



# Lwetb

Bord Oideachais agus Oiliúna  
an Longfoirt agus na hIarmhí  
Longford and Westmeath  
Education and Training Board



www.lwetb.ie

## NEWSLETTER

May 2021

# Challenge, Change, Sadness and Hope



**Ms. Liz Lavery  
Chief Executive  
(Acting), LWETB**

A lot has happened since the last LWETB newsletter was published in December 2020. As an organisation, we have shared significant challenge, leadership change, endured unspeakable sadness, and now, optimistically, we look to the future with hope. As we closed our schools, centres and offices to celebrate Christmas, the COVID-19 pandemic continued to rage and despite the very best efforts of our nation, the country was once again plunged into lockdown.

Unable to return to our places of work, LWETB staff rose to the challenge, and once again, carried out their valuable work in new and creative ways. The LWETB COVID-19 Task Team ensured that we were all kept safe and up to date on latest COVID developments; schools and centres operated remotely; Youth Work services and Music Generation continued to deliver programmes, and a number of working groups established. This newsletter is packed with stories, learner voice, educational achievement, innovations and optimism. I urge you to read all the articles in the newsletter and enjoy learning about the breath of activities we offer through a myriad of programmes. To all our staff who keep this educational show on the road, please accept our sincere thanks and gratitude.

However the changes didn't stop there! On February 1st, Dr. Christy Duffy left LWETB to commence his new post as Chief Executive in CDETB. Christy was the first Chief Executive for the newly established LWETB in 2013, during which time he built on the great work already achieved by the previous VEC's. During his

tenure, Christy developed a vibrant and ambitious organisation and concreted our place on the educational map in the midlands. We send Christy our best wishes in his new role. We also welcome Brian Higgins as Director of Schools, Youth and Music (Acting) to the Senior Leadership Team and wish him well in his new role.

In February we experienced the loss of Ms. Bernice Martin, Principal Lanesboro Community College. The tragic loss of such a wonderful educator, friend and colleague, caused ripples of sadness throughout our organisation and this lovely lady is missed by us all. Our condolences and thoughts are with Bernice's family, friends and Lanesboro Community School. Mahatma Gandhi once said "There are no goodbyes for us. Wherever you are, you will always be in my heart". Bernice will always be in our hearts.

As an organisation we are commencing the development of our next Strategy Statement which will outline our organisational goals for years 2022-2027. Our newly established Strategy Statement Working Group will be in touch with you in the coming months to get your thoughts on the future direction of LWETB. However, despite everything, spring flowers burst through after the long winter. The sun comes out and spring eventually arrives. With it brings hope. The COVID-19 vaccination programme is now well under way and brings the possibility of normality, summer holidays and long overdue rest time. Finally my hope is that you enjoy the coming summer, reflect on good times and re-energise for the next chapter in September 2021.

*"Spring will come and so will happiness. Hold on. Life will get warmer." (Anita Krizzan).*

### Preview:

Young people look forward to brighter days ahead  
- LWETB Youth Work Unit

LWETB Encouraging employee wellbeing

Spotlight: Athlone Training Centre



New CNC & CAD facility at Athlone Training Centre with Bruno Donatti pictured above

Bríomhar | Ilchineálach | Nuálach

Dynamic | Diverse | Innovative

## "There was never a night or a problem that could defeat sunrise or hope" - Bernard Williams

I do not know whether I would always see the glass half full, but I like to think I am an optimistic person, who finds a lesson to learn in everything, which makes life so interesting. Over the past year I have learnt that I do not need much to be happy. A smile, a word of encouragement, a compliment, a present from a friend, my cat purring, a slice of cake out of the oven, that is all I may need to keep going and be content. Being away from my family for so long has been difficult, knowing I might not be able to go see them, but my greatest hope is that soon I will. It is hard to think it, let alone write it but, knowing my parents' age, I can almost count on my fingers the number of times I will get to see them before they are gone. I have lost more people I loved in the past year than I lost in all the years before that. Yet, I look at the world and learn and feel a bit better about everything.

The best thing that I have experienced recently is becoming part of LWETB and getting to know so many kind people. Forging relationships in these times may seem daunting, when personal interaction is outside the parameters we once knew, but I think it is so much easier in LWETB than in the private sector. There is no fierce competition for attention or for power; instead, a constant, genuine desire to help, which makes working here so amazing.



Pictured above: Magda's cat Utzu

I have met only a few people in person, but I have interacted with a lot more and I feel I am in good hands. Loneliness is never on my agenda. Another thing I have learnt is that it is all right to take one task at a time, one day at a time, rather than dream big, aim high and focus constantly on the distant future while being dissatisfied in the process. The present is rewarding and comforting if I just stop and look around.

The bumblebee visiting my garden does not have a business plan and my cat surely does not analyse some KPIs when she decides to take a nap on my desk while I am working.

They live in the present and are grateful for what they have. I am grateful I am part of a solid, hard-working and friendly team in LWETB, I am grateful that I can enjoy their presence even if it is only via MS Teams. I am grateful my family are now safe, although far away. We may live in a scary world, but it will not be like this forever.

