

The Creative Chaos of COVID Clouds



Dr Christy Duffy
 Chief Executive,
 LWETB

Back in April when we were in the early days of lockdown our LWETB newsletter tried to capture what the experience was like for staff. Ten months on from COVID the focus of this newsletter has changed away from the personal experience to concentrate more on how COVID has changed how we work and live.

It is no understatement to say that the scale and pace of change have been hard to fathom and grasp, at times confusing and at times overwhelming. While everybody is aware of how their own particular area of work has changed, what this newsletter highlights is how COVID has transformed every single aspect of work in LWETB.

In the early days we spoke a lot about the chaos associated with COVID and the turmoil to daily working life. What we see, on reflection, in this newsletter is how creativity has emerged from the chaos of COVID. While the prospect of a vaccine offers a glimmer of hope for the future many people still experience COVID as a cloud hanging over them. So today let us look at the creative chaos of COVID clouds. We may part company with some of these changes in a post-COVID world, but many of them are welcome developments which we will build on and develop further in the years ahead.

On a personal note, COVID has brought unexpected changes to my own work situation. I now look back not on the past seven months but the past seven years as I prepare to take up a new position in CDET. It has been my privilege to have led LWETB over the past seven years since August 2013. As an organisation LWETB has changed in ways that could not have been foreseen and I like to think it is now established as a vibrant ETB that offers top quality services in education and training to the people of Longford and Westmeath and beyond.

As I move on, I bring with me so many good memories of people in LWETB who have committed their considerable talents and energies to help develop both young people and adults over the years. And I would like to feel that the key words of our strategy statement 'dynamic diverse and innovative' are not just empty words but rather lived realities and that all us as staff in LWETB feel we are making a valuable contribution to the lives and future of young people and adults. And I would like to thank you all for ensuring that working in LWETB was such a wonderful and enjoyable experience for me personally, so much so that I can hardly believe the years have flown so quickly. Many thanks to you all and I wish you all many years of health and happiness in our much-changed COVID world.

We would like to wish all our staff a very Happy Christmas & a peaceful New Year

Athlone VTOS keeping the spirit of positivity alive

Athlone VTOS, like so many other organisations, has had to change the way in which we carry out our courses and classes due to the COVID-19 Pandemic. Upon our return in September, the centre at Garrycastle was looking somewhat different. Social distancing of 2m was to be observed – so we had a lot fewer people in class! There were desks and chairs marked off with yellow and black tape so students knew where it was safe to sit. Everyone wore their masks and hand sanitizer and wipes were in every classroom and corridor. There was a carefully devised one-way system - which everyone had to follow and there were now Lead Worker Reps on the corridor clearly marked in high vis green vests to help instruct people and keep watch that everyone was following the rules – for their own safety and that of all the others in the centre.

VTOS is a full time programme and much needed funding was put into providing laptops for the students to borrow during their time at VTOS. We used the first few weeks in September to set all the students up on Teams and train them on how to use the various functions. It was a steep learning curve for some and it has worked out really well. The students now enjoy using Teams and can easily keep in contact with their tutors. Tutors can put up all assignments and carry out live classes – just as if they were in the “real” classroom. For those learners who learn visually – the tutor can also put up small videos which can be replayed until the student feels they have grasped the context. Everyone can benefit from this also when it comes to revision time! There were of course challenges along the way. People felt isolated and unsure about what was going to happen. We tried our best to reassure staff and students as soon as we knew information in an effort to keep people up to date.



Microsoft Teams has improved the problem of isolation – we are not meeting people face to face but by working on teams and having live classes on line, that all important human contact is there!

Internet connections has also caused problems for some staff and students – particularly those who may live in more rural settings. The centre at Garrycastle is open and if staff or students have connection issues or need to print or need assistance – they can come into the centre. We are also getting students to come in to the centre for some practical aspects such as art and horticulture. We have the polytunnel up and running and students are preparing the soil to plant vegetables for spring – nature prevails!

The art students are glazing ceramics and making lino prints in the centre and are now able to study graphics on line on Teams! COVID has indeed changed the world and the way we do many things. Technology enhanced learning has made a huge difference to Athlone VTOS – it was a change we had often spoken about making – so a very positive effect of the Covid pandemic is that we are now using this technology daily and with confidence!

At Athlone VTOS we have tried to keep the spirit of positivity alive. The pandemic has shown that we as humans have proven to be determined and have come up with creative and innovative ideas to keep society alive. The excellent teaching and learning continues at Athlone VTOS – we just do it in a technologically different way. Perhaps we can now also appreciate in a much more meaningful way the importance of our workplace relationships and how we must all support each other and work together!



- Maria Ryan, Athlone VTOS

Learning in Strange Times

In the Literacy service we are fortunate to be able to offer different methods of delivery to suit the needs of students. Some students still need to attend classes in the centres but tutors are working with them to improve their computer skills so they can engage in online learning. As a result, some of our classes have successfully moved completely online whilst others enjoy a mix of blended learning classes. Some classes are taught and other parts are online. Some students love the advantages of learning online but others prefer attending in person so we are offering opportunities for learners to choose what suits them best in the current environment.

The North Westmeath Family Learning tutor, Miriam MacElroy, with the help of HSCL Breege Smith, is presenting her classes remotely and providing wonderful video resources for the parents on the programme. These videos can be accessed on our Facebook page, LWETB Further Education Centre Mullingar and on the Castlepollard CC Facebook page. A very tasty sample of remote learning this week with brown bread and a chocolate tray bake! In South Westmeath one of the approaches taken was using technology to deliver horticulture classes. The group were together at the polytunnel and the tutor was instructing virtually, in real time. One of the learners had a device and the tutor could see what needed to be pruned, harvested or weeded. The tutor observed and guided the group during each class. This group recently completed 2 QQI 3 modules and will receive certificates in Outdoor Vegetable Crop Production and Garden Planning.



In Longford, a tutor created a channel on YouTube for paired reading for students who need help with reading. In order to keep social distancing but help struggling readers this YouTube channel facilitates our readers at different levels. Readers say that doing it on YouTube is a way of repeating over and over the same reading material in their own time and at their own pace without depending on someone else. Many of these new ways of learning will no doubt be used and developed long after COVID-19 restrictions are gone, giving our learners new skills and independence.

- Tricia Egginton, Adult Literacy Organiser

Interesting Times in Lanesboro!

'May you live in interesting times' the old Chinese saying goes and it doesn't get more interesting than what happened in our schools from the 12th of March 2020. Literally overnight, we as educationalists, utilised all our skills and knowledge and became capable of reaching students using all the resources to hand. A whole scale deployment of every last piece of technology was thrown into the effort to ensure that quality education continued as far as possible to meet the needs of all our students. It could be described as our finest hour. Teachers dug deep and worked tirelessly to engage with their students and gave them encouragement, support and of course curricular content! As we strove to keep our schools going, all members of the school community rallied to ensure that delivery of curriculum, well being support and supports such as maintaining the delivery of school meals continued.

Nevertheless, despite the best efforts of students and teachers, everybody wished that they all could go back to 'normal school'. It seems that face to face engagement and quality relationships just can't be substituted by screens. And as the summer ended, lockdown was lifted and we all headed back to the classroom. With all hands on deck to make our school safe, we started a new year in a Level 3 COVID environment. This quickly moved to Level 5!

Despite a level 5 lockdown, schools remain open for business. New ways of conducting our business has been developed so we can deliver the curriculum in a safe and sustainable manner. We use our new technologies to give and collect homework because its safer than touching copies. Heavy books are left at home as we use our phones to download class material. Classes are live streamed to ensure guidelines are strictly followed with students participating in the lesson through the use of overflow classes. Students who must isolate can keep in touch through 'Teams' as indeed do our teachers and leaders. Teachers stream and student upload their homework and while it might take longer than usual, it is the new world we now find ourselves part of. Schools now have a myriad of platforms where information is disseminated and making sure we don't miss anything is a constant challenge. Off course the downside is that we cannot meet or engage with our colleagues like we used to but this too hopefully will pass. With the dedication of modern science, we will slowly resume back to normal life and schools.

Things are changing and by necessity a quite revolution is happening, led by schools who will do what it takes to give their students the best possible education. This process is not always pretty but without doubt it is bringing about changes, the likes of which have not been seen for many years. Similar to all schools in LWETB, we have done much to meet the needs of all our students. Our mechanism for delivery of the curriculum may have changed but our dedication to our students, their well-being and their achievements remains the same. Using wise management, resources and ongoing support, our schools offset the inequality of access that was observed during the first lockdown by exploring every avenue to support our students. It's certainly an interesting time to be in a school.

