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Longford and Westmeath  
Education and Training Board

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## Capturing COVID-19: LWETB Staff Newsletter May 2020



**Dr Christy Duffy**  
Chief Executive,  
LWETB

This newsletter is different. Normally we do a hard copy newsletter with news from all the different sections in LWETB to give a flavour of what is happening on the ground and the achievements of different areas of work. This eNewsletter came following a general call for submissions to all staff in LWETB and the result is the unedited reflections and inputs from those who contributed.

This newsletter is a story. Or rather it is a collection of images, poetry and stories. It is an effort to capture the Covid moment or a Covid moment. It is a point in time on our COVID journey and it is the experiences of staff at this stage.

Often when work like this is drawn together the introduction identifies themes or trends,

underlying ideas or areas for future exploration and work.

But these stories are personal stories of people we know and work with and personal accounts of what it is like working in LWETB under COVID-19.

So, no, there is no other theme. That is the theme. So I invite you to read the stories and let the stories speak to you. The message or messages every person hears will be different, the parts of the contributions that touch us will vary from person to person. And we are all very grateful to those who were willing to share their experiences and personal stories with us. So savour the moment and enjoy the beauty of what is shared.

### Preview:

Workplace Wellbeing Walk

Remote Working Submissions from Staff



My name is Virag Hogan. I am an Special Needs Assistant in Mullingar Community College. After caring for my six children for 15 years I have started working as a full time SNA last September. The principal and staff in MCC have made me very welcome and I slipped into my role quickly. My tasks were very varied, from checking blood glucose level to giving encouragements and help with reading and arithmetic, to breaking down instructions to more manageable sizes to those who were in need just to mention a few. I mainly worked with First Year students which was a blessing as we both encountered together the new situations this year was bringing to our lives.

In March I was catapulted into the unknown, like most of us. All of a sudden, not alone I was a mother, an SNA but became educator to my children and was being educated by my colleagues on how to use and work on Microsoft Teams. It was daunting as I am not very good with technology and much prefer face to face contact. However, with help from Mark and Colin and a few online lessons I managed to grasp the basics of Teams while doing work with my children on Zoom and on Whatsapp not to mention the old fashioned emails. It took a while but in April the eureka moment came, I had the chance to help one of the students to use another function of Teams. It was a real moment of joy. Not alone I could encourage and break down instruction but in a sense I became an instructor on something that I was vary only a few short days before.

Life is a challenge and balancing all the care I wish to and asked to give can be difficult at times. The joy of being able to work and help is there everyday. I hope and pray that my contributions to people's life helps them in these difficult times. I can't wait to get back to normal, whatever it may be the new normal but know that we can overcome any difficulties if we work together.

- Virag Hogan

My role is the Adult Education Guidance Co-ordinator within the Further Education and Training Section of LWETB. I am privileged to work with four other dedicated and enthusiastic colleagues in our FET Guidance Service, John Doherty, Fiona Murphy, Patricia Reilly and Liz Glennon. Now more than ever we have discovered the meaning of team work as we have learned how to engage our clients remotely and figure out how to provide guidance and counselling to those who need it.

We have addressed these challenges and are using social media and our new weekly e-newsletter to provide support to our current clients and engage new learners. We are constantly researching what might be of interest and relevant to the general public and showcase what LWETB FET service has to offer.

Luckily my husband and I can work from home however we are both trying to manage this and home-school our two children. This comes with it's own challenges and at times can be very difficult to manage. Some days are better than others but every day we go out for a walk at lunchtime to get away from the desk and stretch our legs. I am loving the slower pace of life and not feel like I am racing from one place to the next and this is something I want to hold onto post Covid-19.



- Caroline Cornally

I sit here looking at the outside world through the window while sipping on what I think is my 6th cup of tea today. What once was normal life seeming alien at this stage. Over the past few weeks of lockdown it has become very clear just how much we took for granted. A trip to the shop for groceries has become an ordeal. I don't just go equipped with a shopping list, I now have a checklist to go through before I even set foot outside the front door – Have I got gloves? Have I got hand sanitiser and antibacterial wipes? Once I get there I almost hold my breath as I walk passed people, as if somehow that is going to help! I'm becoming used to the worried stares if I cough or have a snuffle in public and of course Murphy's Law I always seem to get a tickly throat at the most inopportune times! And now that they are limiting the amount of people allowed into the shops at any one time it feels like my cough echoes right through the whole shop as if King Kong is marching through the country and with every footstep there is a vibration!

I was doing my fortnightly shop recently in Supervalu and as I turned the corner into one of the aisles a member of their staff was walking toward me and she literally jumped in fright at the sight of me. Granted that could be to do with how I was looking in fairness to her! I can't remember the last time I wore make up, tied my hair up nicely or wore something other than my comfy clothes, but that's for another day! She laughed it off but the lack of contact with people is starting to become the norm for us which is a worry. As human beings our instinct is to be close with others. But now we are being forced to stay apart which is so unnatural.

I commend LWETB for how quickly they reacted to COVID19. The changeover to working remotely happened over the course of 4/5 days which is amazing. It hasn't been easy admittedly, it has taken a lot of getting used to! I miss the luxury of having proper desk space, colleagues to bounce ideas off, the banter in the office, even the photocopier that I have cursed many times. It had a habit of making me walk all the way down the corridor to it but when I get there the job wouldn't be on the menu to print. It was like it was having a laugh at my expense but oh how I miss it. My kitchen table has now become my desk, and I have the daily distraction of the washing machine going, the kettle boiling, the radio, and the fridge tempting me to stick my head in every couple of minutes. I have picked up a lovely olive tone from the fridge light. Who needs false tan! My poor dogs don't know what's going on. It was a novelty for them at the beginning having me home all day everyday but I think they dread the sight of their leads at this stage! I can feel the eyerolls behind my back everytime I reach for them out of the press. I'm lucky to work with my best friends and to say I miss them is an understatement. Obviously we are all keeping in contact on a daily basis, as I am with family. At this stage I see more of my family than I did pre COVID19! Skype and Zoom have become part of daily life. But there is nothing like sitting down for a cuppa with my friends at 11, having a laugh or discussing the latest reality TV show, and deciding what to have for lunch, them saying 'we'll be healthy' and me trying to tempt them with the less healthy options, and saying I'll be good the next day. I was kidding noone!

