going to pose a significant difficulty for a lot of them.
Three additional weeks were added to the calendar to allow for further reading weeks. Assignment deadlines were also pushed out to take the pressure off. Feedback received from the students has been that these additional measures were very helpful to ensure they could continue on the course and get their assignments submitted.

I was really just settling into this new role myself when the pandemic hit. I had already been encouraging the students to use the communication platform (Slack) to help each other out. I had also put together some videos on topics like time management and organisation tips as well as interviews with students and staff giving advice on how to survive the course.

The programme team were supporting the students as best they could on the academic side but what could I now do that would be of real benefit to people who are finding themselves under even more pressure? I believe connecting with people and framing how you look at things is very important in getting you through difficult times, so I started there.

The approach I took was first to offer one-to-one meetings with the students and secondly to encourage interaction amongst themselves.

Overwhelmed was a word I was hearing regularly and time management really became a priority for some. In response to this, I offered one-to-one meetings with students focused on creating a new routine that would fit their current circumstances. Exercises like this can really make all the difference in terms of feeling in control of a situation.

Connection with our peers is something that can be overlooked in online programmes, yet for those of us who studied in a traditional classroom setting, many recall that was one of the main things that got us through the course. With this in mind, I began running virtual tea breaks to give the students another place to connect with each other outside of course work. Virtual tea breaks can be more intense than traditional tea breaks because there is just one conversation and people don’t want to talk over one another. As the host, it is good to have a few general things up your sleeve to talk about and questions to bring everyone into the conversation. I think virtual tea breaks are definitely something that should continue post-COVID-19.

There is more uncertainty now than I have experienced in my lifetime. This affects people beyond their work or study. Being comfortable with uncertainty is not easy but it can be achieved (or at least helped) by focusing on the now and adapting to what you have in front of you."