- Mike Lyons, Acting Principal, Lanesboro Community College

What does the successful reopening of a school look like from a Columba College perspective

On the 1st of September Columba College was delighted to reopen our doors to welcome our students and staff back after our unprecedented closure in March. With happiness and a bit of apprehension we kick started the academic year 2020-2021. So much has changed over the past few months, as a school we have done as much as possible to ensure the health and safety of all in our school community and to reintroduce routine and a sense of normality where possible and to provide the highest quality of teaching and learning for our students despite COVID-19.

While our school doors may have closed in March, work continued behind the scenes adapting to a new way of teaching and learning, leaving certificate predicted grades and preparing for the successful reopening of our school. We have implemented the COVID-19 protocols within our school, from the reconfiguration of classrooms and school building, to introducing social distancing, to installing sanitising stations school wide and a one-way system and they are just the physical changes!

What really has made the reopening of Columba College a success, is the commitment and dedication of our students, staff and parents. Our students have adapted to mask wearing, social distancing, base classrooms and staggered breaks all on top of their normal school life and must be commended on all their hard work and resilience during this difficult time. Our staff are working together as a team and continuously adapting to current times to ensure high quality teaching and learning for all our students.



Our LWR is working tirelessly to ensure all COVID-19 protocols are maintained and upheld in the school to ensure that we continue to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in our school. We would like to thank the parents of our school community. Without their continued support and diligence, the reopening of Columba College would not have been a resounding success. In addition to the successful reopening of Columba College, we also had the excitement of our 3 new classrooms and new Autism Unit being installed in school over the midterm break and we forward to the opening of these additional rooms in the coming days. We also overseen the installation of the community defibrillator on school grounds in collaboration with the Community First Responders. Needless to say it has been a busy time for all of us, but regardless we continue to work hard and look forward to the future.



The importance of a Special Needs Assistant during COVID-19

The role of the SNA team is to assist in supporting our students with special educational needs who have significant care needs in the classroom and school environment however this definition of the role of the SNA does not do the job of the SNAs justice. Here in Columba College we are lucky to have a wonderful SNA team, who go above and beyond for our students on a daily basis. Our SNA's are an invaluable part of school life and over the past few months they have really contributed to the successful reopening of Columba College.

The following is from a member of our SNA team on the important role of the Special Needs Assistant during the COVID-19 pandemic.

'The role of the SNA in a school is vitally important, but never more so than in the present times during this pandemic. We believe our role is extremely important to calm and help our students, as their anxieties may be greater at this time due to increased media coverage and talk almost everywhere about COVID-19. Being a student during this pandemic is not easy. Another important factor we stress to the students is that of social distancing, while out on break and moving around between classes. Handwashing and sanitising is always mentioned and again stressed by us to the students. Assisting in the sanitising at the end of each class is also important to us to continue to prevent the introduction of COVID-19 into the school environment.'

As the advert says we are all in this together and together we make a difference.

This is our motto in Columba College and we believe that it works and is working.'

LWETB FET Guidance continue to deliver a professional service

We are doing our best. Who would have thought that this pandemic would continue for months on end and into 2021? So considering the year that has passed I am proud to say we have really adapted and continued to deliver a quality driven and professional guidance service.

We are doing our best to keep our service relevant in these times, to reach our current students and target new ones. In March we decided to deliver a weekly FET Guidance newsletter to keep students and staff up to speed on what was being delivered locally and nationally. When centres reopened we continued with the newsletter as we feel it is a very useful tool to keep us relevant and engage with current and new learners. We moved our service on-line delivering 1-1 information, guidance and counselling on-line using teams, utilising social media and also by telephone. We have linked in with internal LWETB programmes and services and other agencies to reach learners and refer appropriately. We signed up to use Careersportal My Future +, an on-line guidance tool, which again helps us work with students remotely.

When reflecting on the year that has passed I really want to commend and thank the team, John Doherty, Fiona Murphy and Patricia Reilly for their constant interest and positivity in trying new ways of doing our work. During the course of the year we have had some staffing changes with our colleague Liz Glennon moving to the FET Employer Engagement role and a new colleague Niamh Penrose starting with us in November. While we miss Liz we know that she will bring her work ethic and dedication to her new role. Niamh joins us during these strange times but has already made a valuable contribution to our service. Most importantly we are doing our best to be kind to ourselves, each other, our colleagues and



to clients. We are in very strange and worrying times for people and we have to respect that every person's experience of living with this COVID pandemic is unique to them. We can't assume how people are feeling, generally anxiety levels are heightened and people are missing family and some social contact. It can be a very lonely time for people. So if in some way we show kindness, respect and empathy to each other we might just help someone.

- Caroline Cornally, FET Guidance Co-ordinator

BTEI Services

It was not simply a rumour...COVID-19 had arrived. No apology. Did we run? No, we stayed and fought. From Friday 13th March 2020, we battled for our learners and staff, our delivery of services and for the health, safety and wellbeing of all. BTEI services across LWETB circled the wagons and put our plan in place. We met with many challenges but overcame many too. The practical steps included physically measuring floor space to ensure social distancing; reducing classroom capacity; installing sanitising stations at all entry/ exit points; perspex screens and clear signage adorned every wall and door; additional cleaning hours were arranged; stationery and postage were provided for issue and return of learner work, when broadband would not stretch that far.

To enable our learners' attend classes online, laptops were provided for the duration of their course with IT support. Despite the fear and trepidation we all felt, remote learning proved effective for many. Certainly there were numerous rows with the wi-fi, steam from the ears (not the kettle!) but the dedication and perseverance of our teaching staff and willingness of our learners bore fruit.

Exams were conducted online and Assignments submitted using new digital platforms like MS Teams. This was both difficult and innovative and has led to new offerings of 'online' and 'blended learning' delivery across the BTEI services. One positive outcome from the lockdown is that some programme portfolios were presented online for IV and EA – this is a goal of the QA unit – this goal was realised sooner than planned.

The experience has highlighted the staff's resilience to change. They devoured the new training that was put in place - at speed. They sought new ways of ensuring the classes were learner centred. They got on board with the online and blended learning and continued to deliver their classes in a way that best suited their learners. The classes continued with minimum disruption. The BTEI team across LWETB delivered when it mattered most. We plan to continue facilitating more opportunities for learners and staff alike in our next term.



- Anne-Maree O' Brien, Co-ordinator, BTEI

Virtual BT Young Scientist and Technology Exhibition 2021

Ardscoil Phádraig have two projects selected to compete in the first Virtual BT Young Scientist and Technology Exhibition from the 6th to the 8th of January 2021. Thousands of students entered this year's competition with approximately 550 projects being selected for the virtual exhibition in January. For each of their chosen research topics, students are in the process of carrying out their research and analysing the results of the data they have obtained. Students are currently completing their project book and a short video explaining their projects, both of which will be submitted to the exhibition. Students will be judged on their projects virtually with each judging session lasting about fifteen minutes. This is similar to other years except this year students will present their project to the judges and answer questions about their project virtually.

These are the two projects submitted by the following students to the Virtual BT Young Scientist and Technology Exhibition 2021.



Aoife Reilly and Katelyn Farrell.

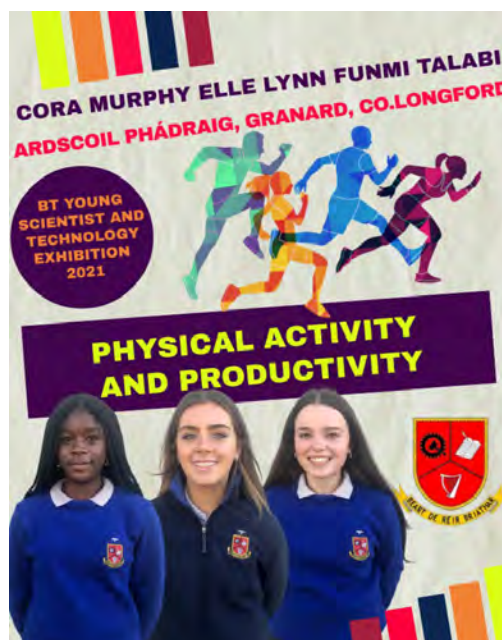
Project title: The Effect of Technology on Social Interactions - Social and Behavioural Sciences

The students chose this title as they are intrigued about whether or not people are aware of their technology usage throughout the day, particularly during conversations. Students are analysing a number of people during meal times, conversations, daily tasks and observing their phone usage, for example how many times they check their phones, does it distract them during their meals, conversations etc. Students are surveying the individuals about their perceived technology usage and then analysing the data to see how aware people are of how technology can interfere with conversations, daily activities, meal times and a number of different situations.