I miss heading to Dublin to my family at the weekends and conveniently timing it so that my mam would be serving the dinner as I arrive, and I miss getting up to devilment with my niece. This isn't forever. We are all in this together, and we are all working toward the same goal for the greater good. I don't know that we will ever get back to the old normal, but I personally am excited for what is ahead.



It is in our nature to adapt and overcome, and we have found new ways to do things that will be carried forward with us and will become the new normal.

It is amazing to think that someday this will be History. Children will be hearing about the Global Pandemic of 2020. At the end of the day at least we can all say we survived the great toilet paper shortage of 2020! I hope everyone is keeping safe and well. See you all on the other side.

- Elaine McEvoy



The Athlone VTOS team is working very hard at home under unusual circumstances - but we hope we are managing to keep in contact with all our students. Like every other establishment in LWETB we are trying our best to engage our learners in whatever method we can - Microsoft Teams, email, text, on-line tutorials and sending assignments out by post. I also ring the students who can call me when they have problems. It's also very important to realise how essential the support of other ETB colleagues have been over the last few weeks - and I'm very appreciative of that!

It's not easy to work from home - people don't always have good internet access and many staff have small children at home and are trying to home school them and do their own work. People are missing the social contact with their colleagues - and most importantly our students. Our students have worked very hard and as VTOS is a two year programme - many of our students have been with us a long time! Situations like this show how important social contact is for all of us, but we can still keep in contact - albeit remotely!

Our aim is to support our second year students to get through the QQI Level 5 June assessments. Students have put so much effort into their work over the last two years and we hope to help them gain the certification they deserve.

In times of adversity people can, and do adapt - I'm proud of the effort both staff and students have made at Athlone VTOS. Hard work and determination will get us through this situation. A huge thank you to all staff and students!

- Maria Ryan

Working remotely during COVID-19 has certainly presented some big challenges for everyone. It is great that we have been supplied with the resources such as laptops and Teams. I am probably one of the luckier employees in being able to remotely complete most tasks that my role involves, in supporting schools, youth and music and that my internet signal is strong. In preparing our schools and students for the next set of challenges, such as completing their Leaving Certificate, the work is relentless and the logistics not quite straight forward. There is a constant "back and forth" of communications and actions between colleagues, suppliers and support. Sometimes responses may not come immediately, so getting tasks done can get drawn out a bit longer – it's just the nature of the working environment we are currently in.

However, everyone understands the situation, and all have been very supportive and positive in such taxing times – thanks to my LWETB colleagues for their support & patience! I miss the comradery and the banter in the office (not to mention the coffee!) but we have had a few on-line meetings in corporate services, and as well as seeing what people are doing, it's a great way of lightening the mood and having a bit of craic as well!

Home life for me has been ultra-busy – I finish work in the evening, try and hurl a few balls off the gable end of the house for a bit of exercise, make the tea and then it's straight into studying for my online degree. The past few weeks I've been up until 2am trying to get assignments finished – anyone who has studied part-time on-line will know the pain! The good news is, all going to plan, I will be done and dusted by May 8th...

Remember, we might be in different boats, but we are all together on the same choppy waters...

- Mark Landy



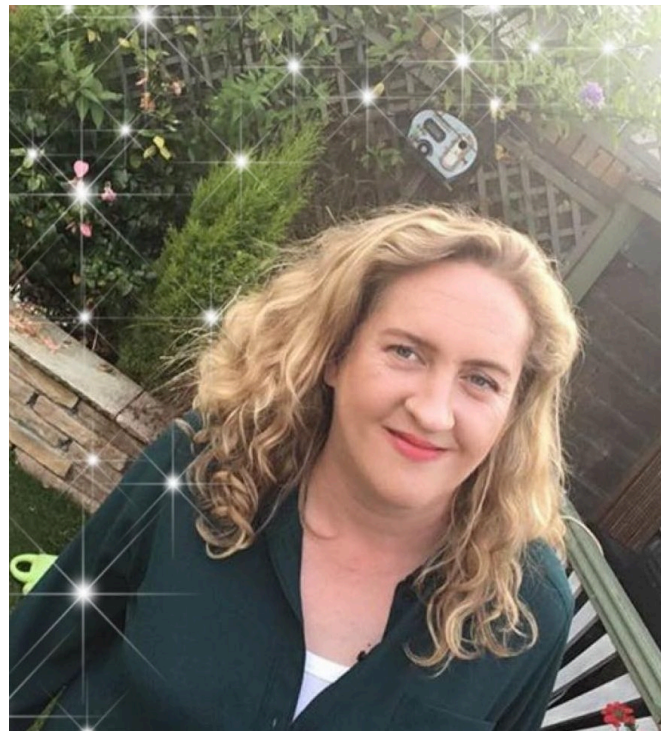


I have worked at Athlone Training Centre for more than 21 years. My core role has always been in Course Recruitment both Day and Evening courses. It is a role that is varied and allows me to converse with people on a daily basis. Working from home has been different but still rewarding. Blessed with good broadband, a laptop and phone, the transition has been quite seamless. The main objective for me was that we as a team could continue the great service we have always provided. The client always foremost in my mind. I put myself in their shoes. If I was an applicant or a trainee, I would want to be kept informed of changes as they occur, remote learning, updated start dates, new courses, new ways of learning etc.