Cora Murphy, Funmi Talabi and Elle Lynn

Project title: Physical Activity and Productivity - Social and Behavioural Sciences

These three students decided to analyse the impact of physical activity on productivity as they are all very interested in sport and wanted to see if exercise could positively impact people's productivity levels. Students surveyed a wide range of people to assess their opinions on whether exercise impacts their productivity or not. Students also carried out a test on exercise groups and control groups to determine the impact on productivity levels by completing a task after either exercising or not exercising.



Best of luck to these five students as they continue to conduct and finalise their investigations and as they progress on to the exhibition in January.

Music Generation Longford's move to Online programmes

Music Generation Longford first got up and running early this year with exciting initiatives and workshops planned for the summer months. Unfortunately, the unforeseen outbreak of COVID-19 and a National lockdown stopped Music Generation Longford's momentum before it really got going. We are delighted to announce Music Generation Longford recently recruited a wonderfully talented team of fifteen musician educators local to Longford. These musician educators with Music Development Officer, Mary-Jane Sweeney, have been busy planning how to deliver performance music education to the children and young people of Longford from an online platform. We in Music Generation Longford are now very excited to launch a series of online programmes. The programmes include:

Rock/Pop Music Hub – online small group tuition in Guitar, Bass Guitar, Ukulele, Drums, Singing, and Keyboard.

Online Music Production – This course takes young musicians through the very basics of audio technology and recording using their own virtual online recording studio. Even if they don't play an instrument, this course will allow them to learn about recording, music, and production. By the end of the 6 week programme the young musician will have created their own track, using loops, beats and even their own voice if they wish.

Online Songwriting programme – Over the course of six weeks the young musicians will learn the fundamentals of songwriting and use their creative talents to compose their own song under the guidance of Music Generation Longford's musician educators.

Music Generation Longford's work with County Longford Youth Services

Music Generation are working in partnership with County Longford Youth Service, delivering guitar and band tuition to numerous groups on a weekly basis.

Traditional music online workshop with Dónal Lunny, Tara Breen and Pádraig Rynne

It is with great excitement Music Generation Longford announce a workshop to be delivered by the highly talented musician Dónal Lunny and his partners Tara Breen and Pádraig Rynne on December 19. This initiative is in collaboration with Music Generation Offaly/Westmeath for the young musicians in these three Counties.

Dónal Lunny is one of Ireland's greatest ever composers, arrangers, and producers. Dónal with Pádraig and Tara will provide classes in approaches to accompaniment in Irish music. Dónal will teach some recent compositions of his, showing learners the important approaches needed to succeed in complementing Irish Traditional music in arrangement and composition. Pádraig will help young musicians experience and learn the creative elements needed to grow their own roots in composition. Tara, providing learners with essential tools in approaching melody playing within the genre and taking the young musicians round the world with melodies from Ireland, Galicia, Brittany and even Nova Scotia.

- Mary-Jane Sweeney, Music Generation Development Officer



Music Generation Longford an Longfoirt



Students adapting to remote learning at Longford Youthreach

We returned to our Centre on the 20th of August and made the necessary COVID adjustments. Our students returned on Monday the 24th of August and we managed to accommodate 22 of our 25 student cohort on the premises at the same time. The 2 metre spacing requirement of the FE Sector presented us with a great deal of re-organising, as we had initially assumed that the second level 1 metre rule would apply.

We also had our kitchen operating to provide a cooked lunch for them everyday. Students were accommodated in 3 different rooms and catered to at 3 different times. This was a very asocial exercise, with none of the usual interactions or banter, being a merely functional intervention to ensure that all students were fed properly. Then our roof gave up and we had some heavy water ingress on a number of occasions in early September. This precipitated a move to the old VTOS premises on the Battery Road, while a new roof was being installed on our own Centre. This unexpected change in routine brought a positive "unintended consequence" to the move, adding a novelty and freshness to the norm. The students and staff have been remarkably understanding, co-operative and creative throughout the entire period of our return to work in August.

Remote-learning has now become an integral methodology of delivery to the most able in our student cohort. The provision of laptops to each individual learner by the LWETB has been a major factor in the transference of teaching from the classroom to the home setting. This methodology is still in its infancy, and will remain a major obstacle to the progression of many of our student group, but it has provided an avenue of interaction and teaching that would not have been foreseeable 9 months ago. It has also equipped some students with some invaluable progression skills in the event of continuing on to Further/Higher Education.



The absence of many of the extra-curricular activities, which are an integral component of our strategy to engage out learners and ensure attendance, remains a major negative in the lives of our students. Daily student interaction is currently very classroom/laptop based and this has had a fatiguing effect on all our students with some leaving due to the "it is too much like school" environment that COVID restrictions has placed on us all. Despite this, attendance, application, good-humour, resilience and kindness can be seen on a daily basis among the students. Many are accustomed to a personal daily routine of uncertainty and consequently may be in a better position than more privileged students, to withstand the challenges.

As a Programme, we look forward to returning to the normality of eating together as a group, having all members of the same class in the one room, an active games room, excursions, contact sport, work experience etc. etc. in the coming months. It has been and continues to be a major challenge, but the fortitude and understanding of our staff and students has been a revelation and makes the management of the Centre on a daily basis a more rewarding professional experience.

- Seán O' Suilleabhain, Co-ordinator, Longford Youthreach

YOUTHREACH



Ireland's EU Structural and
Investment Funds Programmes
2014-2020
Co-funded by the Irish Government
and the European Union



EUROPEAN UNION
Investing in your future
European Social Fund

New Principal at Castlepollard Community College

LWETB is delighted to welcome Mr. Wayne Walsh as Principal of Castlepollard Community College. A native of Oldcastle Co. Meath, Wayne holds an Undergraduate Degree in Physical Education and Masters in Educational Leadership from St Marys University, Strawberry Hill, London.

Wayne brings a wealth of knowledge and expertise to the role of Principal, drawing on his extensive experience as a Deputy Head Teacher in one of the highest performing comprehensive schools in England. Over a period of 12 years, Wayne held numerous leadership posts and successfully led the work of all subject departments across the school in the delivery of quality education programmes. Wayne also successfully implemented a number of student enrichment programmes and achieved sustained success with sports teams at both provincial and national level. This work was completed under the tutelage of Sir Pritpal Singh who was knighted for his services to education at the school.

Wayne states that his career has been to "provide the best possible opportunities and support to all staff and students in his care in order for them to achieve their potential". He has passed on his appreciation to Mary Coyle for all of her service to the school and is looking forward to leading Castlepollard Community College in the coming years.



The changing shape of Castlepollard Community College

Covid 19 restrictions have brought changes to the daily life of our school however everyone is happy to be back with old friends and our first years have made a great start to their time here in Castlepollard Community College as new friendships blossom in our familiar setting. The familiar setting has changed somewhat, however. COVID-19 requires space and that was the focus when we came back to the college, creating space for our students so they could be as creative, innovative and as comfortable as possible in their surroundings. With the restrictions came new fixtures and posters all over the school. The physical aspect of the school has been changed with sanitisation stations at every room whilst the staff and students' movement around the building has changed with a new one-way system in place. Some have even been wondering why we didn't have it in place all along! A new shed for storage was installed in September as the corridors were cleared of lockers and benches giving the staff and students plenty of space to get around the school safely.

Perhaps the more welcome changes have come outside as students are now taking even greater advantage of our wonderful setting, taking to the running track around the GAA pitch for walks regularly throughout the day to get a break from the dreaded facemask. The most obvious infrastructural change can be seen in our yard, the most popular area during break times. The picnic tables which would usually be deserted in the winter months are now covered by brand new canopies. This gives our students a more comfortable environment to spend time with their friends.

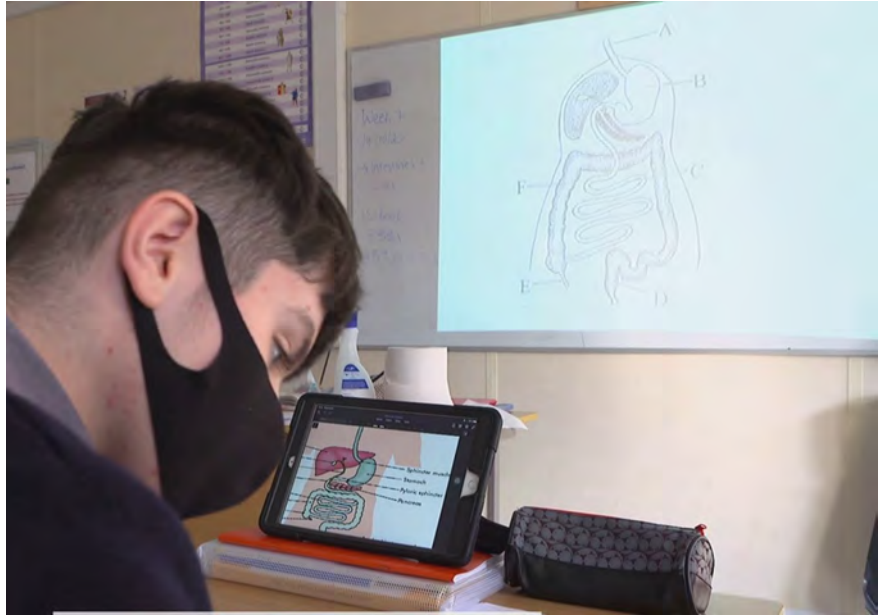
Our prefab classrooms towards the back of the school site now have a sheltered connection with the school as canopies were also installed to provide students with shelter going to and from classes in the winter months. The yellow and black signage has now become familiar to us and the new staff and students' entrances are engrained in our routine. Despite these physical changes, the welcoming atmosphere of the school hasn't changed.



Facing new challenges in teaching and learning

Along with all the infrastructural changes in the school, staff and students alike have had to face challenges to their everyday lives. Teaching as is well documented has changed for the teachers in Castlepollard. Our students have also had to approach learning from some different angles.

A lot of these changes have been achieved with the helping hand of IT. Fortunately at Castlepollard Community College, this is a change we were ready for. Before the Covid pandemic, a working group of teachers had been promoting the use of OneNote in the classroom and also for homework. This was not exclusive to the group and many other teachers were using it with their classes.



As our Junior Cycle students use iPads, their ability to access notes, recorded lessons and online resources came easily. Students are now very comfortable with this "blended learning". Their resources are organised on the online platforms of OneNote and Teams. Homework is handed up and corrected online and classes can be held from home or through several rooms through Teams. This culminated in a "Online Learning Day" which we held in October where students attended their classes from home. This day was an example of how proficient our staff and students have become with online learning.

Outside the classroom setting school life has seen further changes. Students are spending much more time outside on our walking track and beneath the new school canopies. Our split lunch breaks have also changed class times throughout the week.

Despite the curtailment of extra-curricular activities staff and students still managed to celebrate Positive Mental Health Week with distanced activities. Maths week went ahead with great success along with our Halloween Fancy Dress Competition. During our first lockdown it was clear that the school community were ready to face these challenges head on as we replaced our traditional Sports Day with a Virtual Sports Day. This coincided with the launch of our Instagram page as staff and students challenged each other in a virtual format. On this note, we have found social media a valuable asset during these times, connecting with parents and the local community through Facebook, Twitter and now Instagram, which has been a huge success.



LWETB Board

'Every problem is an opportunity in disguise.' As we come out of our second lockdown I look back to March when it all began and realise just how far I have come in my job along with my colleagues in Corporate Services. Before COVID-19 was even heard of I was familiar with the concept of remote working, but I had never experienced it. When the government announced the first lockdown things changed considerably for us all. The week running up to the lockdown was chaotic to say the least, but in a good way. We all really pulled together as a team to make sure staff were set up to work remotely. There was a great sense of comradery. My first week of remote working was a novelty during which I set up a Corporate Services network on Microsoft Teams. The novelty soon wore off when I realised the challenges ahead.

One of the key changes for myself, Senior Management and the Board was the holding of our statutory meetings commencing with the May meeting. LWETB standing orders did not facilitate the holding of meetings virtually. In consultation with the Chairperson, Deputy Chairperson, and the Chief Executive we amended the standing orders to facilitate the changed environment.

In normal circumstances members and relevant staff are issued with an agenda and supporting documentation seven days in advance of the meeting. With the staff I would normally follow up through face to face reminders in the corridor or sticking my head into an office with a gentle reminder as I walked past. I am sure they dreaded the sight of me in the week running up to the issuing of the agenda. However, in lockdown I followed up through email and had to await their responses. The face to face interaction with my colleagues was gone and I really missed that. One of the downsides of lockdown is the lack of social interaction.

While waiting on the documentation I familiarised myself with Zoom of which I was not aware pre COVID. I was concerned that members would have difficulty using it and as administrative support to the Board I was required

to assist them in joining the meeting and to do so I had to know how to use the software. I set up a few test meetings and I watched a YouTube video, so far so good. The agenda and documentation issued on time. Then came the night of the meeting. This was the first ever virtual meeting of LWETB. As administrative support I am tasked with keeping notes of the meeting and I can track attendance from the sign in sheet in normal circumstances. This was difficult in the virtual environment, as together with monitoring attendance I had to ensure a quorum was always present. This was certainly a change from what I was used to.

The meetings have continued virtually and apart from some technical issues they proceeded without any problems. Virtual meetings allow easier access. As all LWETB members have responsibilities outside of the board the holding of meetings virtually makes it much easier for them to attend. We have discovered a new way of working which could be beneficial in the future.

A significant event for board members in the lockdown period was the provision of governance training which was extremely successful notwithstanding the virtual environment.

2020 has been a very tough year for all involved, but it also gave us an opportunity to reassess how we approach things and devise new ways of working, some of which will be carried through to the next chapter in the post COVID period. While I miss the office and the social interaction with my colleagues, which is part of my daily routine, I can now see the opportunities presented through remote working. I initially felt distant from my colleagues however remote working has brought us all closer together as a team which can only be good for the future.

- Elaine McEvoy, Corporate Services

The Dust Busters of Mullingar Community College!

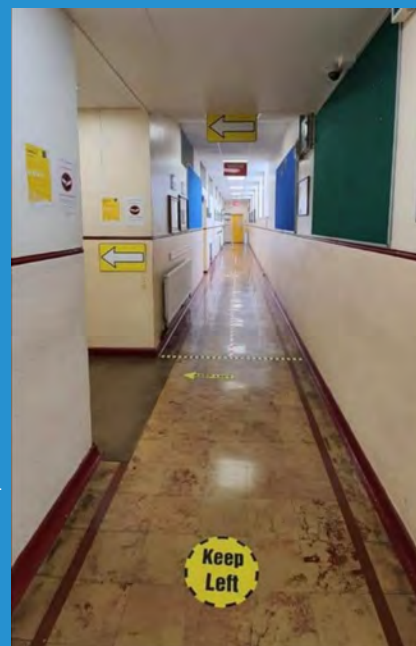
When schools reopened in August, students and staff returned to a very different place to the one they left in March. In order to adhere to government guidelines and ensure the safety of all, schools had to change or enhance many of its previous systems.

A high level of cleanliness had to be maintained and monitored and for us this involved a focus on wiping and sanitizing of all surfaces, refilling dispensers and emptying bins more frequently as they filled up with wipes and kitchen roll.

The one way system on the corridors has left them less congested but resulted in more walking for us. Rooms are cleaned thoroughly every day and this is documented on checklists to ensure the highest of standards. Isolation rooms are disinfected immediately after being used; the whole school is 'fogged' at the end of each day. What would have seemed unusual a year ago is now the normal. The Canteen which was hive of activity at lunchtimes is now quiet as an Overflow room. Pre-ordered, packed lunches are now brought to base rooms or the Astroturf for each year group. Again, new systems keeping us safe.

It has been difficult at times adjusting to the new way of doing things but with the extra work comes the extra steps which must be good for us! I suppose everyone in schools has had to change their ways and it is good to do our part in ensuring that life goes on as normal as possible for everyone because I think we all agree, it's good to be back!