My approach has always been client centered. Clients have been more than delighted to receive an sms text, a prompt email reply to a query or a phone call. Sometimes we as a team have found that we may have been the first person they have had a conversation with in many weeks. Links I have forged with many departments over the years continue to help me with my daily work. Sometimes there are queries I may need assistance with and I have to compliment my colleagues who are as always so helpful. They are also client focused. We can never go too far wrong if the client is at the center of what we do.

My husband Martin is an essential worker so he has continued to work throughout this pandemic. We have three daughters Kerri 16yrs, Holly 14yrs and Lexi 5yrs old. In the early days of this, our daughters had to readjust to life without their friends. They were tears and tantrums. We all needed to adapt so I introduced tasks that I thought would help them fill their time. Baking cakes and scones which they gifted to our neighbours were a big hit. We planted seeds and filled window boxes and planters with bright displays. They painted our wooden fence and the trim of our house.

They started to enjoy themselves and forgot about the isolation and the cancelled Niall Horan gig. That was a very low point for Kerri! My husband organised that Holly could print almost 300 photos of herself with her friends with which she made a collage on her bedroom wall, this made her so happy as she loves company and calls this her memory wall. Lexi has become our resident artist. The trio decided to build themselves a den, using old tyres and reclaimed wood, they made a swing and some seating. Cutting, sanding and varnishing, they learned so many new life skills these last few weeks. Denim clothes have been bleached. Little experiments undertaken. Home haircuts were lots of fun and interesting!



The glass is always half full for me, hopefully my positive outlook has helped our children have a positive outlook on life. Their resilience shown throughout this pandemic has made us so very proud of them. Continue to stay safe everyone, see you all on the other side.

- Sephine Smythe

I have worked in Longford in a variety of locations on the Youthreach Programme since its inception in Longford in 1994. Youthreach is a participant-centred and participant-led Programme for early school-leavers who struggled in the mainstream setting for a variety of reasons (social, emotional, cultural etc.) It is a very intensive work environment where trust and staff/student relationships are fundamental to the Programmes viability.

The profile of many of our students would indicate recurring themes of low self-confidence, low self-esteem and a debilitating fear of failure which triggers a variety of interesting responses from the students. These underlying issues usually manifest themselves through challenging behaviour, poor motivation and an absence of a progression strategy which will enable them to fulfill their undoubted potential. This is where Youthreach enters their lives and helps them to address these themes and provide a pathway towards a rewarding and fulfilled life.

Due to the nature of the Youthreach Programme and its necessary emphasis on building relationships and trust, the current COVID pandemic has thrown up a number of very real, but not unexpected challenges for staff and students on the Programme. Our initial working strategy involved emailing homework on a weekly basis to each student with access to all staff on-line, should the student require assistance or direction. Predictably, after an initial attempt by some of our learners to interact with technology, as Easter approached, this interaction had dwindled to a handful. Correspondingly, staff communications to them and frustration emanating from the poor response, created a feeling that the energy and effort expended on the technological approach was not being reciprocated by learner response.

Interaction on-line, outside of the obvious broadband/computer/laptop and access issues associated with this methodology, required a number of characteristics which our learners do not have in abundance i.e. self-confidence, self-discipline, self-direction, self-esteem, self-starting etc were inevitably going to pose insurmountable issues for them. Their relationship with the "self" is very fragile and the subterranean current of fear of failure resulted in poor results. We have now reverted to the posting home of paper exercises and hopefully, this will evoke a more positive interaction from a greater cohort of our learners than heretofore.

On reflection, I would assert that of all the Programmes in the FET sector, the one that could prosper least under the present restrictions and methodologies, would be Youthreach students at Levels 2,3 and 4 particularly. Classroom, on-site, teacher-student interaction will reap the most rewards for our learners. Office hours are varied, with many of our students unavailable until evening time. Many of them are finding the intensity of being at home constantly, very stressful. Staff are busy doing on-line courses, TEAMS Meetings, setting homework, preparing for next year etc etc but all would welcome a return to the classroom.

It has been a very challenging management environment since we closed the Centre. Focus, motivation, leadership, communications, etc. all require a greater effort and 5 o'clock rarely comes at 5 o'clock. The natural cut-off point doesn't occur with the journey home from work.

Roll on the vaccine.

- Séan Ó Suilleabháin

## Life in a Covid world.

They got up late and they got up early.  
Most went online some not at all  
The work was done but at first barely  
We sat by our computers ready to call.

Covid came and I didn't foretell it,  
DPs don't have that type of sight,  
I thought it would be short even though it  
Seemed to be wrapped up in some spite.

Athlone was busy when we left,  
Mocks ,awards and next years plans,  
Now suddenly we were bereft,  
Wondering what to do,for us that was new  
Washing of hands, O what to do.

Teaching remotely is not easy,  
Administration is a lonely chore,  
Evening news reports make us queasy  
We walk more and more and take in natures store,  
Though I am not sure what for.

\*John Prine who died from Covid 19 in April.

The Leaving cert will have to wait,  
Calm the students missing friends,  
Next years timetable is going late,  
If this ever ends,will mean so many bends,  
Time to make amends.

John\* said old trees just get stronger  
And rivers grow wilder every day  
But as this just goes on longer, will we fade away,  
Forgetting just to say, it is hard to take much longer.

A curse, a blessing or a bad dream,  
A way of bringing us to earth,  
I don't believe this, to me it seems  
Not just A death but a rebirth.

I think we can make it as a team though,  
I think we will get stronger everyday,  
Our roots are strong so we will grow,  
Not stay so low , yea I think so.

It will return as it was someday,  
Chatter, hugs and helpful shouts,  
Our students will always find their way,  
They will come out, no lockdown about  
To laugh in their own way, and see another day.