- Clare Orme on behalf of the cleaners of Mullingar CC



Junior Cycle Assessment

Providing an inclusive education for all students is something Athlone Community College holds very dear, especially in terms of young people's right to fully participate in their educational experience. Teachers have fully embraced assessment reforms at Junior Cycle as this new approach to assessment has opened up the space for students to be further included in their learning. Choice and flexibility are key to the assessment approaches introduced with the Classroom-Based Assessments (CBAs), which allows teaching and learning the freedom to respond to the needs of all learners.

Teachers approach to CBAs ensure that assessment focuses on what happens in the classroom with the students as they engage in learning. The potential for lost learning or growing gaps in learning was a very real concern as COVID-19 spiralled us all into a global pandemic. Thankfully, our school had planned for assessment at the start of the academic school year and had a CBA calendar in place. This meant that when we were thrust into lock down, many students had already engaged in CBAs in most subjects. This year again we have a calendar in place for the year ahead and SLARs have already taken place in some subjects. Despite the current restrictions, teachers are discovering ways to work within the guidelines and still capture the more practical skills that cannot effectively be assessed in a traditional pen and paper examination.

The cancellation of the State Examinations in June caused uncertainty for teachers and students alike but as a school we are committed to ensuring that students learning will not go unrecognised or uncelebrated, regardless of trying circumstances. Hence, all teachers held online assessments with students at the end of the last school year and these were reported to all students and their parents or guardians. We also issued a Certificate of Achievement to students in recognition of the wealth of learning that they had engaged in over the course of Junior Cycle. This year we have already issued an extra report home to students and parents/ guardians, and we have just recently planned for Parent-Teacher meetings to take place over the phone.

Placing students at the centre of learning is a priority for us as a school and ensuring that all students continue to have full access, participation and engagement in learning is fundamental to who we are.

- Gráinne Macken, Acting Deputy Principal, Athlone Community College

Ballymahon Youthreach



COVID-19 has comprehensively changed the look and feel of Ballymahon Youthreach. Cleaning, sanitising, wiping down and washing have all become an integral part of the daily routine. We have been very lucky to have Veronica in the centre who upholds the highest of hygiene standards and whose meticulous attention to detail and good practice has encouraged everyone to play their part. With small classroom sizes and the requirement to maintain two metres between students, an overhaul of the buildings took place. In addition to our normal three streams of QQI Level 3, Level 4 Year 1 and Level 4 Year 2, we added a fourth programme and reduced the sizes of each. The new programme is QQI Level 5 University Access Programme. Staff have had to deliver new modules at a new level which was both challenging and rewarding at the same time. It increased the diversity of the centre with modules like European Studies, Web Authoring and Computer Aided Draughting. All computers from the IT room were removed and it became a base classroom for the Level 5 group. 30 new laptops were procured and provided to each individual student.

Teachers worked with students to set up Teams and Class Notebooks in preparation for any future situation where students would study from home. But the core value of the Centre's mission statement has held firm: to provide quality student-centred education. The social interactions between students have been restricted but their resolve is to be admired as they still engage in fun and banter while complying with COVID-19 regulations. While students cannot enjoy group-work as before, collaboration is still a major part of every day's lessons – the difference being that instead of sitting side-by-side, students cooperate digitally through tools like Padlet, Nearpod, MindMeister, Prezi and a host of Microsoft Office applications. Despite all the challenges as a result of COVID-19, the staff have remained positive throughout. A great sense of camaraderie is perceptibly evident which has ensured a continuity of active learning, while we all understand that brighter days lie ahead.

- Claire Gormley, Co-ordinator,
Ballymahon Youthreach



Out of this World - "Athlone Community College Calling ISS, Over"

Athlone Community College had a once in a lifetime opportunity to make contact through amateur radio with the International Space Station (ISS) on 7th December 2020 at 2:50 pm. Students from ACC had about 11 minutes to put Athlone on the astronomical map as they made contact direct with the ISS while it orbits our planet at a speed of 27,600km/hr. This once-in-a-lifetime opportunity was part of the Amateur Radio on the International Space Station programme (ARISS), in which students from Athlone Community College spoke with U.S. Astronaut Shannon Walker on board the ISS.

In order to carry out this real-time Earth-to-space radio contact, which uses amateur radio equipment to beam a line-of-sight signal to the ISS, ACC set up a temporary amateur radio station on the grounds which included a tracking antenna, and two-way radio system, which allowed students to speak directly with Shannon while she took a break from her duties and experiments on board the ISS, to answer the students puzzling and fascinating questions as they ponder about space and life in space. The ARISS ground station at ACC was allocated the very special callsign EI1ISS (Echo India One India Sierra Sierra) by ComReg for the occasion. The station was operated by Irish members of ARISS Europe with support from the local amateur radio club in Athlone, the Shannon Basin Radio Club (www.ariss-eu.org, www.sbrcl.ie)

Athlone Community College was a stand-out school of choice this year due to their inspirational science education methodologies which promote hands-on, inquiry-based, collaborative and student-centred learning. The facilities and staff in the school ensure science education is imaginative, engaging and both playful and challenging for students, putting them light years ahead of competing schools. The teachers in the science department are dedicated and specialists in their subjects. STEM (Science, Technology, Education and Mathematics) subjects are particularly popular in the school. ACC are also one of a diminishing number of schools nationally that offer Applied Mathematics for Senior Cycle students.

In the months building up to the live event, Athlone Community College were delivering engaging, fun filled and educational events to prepare students and awaken a deeper interest in space and space travel. Aside from the Earth and Space curriculum in science, students in ACC were busy creating

questions to ask on the day. Nearly three hundred questions were submitted by the students and distilled to a final list of twenty questions for the programme. Students had the opportunity to name and register a star, the winning entry being "Réalt Áth Luain". Sixth-year students participated in a charity space-walk to raise funds and awareness for the Mark Pollock Trust, Second years had an in-class observatory from Blackrock Castle Observatory via Zoom, while First years experienced a live Q&A with Aidan Crowley who works at the European Space Agency, stationed in the European Astronaut Centre (EAC) in Cologne. Every department in the school got on board for this huge event. The Music department learned space-themed songs in choir practice, the Art department decorated the school, the English department students wrote short stories on the theme of space and space travel and the History department taught students about the timeline of the space race and notable space events. There was a school-wide effort to build momentum ahead of this magnificent opportunity.





This "out of this world experience" was exciting and special for all the students involved. The event was live streamed to every classroom in the school as capacity in the hall was restricted on the day of the event. Ten students had the enviable task of communicating with the Astronaut Shannon and learning about life in space.

Working with the students and staff of Athlone Community College was Daniel Cussen, ARISS Radio Technical Co-ordinator. He built and tested the operation of the temporary "mission control" radio station EI1ISS. Daniel commented "I am thrilled that ACC was chosen for this event. I am extremely passionate about amateur radio and technology and I am so excited to share my passion with these students and to inspire them to follow in my footsteps"

Amateur Radio is a hobby which facilitates learning how radio technology works, communicating with others and investigating the mysteries of long distance communication. ARISS (Amateur Radio on the International Space Station) is a global voluntary group that has created a programme for utilising radio equipment on-board the ISS as a channel for further educating schools across the world on the work of the international space programme, life on-board the ISS, expeditions which astronauts are undertaking and amateur radio. This highly-competitive programme which celebrated its 20th anniversary recently, receives many applications from schools across the globe.

Every six months the application process opens, enabling schools to apply to be chosen as one of the select few to make space contact six or 12 months later. Laura Donnellan co-ordinator of the event and science teacher at Athlone Community College says "The whole school community are excited by this once in a lifetime opportunity that both staff and students will not forget.



I am delighted to be part of a tremendous school that is now being recognised nationally and globally. It is a massive opportunity for the students to see the possibilities and opportunities life has to offer and for all of us to see just how far technology has come. With all the mini events we planned as a science department it truly will make for a memorable experience. Students are getting inspired to 'Aim for the moon, even if you miss you will land among the stars'".