- Chris Forde

As Deputy Principal at Castlepollard Community College, I have become a more obvious support to parents and not solely a disciplinarian. A prime example was the expression of gratitude by parents when they collected laptops and food parcels with it all culminating in an understanding between parents and teachers now that might not have been there before.

Initially, the work life balance was difficult to switch off as normal feelings intensified. I became acutely aware that the 21st Century Learning was hugely beneficial but equally the important role played by the Care Team with our weekly online team meetings becoming the new norm as teachers & tutors reached out to the needs of their students in their homes and their expectations.

I hope that work will not change significantly apart from the application of social distancing guidelines and that school will be a place with as little stress/pressure put on staff and students as possible where our students can feel safe, flourish and reach their full potential.

We all have become more appreciative of the person and not just the professional contribution they bring.  
Is ar scáth a chéile a mhairimid.



Photo: Westmeath Enterprise overall winner, Patrick D'Arcy is pictured with teacher Mr. Michael Murphy & James McGrath, Deputy Principal at the Golden Island, Athlone on Thursday, March 12th, 2020 which coincided with the school closure day announced by the Taoiseach.

- James McGrath



My name is Hilde Kiernan.

Four years ago, I returned to college as a mature student to get my H.Dip in Further Education. I've worked for LWETB since, teaching ESOL and Creative Writing.

Currently, the main part of my job is teaching English on the Syrian Refugee Resettlement Programme in Kilbeggan, an Athlone outreach centre. Teaching English to people who are new to Ireland is a privilege. I was new to the country myself a long time ago (1995!), when I came over from Norway as an Erasmus exchange student.

Since the announcement on the 12th of March that schools would close, my life changed to working from home and homeschooling two teenagers. There were definitely hurdles: technology issues, painfully slow internet speeds, brand new ways of teaching and learning, trying to keep focus on the task at hand when the fridge is buzzing temptingly in the kitchen and the dog wants a cuddle.

The worst part for me now is that I miss my students and my colleagues. The initial upheaval and sense of "is this really happening?" have settled somewhat into a new normal. New routines and ways of working are becoming established. I like the new ways of engaging with material and I'm learning a lot about distance education, even though there is no substitute for face to face interaction in a language class.



I feel the learning taking place now is a different type of learning. We have the opportunity to reinforce prior learning and allowing it to mature, to become part of who we are. Life moves at a slower pace, learning should too. That's not to say it stops or has any less value, rather it can gain depth, become more meaningful, more related to the lived reality of people. Slowing down allows knowledge to expand and flourish.

That is what I focus on in the work I create now: for the students who find it challenging to engage with learning through technology, I write workbooks which are then posted to them. These emphasize reinforcement and approach material from different directions.

For the students who engage in Microsoft Teams: same as above, and here I also seize my own opportunity for learning. I'm taking part in weekly courses organised by our TEL coordinator, learning new ways to teach online classes. I apply these and other methods to create interactive lessons.

I wrote these lines to summarise how I feel about teaching and learning these days:

**Now is a time for slowing down,  
taking stock.**

**Letting all your learning  
settle in body and mind  
in your own time.**

**When we meet again  
we'll reach back together-  
take the seeds you've gently  
planted  
and nurture them to full,  
magnificent bloom**

- Hilde Kiernan



## Workplace Wellbeing Walk

May 1st 2020 was National Workplace Wellbeing day and the FET Guidance Service asked staff to join them on a lunchtime 2km walk. The aim was for staff to stay safe, healthy and connected with each other during this time and Fiona Murphy thought of the idea of asking staff to document their walk which we could then share.

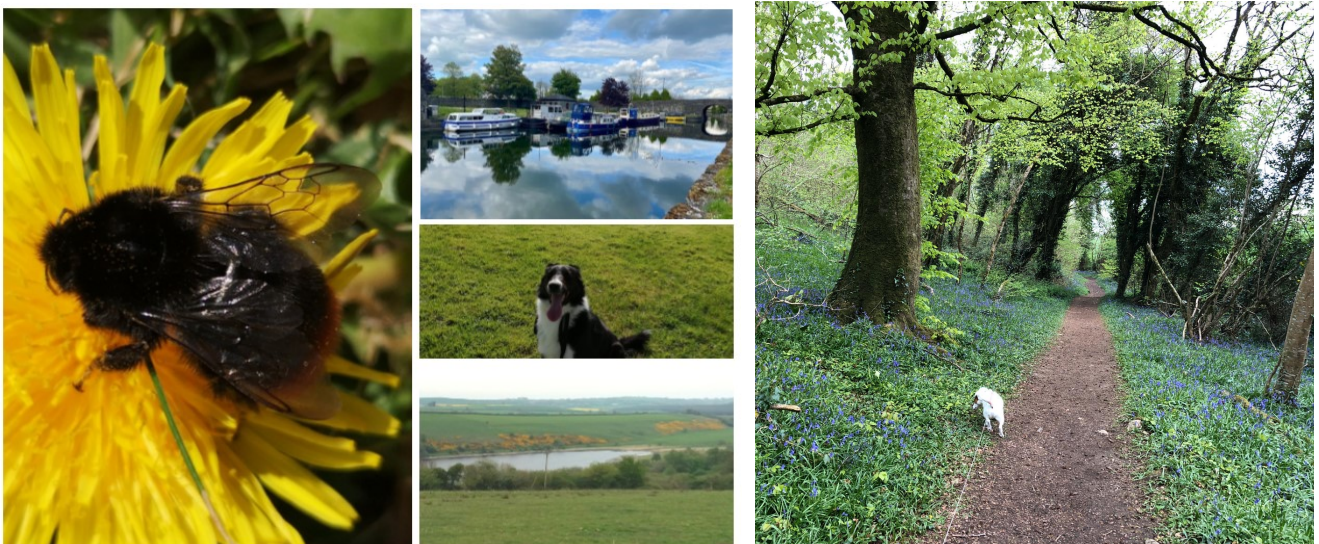
We were delighted with the response with 22 members of FET staff sending a photo of themselves or their view on their walk. The guidance team would like to thank everyone for taking the time to join them and these are the wonderful photos we received which showcases how beautiful the midlands are.













I have been working since November 2019 in the LWETB office in Marlinstown Mullingar as a Clerical Officer in Corporate Services and for the most part look after the office facilities. As like all staff at LWETB I am now working from home set up here with a laptop.

We have the use of the Microsoft office team application which is useful for keeping in contact with my colleagues and if we need to have meetings a valuable tool in case we forget what we look like, but I must admit not good if you want to magnify any grey hairs on camera!! Printing is now a distant memory and suppliers are encouraged to send any invoices electronically which appears to be running smoothly so hopefully this will be one advantage in the future. The spammers appear to be a little busier and so you are getting more emails from myself with alerts. We just have to be more vigilant when any email pops up. My motto is now "think before you click".....I know a little cheesy.



I have started a Microsoft access 2016 online course which I enjoy mostly and I hope will be of some benefit in the future. It has been quite different not visiting the office every day and that has probably been the biggest change. My role was quite active with visits to different departments so I would say the job itself is more sedentary. On the plus side I get to take my collie Roxy on longer trots round the canal here in town (she has never had it so lucky) Also it has been nice to have breaks and lunch with the family.

I imagine our working environment will change when the time comes to return to the office and the need for social distancing will be with us for some time to come, but I am sure we will adapt and take the positives out of the changes. Social media and technology has never become so popular and zoom calls are now a lifeline to friends and family both here and abroad, but I think there is nothing like meeting someone in person and it will be all the sweeter when we are back to a different normal. I leave you with a view from my new office window. I do miss my work colleagues face to face contact and we can only hope for a safe reunion when the time comes. Sending my colleagues good wishes and hoping you are all keeping safe and well.

- Catherine Pickering

It is not often that the entire world is united together in a fight against a common enemy. War has never been a unifying force- it's destructive by its very nature with one side wanting to be the conqueror of the other. Our world is locked in a war with an invisible, indiscriminate and powerful enemy and yet, populations have never been as united with one another in trying to stop such a relentless opponent. That, for me is a very powerful thing.

COVID-19 crept into our worlds unraveling our societies and our "normal" way of life unbeknownst to any of us until it had embedded itself. I flew to New York on 11th March 2020, leaving "my" Ireland behind and flew back into an entirely different one that didn't feel at all familiar to me five days later. Instead of being greeted by family at the airport a luminous yellow sheet, a colour I don't think I will ever look at the same, was thrust into my hand by a woman wearing a mask and gloves. I was told to self-isolate for 14 days and if I'm honest I had to google what that actually meant! It was a concept I had heard about in books and yet this was life now, apparently. Self-isolation, physical distancing, remote working, pandemic, 2 metres apart- to be honest in the early days I didn't know how far 2metres was!

Now I find myself naturally recoiling when I feel too close to the person in front of me in the queue, holding my breath as I walk around the supermarket and scrubbing my hands when I get home. How that has become normal I will never know but it has and I'm not sure how it makes me feel any better.

We transitioned to working remotely so quickly it has to be commended. If you asked me at Christmas I would have said it was impossible. It has been neither straightforward nor easy. There have been days when I have really struggled but on those days I have learned one really important thing from my friends and my colleagues- everyone feels the same, you may be physically on your own but you're never totally alone. And everyone hates their internet provider just as much as you do!! Testing times show us what we're capable of and I'm amazed at how much we have managed to do as a staff. There is a saying I read recently that I really liked, "tough times don't last but tough people do."

I hope we all stay home, stay safe and we all see other again soon, even if it's just to complain about the photocopier or the coffee machine.

- Bronagh Maguire





I work with a great team in Corporate Services. I worked remotely for a time when I was living in Galway but it meant I could work from the library, coffee shop or an open business hub. This time though it is a very different environment. I am working from home in the countryside. I am surrounded by the sounds of nature. The highlight of the day is when the postman or a DPD van arrives!

My job is very manageable. I have a dedicated work space. I can access all the information I require and it is very easy to keep in contact with management and my work colleagues using Teams or Zoom. One thing I don't miss is the long commute every day.

My day is not the ordinary 9-5 working schedule. I am also looking after my parents. It is a challenge at times, especially when they are not tech savvy! Video calls to family members is all new to them. It is great that we all can stay connected. I have two golden retrievers that are very happy with the current arrangement. Lots of walks have become a vital part of the day (see picture!).



From a personal point of view this working environment is something I have been capable of adapting to but my mindset is better when I'm in the office. When we return, whenever that day will be, I can imagine that everyone will be happy to be back and safe even though certain measures will still need to be in place for future safety. We must remain positive. We will get through this together.

- Winnie Padian

## COVID-19

12th March, 2020 is a date we will always recall  
When Leo Varadkar announced that schools were closing for all  
The purpose of this was to stop Coronavirus from spreading  
Now a new way of working was the direction we were heading.

The race then began to ensure that staff were resourced Laptops, dongles and Data Sim Cards were hurriedly sourced  
IT technicians were busy setting up our remote connection And ensuring that all complied with Data Protection

Microsoft Teams and Zoom became the new norm  
Work life had suddenly taken on a new form  
For some this is combined with home schooling and childcare  
And often a scramble to find the best chair

Simon Harris and Dr. Holohan have become familiar faces Providing daily reports of deaths and new cases  
Over 70's being advised to stay home and cocoon  
With the hope that normality will resume soon

That that's missed most while working from home  
Is the company of colleagues and the ringing of the phone  
We are conscious that some have found this distressing But, despite all of this, work is still progressing

And just now when we've become accustomed to working remote  
The Government unveil a roadmap for the economy to re-float  
The plan is to ease restrictions in five different stages As well as reducing the financial burden of paying worker's wages

So, who knows when we will return to our various workplaces  
And once again meet up with those familiar friendly faces  
Shops and restaurants will re-open and we all can frequent  
And chat and swap stories about this unprecedented event.