The event was live streamed on You Tube and can be viewed here

About ARISS

Amateur Radio on the International Space Station (ARISS) is a cooperative venture of international amateur radio societies and the space agencies that support the International Space Station (ISS). The primary goal of ARISS is to promote exploration of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) topics by organizing scheduled contacts via amateur radio between crewmembers aboard the ISS and students in classrooms or informal education venues. In Ireland the Irish Radio Transmitters Society (IRTS) represents Irish Amateur Radio Operators. ARISS volunteers work with international partners to plan live events between astronauts and school children. With the help of experienced amateur radio volunteers, ISS crew, who are licensed radio amateurs themselves, speak directly with large audiences in a variety of public forums. Before and during these radio contacts, students, teachers, parents, and communities learn about space, space technologies, and amateur radio. For more information, see www.ariss-eu.org, www.irts.ie

Working in a pandemic in Athlone Training Centre

Well like everyone else in the country, and around the world, the effect of COVID-19 on both our personal and working lives was and is unprecedented. The suddenness of the impact of restrictions meant that on a work level we in Finance & Admin ATC, as well as the rest of LWETB, had to move very quickly to adapt to the restrictions imposed. This required a major team effort by all involved and was helped by the guidance and support from the LWETB COVID-19 Workplace Response team.

The COVID-19 restrictions meant the introduction of Remote Working which had not really been tried or tested to any great degree heretofore. We had to source/prepare laptops for all staff and deploy software solutions that would support working remotely in a secure manner. This was done quickly, and all systems tested to ensure that they could be accessed and used remotely. We also had to modify our workflow processes for all work that was previously done in the office environment to e-based workflow processes. We had to communicate with both our internal and external customers and ensure e-workflow channels for both were set up and managed effectively.

As most will now fully appreciate the challenges of working remotely from home are many, both from a work and personal perspective. It is a very different environment to the office and requires a significant adjustment not just in terms of how things are done but the when and where. It has required staff to balance work and personal responsibilities and has shown LWETB staff at their very best in doing so. Remote working has meant that how we communicate with each other and manage work has changed considerably, and we have adapted and employed all the prevailing IT solutions e.g. the appropriately named MS Teams which has proved to be an invaluable communications platform.

One of the positives arising from COVID-19 is that it has forced organisations to critically look at how they operate and to embrace and adopt ICT Work Solutions to a far greater extent than would have happened organically. It has effectively fast tracked the much talked about 'virtual office' and will have a major impact on the issue of 'Work/Life Balance' going forward. It has demonstrated that with the right supports LWETB staff have risen to the challenges with exemplary dedication and innovation.

- Mark O'Connor, Manager, Finance & Admin LWETB

Community Education in a pandemic

LWETB's Community Education Service has faced the pandemic 'full-on' and has overcome the challenges it has posed by adapting its delivery of classes to our community education groups. In the early stages of the 'lockdown', the Community Education tutors quickly got to grips with compiling resources that learners could complete at home and/or they could use to generate ideas for classes on their return to their centres.

Autumn 2020

The return to classes in September brought new challenges to Community Ed and, again, the challenges posed by the '2m rule', hand sanitising stations and 'wipe-as-you-go' were met with goodwill and co-operation. Tutors were given their packs of PPE and where possible returned to classrooms in FE centres or in community centres. For some learners, classes were required to be online and this generated a few glitches. However, with the benefit of the training in teaching online, (facilitated by Tracey Anderson during the summer), the tutors took on the thrills of teaching through their tablets. They are now up to speed in how to 'hotspot', change their backgrounds and upload class materials. And that's all before they start teaching.

On Reflection....

The Community Education Service has been extremely responsive to the needs of our learners and their communities. This was possible due to the ethos of flexibility and adaptability that characterises Community Education, and to the talents of our tutors who matched their resources and skills to the ability and interests of their learners. The challenges of COVID-19 have made the Community Education team stronger than ever and we look forward, with gusto, to getting back to our groups in 2021!

- Nuala O'Brien, Community Education Facilitator



So, we had Covid Wonderment through photography, art-in-lockdown challenges, instructions on how to make spiral gardens, pasta mandalas, aromatherapy for aches and pains, what to do with 'Thrillers, Fillers and Spillers', the joys of home composting, healthy eating to boost your immune system, quizzes, sewing patterns, keep-fit challenges, how to make art from cardboard.



Calculated Grading Process in Ballymahon Vocational School

In March of this year, we as a school couldn't have imagined that our Leaving Certificate class of 2020 would have to endure such a difficult three months. We were very fortunate that our students maintained a high level of engagement with the school throughout the school closure. This was very much down to the hard work carried out by our teachers, through the support of the students' parents and the willingness and adaptability of our students. We as a school community can understand the decisions that had to be taken but many of our students were also disappointed that they were not been given the opportunity to prove their ability in their range of subjects.

Upon the announcement of the Calculated Grades process, our school staff worked harmoniously together to ensure that we were clear on the steps and procedures required. After a number of guidance meetings on the process, staff initially worked independently focusing on their class groups and then collectively in subject departments. The rich range of assessments and records which had been maintained and throughout the students Leaving Certificate course allowed our teachers to make a fair and calculated judgement. This is in no doubt down the professionalism displayed by our teachers in their day to day engagement with our students. The process was very efficiently carried out and cross checked before returning to the Department of Education and Skills. The small number of our students choosing to sit the November Leaving Certificate indicates that our teachers have been very thorough and fair throughout the process. However, nothing can replace students been given the opportunity to prove to themselves and others what they are truly capable of.

Restructuring Timetables

Previous to the current COVID-19 pandemic, Ballymahon Vocational School operated a timetable consisting of 9 forty minute classes per day with students moving to the base classes of teachers. Prior to the guidance issued by the Department of Education in late July, considerable consideration had been given to the option of moving to 6 one-hour class periods per day. After completing a review of previous practices in light of the guidelines, school management took the decision to move to one-hour class periods on a temporary basis in student base classes. The reasoning for this was:

- a reduction in movement throughout the school during the school day,
- a reduction in the weight of the school bag as students now only need to bring in items for 6 periods a day rather than 9,
- a reduction in loss of tuition time where desks and chairs need to be cleaned after each class. This takes approximately 5 minutes per class and spread over 9 periods would equate to a loss of 45 minutes' tuition time per day,
- a greater focus could be placed on the Leaving Certificate students within a one-hour period who had lost considerable tuition time due to school closures,
- a greater focus on students with Special Educational Needs could be established in one hour periods where there was disengagement during school closures,
- there would be a maximum of 6 sets of homework per evening rather than 9 to allow students to focus on their own personal wellbeing.



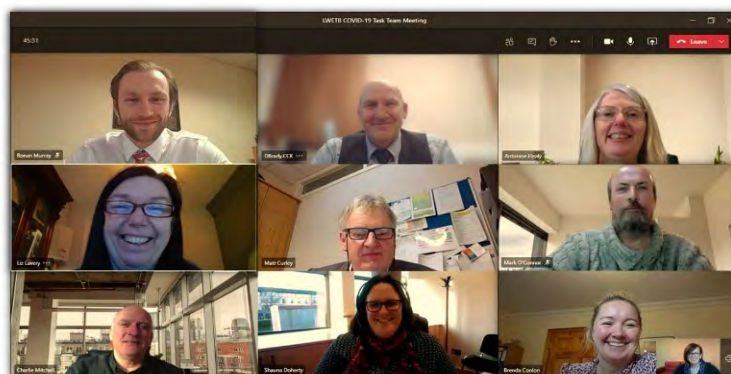
After the initial adaptation to the class lengths, early feedback indicates that it has been very successful in recovering lost time where teachers have the ability to go into greater depth on topics during a 60-minute class. Students have adopted very well to the changes also highlighting areas such as longer engagement in practical subjects and developing a deeper understanding on topics in class before attempting homework.

The school has also moved to staggered lunchbreaks to allow for a reduction in social contacts. This has proven to be very successful with reductions in times for food distribution and students having more space during breaks. There will be a full review of practices implemented before the year end to allow for adjustments and to make a decision on whether current practices will remain in the longer term.

LWETB COVID-19 Task Team

Thursday March 12th 2020, a date etched on everyone's mind in LWETB. Overnight we switched from operating in bustling learning and office environments to suddenly operating alone at our kitchen tables. In response, the Chief Executive, Christy Duffy, considered a whole of organisation approach and established the COVID-19 Task Team as a strategic response to the unfolding situation. The team was tasked with steering the ship in these uncharted waters.