- Mary McKeon

Despite the shutdown, it's business as usual in the Adult Literacy Service. We may not be in classrooms but classes are taking place in a variety of blended learning methods and students have taken crash courses in self-directed learning. Organisers and staff have contacted students by all sorts of means, for example, PLSS texts, emails, Teams, phone and post.

Social distancing is very difficult but we are fortunate to have so much technology to occupy us during lockdown- television, radio, computers, telephones, Netflix, Whatsapp, Teams, emails and so on but the things that students have found most helpful are phone calls from us to say hello and ask how they are getting on in these strange times and asking what we can do to help them through social isolation and coursework.

Some students were already set up on-line and have been able to receive and return work with no difficulties. Tutors helped other students get connected and when this hasn't been possible, tutors are posting assignments and other activities to students. Students have been connected with NALA on-line learning website and English language websites. A cookery course that was due to start has developed into a "Virtual Kitchen" whereby students follow recipes on-line and create dishes at home.

Blended learning and self-directed learning may be the way forward and is working slowly and surely but both students and staff look forward to meeting up again in where they can enjoy the social experience of learning with the personal support of their tutors and peers.

- Frances Stephenson

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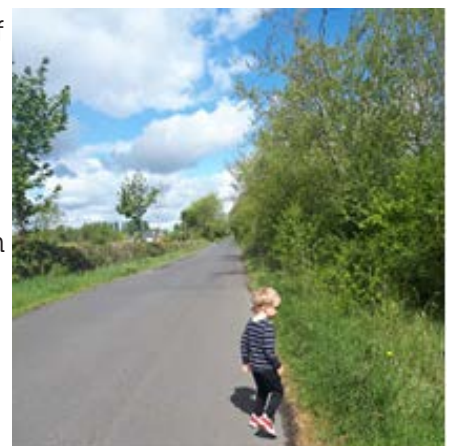
In most circumstances to be told you were to work from home for two weeks would be greeted with delight at the thought of skipping a two hour commute each day and a break from the usual way of working. However, on March 12th while listening to the Taoiseach's address it was clear that everything was spinning into an unknown new reality. Like many I enjoy planning and being organised- the loss of all of that control was disconcerting.

I was to go home to a house with a Leaving Cert student, a six year old, a four year old and later my husband. All looking for space to work, play and just be. It has given me a new appreciation for my home and all that it offers and a realisation of how difficult life must be for all of those in our world that don't have this basic need. Along with this I have developed a new respect and regard for teachers as I take on (badly! the challenge of homeschooling. I think I put patience down on my CV personal statement- I need to remove it!

The guidance service has had to look at ways to support our clients from a distance and meet new people who are perhaps facing a transition. Our team meetings have supported this adjustment and allowed us to discuss our fears and ideas openly- this has served to keep us connected and leaves us with a sense that we still have purpose while we may not have an office. We have been issuing a Newsletter each week to our clients, LWETB staff and students to keep our community informed of everything that is happening around us- new initiatives, services, deadlines. Anything that may be of interest to our audience.

Just last week we hosted a Workplace Wellbeing event, asking all staff to send in photos from a lunchtime walk- the response was amazing and the sense of togetherness, while remaining apart was hugely encouraging. We are still part of an organisation and a team, we still have a job to do and when this passes we will be there to assist, in whatever way we can, all those people who haven't been as lucky as us. As a guidance counsellor I need to use this time now for reflection and research around how we might help those who have lost their jobs to upskill or reskill and to deal with the 'new reality.'

- Fiona Murphy



## Covid19 (the Good the Bad and the Ugly)

It was something to see at the beginning, everyone making spur of the moment decisions on how to operate in this new (temporary) environment. People working to ensure the learners, staff, suppliers and all the other stakeholders were not let down. Problems arose and solutions were found, good solutions. Within a few days most were operating from home and had the immediate priorities set out. Getting the right chair, the right connectivity and the right procedure.

It happened very quick and then the molten metal of reality started to kick in, working from home is grand if you had childcare, connectivity, food and interaction with people. This working from home was different you are on a conference call and the child wants food, to go play, no you to go and play with her. The calls are when you can (what happened to office hours). People went above and beyond because it was the only way. But payroll at ten o'clock at night is not sustainable (appreciated but not encouraged).

As the weeks went by we started to get past the early adrenalin of "must get it done any way possible" to "is there a way to make it better?"

Slowly we move to a settled environment more controlled and planned everyone was great as the new reality settled. Then the department's requests started to come in work as normal in this new normal the deadlines remained the same. This was a great opportunity to catch up on some Training, Documentation, Procedures, Reports, Statistics, to Review Structures...

It is a great opportunity for a lot of things but you can't do everything in one go and some realities still had to be reviewed and improved in the temporary reality like moving payroll to the cloud, upgrading the finance system and moving it to the cloud. That is in addition to the existing projects and activities like the payroll shared services project, the annual accounts, the C&AG audit and the IAU Audits and staff training on ICT on EXCEL, on word, on the new systems.



So the good is the goodwill of staff, learners and really all stakeholders to progress. The time at home playing exercising and enjoying Niamh's laughter at power rangers or playing soccer or baking with her mammy.

The bad is that there are people dying and others under awful pressures for many reasons, exams, money, high risk of the virus in the family, claustrophobia and many other "normal" issues exasperated by these close quarters circumstances. But Niamh getting fitter by the day and blocking more and more of my shots on the soccer field.