Every section of our organisation was represented on the Task Team - schools, FET centres and offices in addition to all members of our Senior Leadership team. Members of the Team over the last 9 months include Christy Duffy – Chief Executive, Antonine Healy – Director of FET, Liz Lavery- Director of Schools, Youth and Music, Charlie Mitchell – Director of OSD, Noeleen O'Donoghue – OSD, Corporate Services, Ronan Murray – Area Training Manager, Dermot Brady - Principal, Columba Community College, Killucan, Pauline Fadden - Deputy Principal, Athlone Community College, Matt Curley – Assistant Manager, ATC, Mark O'Connor - Manager Finance & Administration, OSD, Brenda Conlon



LWETB COVID-19 Task Team Meeting in progress

– OSD, Human Resources, Shauna Doherty – Adult Education Officer, Colin Rhatigan – OSD, Corporate Services and Geraldine Lee – OSD, Corporate Services. The Task Team have developed numerous forms to support our managers and principals to safely welcome back staff and learners and to support the continued operation of a safe workplace. The Team developed a number of wellbeing supports throughout the last six months and established a dedicated section for this on the LWETB website. All the work of the Task Team has been documented in the COVID-19 Business Response Plan which is reviewed and updated regularly and available to all Staff on the COVID-19 SharePoint Response site. In addition, training was organised across a range of areas to assist staff undertaking new roles and responsibilities for example, instructional videos, Lead Worker Representative Training and First Aid Responder Training.

It was at times turbulent – planning for the unknown, but at all times each member of the team had the Health and Safety of our staff and learners as top priority. The success of the task team is down to the commitment, contributions and the positive, proactive approach of each individual member and their dedication to the safe steering of the organisation as a whole through this challenging time. The Task Team have met every Wednesday afternoon since March and while some of us had never met prior to this and have never met physically, we operate as if we have worked together for years. The commitment and support from our colleagues and learners has been instrumental in aiding the Task Team to navigate its way in this time and for that we thank you all. It has been challenging, it has been tough but in all of that comes great learning and opportunities and as we hopefully make our way to calmer waters, we look forward to the positive changes this brings to our organisation.

- Shauna Doherty, Chairperson, COVID-19 Task Team

Positives of COVID-19 Arrangements in a PLC Environment

Life in Longford College of Further Education is very different in this new world of COVID-19. Our first positive change is getting ready for College in the morning is so much quicker now in our mask wearing world – no more need to shave or do the make-up. Many classes now take place online, this has an added benefit of reducing carbon emissions with less travelling into the College. There are also benefits of less time commuting and more time at home with family or for doing the all-important assignments.

Staff and students alike are all coming to terms with new technologies and new ways of learning. There is a whole new meaning to teamwork with Microsoft Teams. Staff get to experience what it is like to learn something new and how even the tiniest things can be stumbling blocks when using new technology. The sharing of ideas, knowledge, materials and resources among staff and students has fostered a great sense of camaraderie, collegiality and now we all know why Microsoft called its software Teams.

There is a huge reduction in the amount of paper, ink and photocopying. Everything is online now. No more carrying of heavy bags, no more storing assignments in filing cabinets, no more worrying that the dog might eat your homework – everything is safe on the cloud. The saving in terms of financial cost and environmental impact is huge.

We have learned to count our blessings. On those days when classes are online, students do not have to worry about going out into the November rain. On those rare days when we are actually on campus we get to appreciate how lucky we are to have the opportunity to attend College. We no longer take the little things for granted. We have all learned the importance of washing our hands the way our Mammies taught us. Our problem-solving skills have improved, and we have all learned to persevere. We have learned that humour helps in stressful situations. The biggest positive in these strange times is that now, when we are physically further apart than we have ever been we are much more connected than we have ever been.

- Ken Martin, Adult Education Tutor, LCFE

Recruitment

Three key words from Longford and Westmeath ETB's mission statement are Dynamic, Diverse, and Innovative. These key phrases steer and underpin LWETB and the strong core values that the organisation both stand and strive for. The importance of these three key words have been actualised during COVID- 19 as we transition from the new "normal" to the new future we now face as both an organisation and a society. They will continue to provide LWETB with a solid foundation on how best to move forward ensuring we deliver high quality, vibrant, professional education and training services now and into the future in line with LWETB's vision. Therefore, it is almost visionary that these key words are at the forefront of our change in 2020.

Change is never easy but it was necessary for LWETB's Recruitment and Pre Employment Team throughout 2020 to ensure the learning experiences, outcomes and conditions of all participants were met and sustained as part of one of our five strategic goals. In order to do this, we needed to be dynamic and adapt to and embrace virtual interviewing via Microsoft Teams, which had never before been a practice of LWETB. This one change to our section, which may not seem particularly significant to others, unleashed an avalanche of changes that the Team had to predict, solve and safeguard for future competitions with each competition bringing a new problem and therefore learning into the next. Our approach as a Team was to regroup, go back to basics and start from the very beginning with what we could continue to do from our original processes, what needed to change, how we were going to change it and how that change would be communicated to the people involved in our interviewing process. Overnight the Recruitment and Pre-Employment Team had to become adept as the experts of virtual interviewing with Microsoft Teams. From a once physical interview room, easily controlled to our new online interview room via Microsoft Teams, understanding its functionality, solving the connectivity issues of the participants, incorporating the varying IT skills of its users and ensuring the interview process ran smoothly and consistently were our key priorities. We did this by

testing the site and its capabilities continuously, conducting practice runs with panel members in advance of interviews, studying online guides and tutorials, building a bank of learnings from previous competitions so as to prevent repetition of mistakes, remote interview guidelines for candidates and for interview panel members were discussed and agreed by management to ensure best practice and being available for live support before, during and after interviews. As one can appreciate the interview is just one aspect of the interviewing process. The next piece of our new online puzzle was to virtualise the interview paperwork which is integral to both the recruitment process and ensuring commitment to public service values of transparency and integrity. This was solved by an innovative measure, Adobe Sign which allowed us to replace our ink and signature processes with electronic signatures in a simple, streamlined process which would allow us to track and monitor all paperwork issued.

Both of these changes transformed and diversified the Recruitment and Pre-Employment Team in a way that was unimaginable prior to COVID-19. We are now a section which, with the help of our Senior Leadership Team and management, can efficiently and confidently carry out interviews in person or online- this is a massive achievement for the section. The Recruitment and Pre- Employment Team have undergone substantial and considerable change in the last 10 months with its very structure and foundation changed in ways that can only serve as stepping stones for future improvement and enhancement in line with LWETB's continued growth and success. This will include the continuation of this new dual interviewing process. This change has been immense, and at times it has felt overpowering, but progress is impossible without change and COVID-19 has forced us to change our practices and processes, unbeknownst to us, for the better. In hindsight perhaps COVID -19 has not increased our workload but simply encouraged us to reprioritise, refocus and improve practices already in use. The measure of how far you have come can only be appreciated when you look back to where you have come from and for LWETB's Recruitment and Pre- Employment Team this has been transformative.

- Bronagh Maguire, Human Resources

Continuing to support one another at Kilbeggan FET

COVID has taken its toll in many ways on our Centre. We would always strive to give students the opportunity to develop both socially and academically but a lot of our community projects/ non academic classes have had to be put aside. These would of been vital in order to lift student, staff and community spirits. This has been the biggest change within the Centre and has had the biggest impact on students and staff alike, with this said I have seen resilience and high spirits shining through students and staff as they try to take on the unknown, this reaction has allowed us to create a support bubble for each other. The change in our learning environment from students being onsite five days a week to now attending the Centre two days a week has been a challenge. But each day we adjust and adapt to our new normal. We miss people, we miss our connection with community groups, specifically Kilbeggan Men's Shed as they were a ray of sunshine for us, we miss going on our excursions which were always well earned, we miss our freedom as a Centre. Throughout this we continue to be mindful keeping the 2m apart, we put down books and go for walks, we talk to each other about how we are feeling and we do our best to see light at the end of this.



Looking forward to getting back to the activities in the Kilbeggan Men's Shed

We try to bring humor into the Centre and we understand that there are good days and bad, we understand that emotions are heightened and someone is liable to cry at any moment, that we are battling to control our own lives again. We are being supported as a Centre and are supporting our bubble and that's all we can do for now, we can't lose hope or our morale (even though it is testing at times), we need to believe that one day again soon we can go back to a society of handshakers and huggers because we all need that human connection.

- Rayon Farrell, Kilbeggan FET

Youth Work, front(on)line in a time of a crisis

Since the confirmation of the first case of coronavirus in Ireland on 29th February 2020 personal and social services have changed, flipped and pivoted in response. Following the announcement on 12th March that all schools, colleges and childcare facilities were to close (initially until the 29th March but as it transpired for months not weeks) youth services, in line with schools, closed abruptly with little initial guidance on how they could continue to support their young people. However, as is traditional in the youth sector, services adapted, innovated and responded admirably to this unprecedented situation.