The ugly is starting now as the lockdown unfolds and the damage starts to be counted in earnest. Whose job is gone for good? who can go to work? who should go to work? Who can still work from home? The Virus as Niamh calls it has made it possible to do many things that two months ago would have been impossible, will any of it stick? Or point a way to the future?

As a society we have been faced with the unknown and from what I have seen people have put people first and restored the local community spirit of self-support but on a national scale. It's great to be Irish isn't it?

We don't know what is coming or when but I am a lot more optimistic than I was.....

- Charlie Mitchell



My job has changed dramatically since the restrictions have been implemented. I have gone from interacting with my class and work colleagues 5 days a week to none. The nature and structure of our mechanic syllabus is 100% classroom and practical based, which has never been taught remotely. IT infrastructure has been challenging for everyone involved, including myself. I have not worked in this way in the past, so I've tried to set myself up as ergonomically as possible with limited resources including slow internet and no dedicated desktop computer. As this all happened so quickly I've tried to think outside the box to implement learning methods that could be applied online. Some ways I've done this are; Study notes and Quiz format.

A big change for me is trying to interact and communicate with my students in a timely manner. The challenge being their time is now out of my control as we are all working separately. Being away from the ATC and away from the classroom can create uncertainty for students. They no longer can ask questions in an open environment, or indeed, offer opinions. The practical learning, which is fundamental to their course has been completely removed.

We are in unique times and with unique times comes unique opportunities. Given the additional time I have had, I've reflected on the challenges we are facing and how we build a robust model going forward to counteract them.

- All students should have functional LWETB email address set up at the start of their registration. (Some could not connect)
- We need to consider if students have access to technology for accessing learning materials and completing assignments. Some of my class do not have access to a computer and are trying to complete questions/quizzes on their phone.
- I think students (motor) should have a module in basic IT skills and technical writing/communication skills.
- For the theory portion of the course this could be facilitated through virtual live video class learnings. For this to be successful we would need to ensure facilitators and students are trained in the appropriate technology such as moodle, skype or zoom.
- Training materials could be published on a shared student portal. This could be extended to include practical video demonstrations to aid in the learnings.

Some other ways which I think I personally would benefit from;

- Weekly touchpoint call with other instructors to understand how they are coping.
- In contact with other training centres to collaborate on their learnings so that we are cohesively practicing the same methods of teaching to ensure the students are obtaining the best possible outcomes.

The biggest challenge for us is how we can continue to teach the practical side of the course. This is hugely important and one area that is unlikely to be overcome from working remotely. Whilst on lockdown I've been very conscious to structure my days to try keep a similar routine as if I was working from ATC. I ensure to keep physically active through walking and maintaining my gardens at home. We all need to be cognisant of the mental effects the isolation may have on everyone. We all need to look out for one another in these strange times. I think our work has changed forever and we will need to ensure we are enabled to embrace the change. Learning is a matter of time and opportunity, now we have the time and opportunity, let's not waste it. Stay safe everyone!



- Gerry Wade

### Will we still watch the stars after Covid 19?

My son asked me this question last week as we stood in the back garden, way past his bedtime. Some rules are being broken around here these days and that's a good thing. I work in Ballymahon Vocational School as an English and SPHE teacher and have done so since 2003. The day after this, I received a piece of work from a junior student describing how he checked on his cattle before his bowl of Cheerios in the morning and then settled down to do his work. A senior student shared her sadness on Mother's Day at watching her own mother wave to her Granny through her window. It is a privilege to read such heartfelt expressions and my subject affords me this opportunity. It is therapeutic for some to write while for others it is working on their farm or spending time with animals.



I myself do not miss the commute to work and the car-runs to and from swimming, football, drama. There is a different type of drama on our house sometimes anyway! I have three children aged 6, 10 and 11 and I quizzed them on their favourite part of all these restrictions. No 'pooey ham sandwiches' in sweaty lunchboxes and more walks in the nearby forest with Dad was a plus for my youngest. Middle child missed 'the craic' in school but not the hour-long maths classes. She finds it easier to concentrate at home and lights the salt-rock lamp every morning. Eleven is the new thirteen if you ask me and so the third answer was an appreciation of the WhatsApp group calls on my phone instead of break times in a rainy yard.

The conversation with my own children reminded me of my students with all of their diverse needs and personalities. I cannot help but to think of the more socially awkward or shy students. Without the dread of the lunchtime bell or the conversation they cannot quite navigate, they must feel more secure in a way.

I am sure that without the pressure of 'fitting in' socially it is easier to focus and deliver and be comfortable in one's own skin. The chance to respond to individual students through written feedback has resulted in a high standard of work being re-drafted. The classroom environment and time constraints do not lend themselves to such individualised communication unfortunately. The fact that there was an increase in student engagement following on-line classes proves, on the other hand, that many of our students really enjoy and need this human interaction. To be reassured about expectations and part of a group conversation had the effect of boosting motivation and overall engagement. I don't think we will be leaving the classroom for good but we can certainly see school life with fresh eyes. The answer is yes, we will watch the stars after Covid 19.

- Sinead Ryan

Working remotely was a challenge for the first few days as it was totally new especially to someone like me who has been working in an office environment for 40 plus years! It was necessary to find the correct set up such as location, desk, suitable chair etc.

Working totally on the lap top was another hindrance the first day or two (but the mouse attachment was a great saver) and missing the second computer screen which is beneficial for checking or comparing documents. I miss the photocopier/printer.

It is truly amazing how we could adopt to this change at such short notice. I know it is due to the fact that we have access to a number of essential programmes i.e. H Drive, VEC Share, O Drive, Megapay, DCS System, Outlook work emails, Microsoft Teams etc. I do feel that many of us could work remotely in the future – at least for some part of the week!

For me, working from home has been successful and the work balance is good and can be flexible if required.

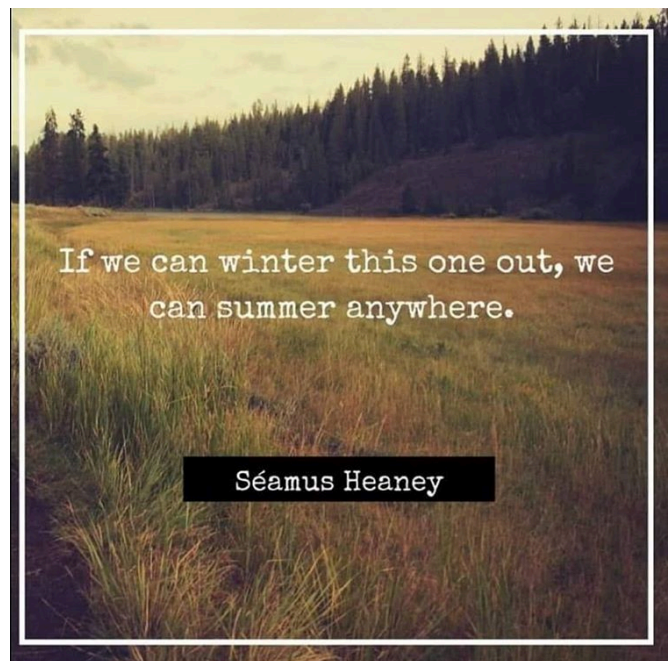
- Helen Kiernan

"Steady the light and come to your senses".

- Seamus Heaney

The lines from Heaney's collection *Wintering Out* are a calming all to cope, to draw on wells of resilience in challenging times. There had been mutterings through early March of possible school closures and we were preparing for the unthinkable. The fear of the unknown was a motif for all aspects of life including work. Management and staff had started preparations for online teaching but i still felt that the need for this contingency would somehow be averted. Speculation increased by the hour and the announcement on Thursday lunchtime was not unexpected but the Ministers announcement ushered in a shaky new world. Announcements and emails, news briefings to hushed classrooms. Lockers had to be emptied and in some cases schoolbags could not possibly carry the weight of the learning crammed into the little locked boxes that lined the halls.

The after school staff meeting discussed contingency plans for teaching and learning for these weeks. The sense of unreality prevailed. The next morning appropriately Friday the 13th flew past in cloud of emails and messages to more than 200 of my students and their parents/ guardians. Throughout the country teachers were trying to convey reassurance against a backdrop of their own fears and anxieties. We quickly learned a new language and our daily lives began to feature a new cast of characters. Overnight we became novice virologists. The tentative arrival of student emails from phones and family computers were like the first snowdrops, symbols of hope and normality. . More interactive styles of learning gradually emerged with Teams and Zoom. It was especially poignant to touch base with our Leaving Certs. These were the students who looked most shell shocked on the previous Thursday. Little did we know that they would not sit into their accustomed desks again. The word unprecedented can be overused but it seemed inadequate when trying to comprehend the cancellation of state exams . However our students are a resilient bunch and they juggled the new and ever changing information with increased responsibilities at home. They added another layer of anxiety to the natural one associated with living through a pandemic and chatted about Paul Durcan and The Playboy of the Western World.



Pictures from battered copybooks or neatly typed Power-points were a reassurance that we were all adapting to the "new normal". I certainly would not swap the old school classroom for the virtual version but the challenges of a learning curve combined with flattening another curve have brought their own rewards. We have moved out of our comfort zone and almost overnight became online educators. We are working with our students and their families in a new way. i would like to pay a heartfelt tribute to the parents and guardians who overnight became home educators. As a parent i know that the challenges in teaching your off spring at the kitchen table are often greater than a classroom full of other peoples children. The days ahead are full of hopes and fears but i keep returning to the touchstone of Seamus Heaney, "if we can winter this one out we can summer anywhere".

- Anne Tully



My name is Agnes Duignan. I am a I.T. Tutor with Longford Westmeath ETB and have been working in St. Brigid's School (Special Needs) Mullingar for almost 27 years under the Co-operation Hours Allocation. We are a small school nestled between Loreto College and Presentation School in Mullingar. We have approximately 82 students, 9 teachers and 16 SNA's. We are a tight knit staff with our new Principal Mrs Joanne Jordan only taking the helm in September 2019.

I have seen many changes over my 27 years but none as big as the changes we are currently experiencing. Special Needs students rely on routine, structure and stability. Their world has changed dramatically so therefore we had to adopt a new way of teaching. Health and Wellbeing has been top of our list on the Curriculum for the past couple of years and never more so than now. It was quite difficult

in the beginning for staff, students and parents but we have now settled in to our new way of learning. With apps such as Zoom, Seesaw, Whatsapp and many more, learning has become fun. It was lovely to see the students chat and connect with their friends as they have formed their own little

bonds with each other during their time in school. What they miss most is; ....their friends!

Students take pride in showing the work that they have done, whether it is English, Maths, Cooking, Art or Gardening. Nature and Gardening is a big favourite with our students in St. Brigid's, (Cross Curriculum Subject) with many a trip to Belvedere to learn about birds, plants and nature. I had a wonderful Zoom class from my greenhouse and garden last week, showing the students the plants I had grown over the last few weeks. It was a big hit as we all compared our vegetables!

As for myself, I miss seeing my colleagues and friends in person, going for a coffee or just the freedom of being able to go when and where you want. I am grateful that I live in the beautiful countryside and we have been blessed with fabulous weather so all in all I am quite content with this new way of living. When this is all over, I would hope that we would continue to reevaluate and slow down our lives and be grateful for what we have-our health, our families and eventually our freedom.

- Agnes Duignan



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