The Youth Work Unit in LWETB initiated a survey with our staff-led youth services in March, which was updated monthly during April, May and June to capture the type and level of service response and any areas of support required from us. We are delighted to report that all services remained operational during this lockdown period. The only exception was in the case of one project, which paused on the filling of a vacancy for a while due to the restrictions. All projects adopted a range of digital and remote delivery encompassing small and large group work, one to one support, parent support, advocacy and interagency work on behalf of young people. The frequency and intensity of the engagement by young people did fall off towards the latter end of the lockdown and into the Summer months. However, this was by no means reflective of the quality of the effort exerted by youth workers, managers and volunteers, but rather a natural and overall pandemic and "zoom fatigue" widely experienced across all aspects of society. This also coincided with the phased reopening of face-to-face services, increased use of outside spaces and summer programme activities.

Since the spread of COVID-19 there has been substantial research conducted to identify the immediate and possible long-term impact on young people. Research from the OECD shows that young people have and will continue to be adversely affected socio- economically, in their mental health and their education. LWETB recognises the vital role the youth sector in our area has played and will continue to play in helping young people deal with and recover from the adverse effects of this past year. And for that we thank you.



Great to see youth workers from County Longford Youth Service out spreading some Halloween cheer (or scare!) in Edgeworthstown. COVID didn't stop these young people from having fun, while detached work has been a great way for youth projects to keep connected to young people during COVID restrictions.



An Roinn Leanaí
agus Gnóthaí Óige
Department of Children
and Youth Affairs



An Roinn Sláinte
Department of Health



Supported by
**National
Lottery**



Pictured here are some young people from the ACT Gateway Project in Athlone who in the summertime explored the local natural area and documented it photographically, while observing social distancing.

- Maria Fox, Youth Officer

The COVID challenge from a Caretaker's point of view

At first, we felt it was potentially a daunting challenge, but we quickly assembled a team of people and developed an action plan to compete the work. Each member of the team was given a role and we worked together to achieve the goal of making the school COVID secure. My first task involved putting together orders for sanitisers and all PPE. We also requested extra dispensers and put them all up including hand sanitiser and hand towel dispensers.

The next challenge was to clear out our student gym to create an isolation unit and ensure it was clean. We then set about creating the one-way systems and ensured all markers for 2 metre distancing were laid down in addition to moving the chairs and desks.

All unwanted materials from classes, lockers from corridors and any other non-essential items were removed. The walls outside were sprayed and pathways cleared in addition to applying the special anti-bacterial treatment on all doorhandles. The walkway around the pitch required more

supervision due to the increased traffic as a result of the new measures and the gates of the school are now closed every evening to prevent visitors from coming onto the school site.

I was really impressed by the collective team spirit amongst the staff and we had to have an increased amount of meetings with the cleaner, secretary, deputy Principal and COVID aides due to the nature of the work.

We did have some problems getting some PPE – a lot of items were out of stock and some items were poor quality. Although we were limited to using suppliers on Procurement, we managed to achieve our goal of making the school COVID secure and we are pleased with how things are going. As always, we are constantly striving to improve at the school and we will continue to monitor and update our work in line with the latest guidelines. We would like to thank LWETB for all the support throughout the process.

- Pat, Caretaker, Castlepollard Community College

Embracing new ways of working in Head Office Finance

Finance, in Head Office, use the SUN and Purchase to Pay systems to support all operations. The continued investment in and development of our financial systems over the years really came to fruition during COVID-19 and we were in the fortunate position that we could use and access the systems remotely from home. The web-based systems allow us to maintain the internal controls within the section, with oversight processes and control procedures remaining in place. From a hardware perspective, our colleagues in corporate services and IT were the key enablers in facilitating this access from home so quickly. The collaboration and dedication of all sections within the organisation during this time really highlighted the 'One ETB' culture that we strive for.

It took time to get used to the new environment, however from a system perspective there were not huge changes in how we conducted a large portion of our business. The team embraced the new ways of working and this was illustrated in being able to gain sign off by the C&AG of the 2019 annual financial statements during the first lockdown. A huge part of our role is to support schools and centres regarding financial matters and thankfully we were able to continue to do so. Whilst this is always the objective of our work, this role has gained even

more importance given all our colleagues in schools and centres are facing unprecedented challenges in these uncertain times.

Naturally, we did hit some bumps in the road with learnings being made, including some changes to procedures being required. However, most importantly the levels of transaction authorisation and the approval process remains robust during the pandemic. The situation continues to evolve and our ways of working must adapt in line with this. Planning for the safe return to the office was and is a logistical challenge. Staff were very flexible and took personal responsibility for their actions to allow Finance spend three months on site again in head office before the second lockdown hit. This was vitally important as the SUN financials system had to be upgraded over this period and the upgrade was completed just before this latest lock down, even though there are of course some bedding down issues.

Like everyone we learnt lessons on how things could be improved, and these were in place when we faced this second lockdown. The team have been amazing and 'Teams' meetings are the new way forward. Finance are lucky to have such dedicated and adaptable people who are true public servants, excellent at their jobs but who also care about the organisation, our students and each other.

- Sarah Geelon, Assistant Principal Officer, Finance

Expanding for our future expanders

The LWETB Athlone Training Center has recently taken use of its newly constructed Carpentry and Joinery Apprenticeship workshop expansion. This expansion marks a significant investment in LWETB's apprenticeship offerings and provides an opportunity for additional future apprenticeship offerings across LWETB. Consisting of two new classrooms, office spaces, stores, bathrooms and a large multi use area, the expansion will cater for 104 learners per year (in a post COVID world).

The expansion consists of an impressive two story addition to the multi skills area which is will be used to test, apply and train apprentices in areas such as roofing, framing, door fitting, stairs fitting etc. The modern classroom spaces will allow for seamless delivery of theory alongside practical which make up a large portion of the Carpentry and Joinery phase 2 programme. With the recent surge in Apprenticeship registrations nationwide, developments like this keeps LWETB in the fantastic position of continuing to offer modern and industry standard training opportunities for those who on an Apprenticeship pathway in state of the art facilities.



- Ronan Murray, Manager, Athlone Training Centre



Athlone **Training** Centre
training for your future



QOI AWARD



An Roinn Oideachais
agus Scileanna
Department of
Education and Skills

SOLAS
An tAidilítí Oideachais Léamh agus Scileanna
Further Education and Training Authority

Positives of COVID-19 Arrangements in a Post Primary Environment

Positive thoughts generally are not the first thoughts that come to mind when we hear COVID-19 mentioned. COVID-19 has caused us all to question our routines and to change many of the things that we have been doing on a daily basis. While many of us are waiting patiently for a return to our old ways and habits, perhaps some of the changes arising from COVID-19 could now be here to stay. The return to school this year has been an anxious time for all school staff, but has also provided many of us with opportunities for learning and reflection.



Highly structured measures such as base classrooms, lockers in the room, not using the loud busy canteen, one-way corridors and social distancing of desks have meant that the school environment has become more sensory friendly. These students have been less likely to become overwhelmed with noise and overcrowded spaces. Even the wearing of masks - while that for many have become a barrier to nonverbal communication, have for some given comfort and made trying to read faces less of a challenge in their everyday world.



With numbers growing in Templemichael College year after year, congestion in the narrow corridors had become noticeable between classes and during break times. As part of the COVID Response Plan, a one-way system, with specific entrances and exits, was designed and implemented to help with social distancing in the school. This may have been introduced out of necessity to help during COVID times, but it is certain to be seen in the post-COVID Templemichael College.

For many of our colleagues, the most daunting thought was returning to school knowing that they would no longer have their own classroom. These classrooms, for some, have been their home away from home for 20 years or more. As the school was reorganised, it was of vital importance to provide these displaced teachers with a dedicated work area. Schools around the country were forced to sacrifice staffrooms, offices and storage to make classrooms and isolation rooms but we have been able to create a new space in which staff can work.

A noticeable positive to arise from the COVID procedures is how it has worked in favour of those students with Autism and sensory difficulties.



Schools across Ireland have been torn apart and put back together during this pandemic. They are, of course, very different to what they were before COVID-19 made it to our shores. Different isn't always worse, though, and like all life's challenges, there are positives to take from these challenging times.

- Mark Hanley, Science and Maths Teacher, Templemichael College