But, if am allowed to have one secret dream for the distant future, may I say that in my next life I would like to be my cat?

*- Magda Pracsiu, Corporate Services*

In time to come, the year 2020 will stand out in our memories as a time, we as a nation, had to collectively embrace a national lockdown which meant staying at home, keeping within our boundary limits and more importantly being content with that. The theme of the year was 'coming together by staying apart'. We had to avoid the very things Irish people are so good at, such as handshakes, hugging, visiting our loved ones, meeting up to celebrate our small achievements and not forgetting our larger family gatherings.

For me, along with all the above, 2020 will be remembered as the year I started working with LWETB. My journey began in September in the Corporate Services Department at Head Office. From day one, I was welcomed by all the team and made to feel at home. My colleagues were very helpful and supportive which helped me settle in quickly. However, in October 2020, within a month of commencing, and due to lockdown enhancements, I found myself with laptop in hand, working from home and embracing online technologies such as teams and zoom. Thankfully, LWETB as an employer had invested in training and technology which made this transition from office to home a seamless process. Even though I'm working from home, I don't feel alone. I have daily interactions with team members and we also have catch up meetings where we discuss business matters and give progress reports on our work. On Thursday's we share a coffee break.....just 15 minutes when we meet on MS Teams with a cup of tea or coffee in hand and discuss non work elated matters.....and we've had some great laughs!

Lockdown has certainly given me time to reflect. I have a new found appreciation for the outside world and enjoy going for daily walks. Getting out in the fresh air helps to clear the head, but it also gets me out of the house and that's important, especially when working from home. It's an added bonus that Lough Derravaragh (pictured right) is within 2km of my home and I've enjoyed some lovely walks there. We have come so far in the past year and working from home has become the norm for so many of us. We've had to adapt our working environs, accept challenge and embrace change, and all in a short space of time. And we did it. So, who knows what the future holds? And does it really matter? One thing is for sure.....we have hope. Only time will tell if we embrace this hope.....and if we do, it might just lead us to a world re-imagined.....and wouldn't that be great!



*- Noelle Wallace, Corporate Services*

## Reflection, Resilience and Hope - Adult Learning & Youthreach

Despite the pandemic and the difficulties our learners and staff have faced, LWETB have endeavored to ease the burden and help each other cope as we wait for better times ahead. However lest we forget how this has impacted on our learners, we include some reflections from students on the challenges experienced, their resilience in seeing solutions, and their hope for the future. We thank them for their contribution to our newsletter.

*"After COVID the world will be re-imagined. People will understand how to look after their health. I always look after my family's health and immunity. This is the same for every flu season. After COVID we will have learned respect for other people's opinions. For me, my priority has changed - now I need to learn technology - IT. In the past I never used technology. "The COVID Pandemic" has forced many people to learn technology." (Marcella, English Student, Adult Learning)*

*The world has become very difficult - it's difficult not being able to go to the doctor or to see my family in Lithuania. To keep in touch with people, I enjoy shopping - it is good for me to see people. I keep in touch with my family and my friends by using Viber or WhatsApp and normal phone calls. I like walking and exercising every day. I like being at home. Yesterday, I bought very beautiful flowers and I planted them in the garden - I like working hard in the garden. I like English class online. I need to learn English to read and write and to talk to people. I learn at home but this is not easy. I like technology but I need help with it. In the future, I would like to learn more English and I would like a very beautiful life for everybody - where people can work, fly abroad, meet family, and relax." (Malvina, English Student, Adult Learning)*

*"What we have learned is that COVID spreads very easily and we need to be careful. For me, I found it difficult, as I have always been able to learn and work best by being around company and communicating with those around me during tasks that I'm given. Due to lockdown this was stopped, meaning I had to carry out my work by myself and with the help of online learning that lasted for a couple of months. I found this extremely hard and I could notice it taking a toll on my class work. I much preferred to be working in the Youthreach centre." - Learner 1, Youthreach*



*"My hope for the future would be that things would go back to normal. It is very difficult for people who immigrated to Ireland - we can't see our families or visit or anything. At the moment, everything is online - everything is close at hand - your study, your business, your food. If you're in business you save on electricity, rent, etc. You meet your friends, family, children and everybody through video calls. This is a unique case - everything is closed. It is a big incident in history - there is no example of this situation in history. I hope that everything will start again like in the past and we can go back to normal life. One of the things I've learned from living in a world with COVID is how to save money - not to spend all the time - to have money for the future. That's important for me. It's great we have internet - if we didn't we would have to write letters and send them! We can't meet with friends - just a video call. It's not very good. People are looking after their health better because of COVID-19. We are cooking more at home because we don't have a choice to go to the restaurant. We have more time at home to cook healthy food. And we have time to do something new. We are learning lots of new interesting things, like art, music, reading books, reading history... everything. Online classes are ok - we get to talk and learn but it is not as good as going to face-to-face classes. Face to face is very good - it is a better learning environment. And you learn faster. Online is ok because we are stuck at home. You can understand better face-to-face and increase your knowledge more quickly". (Dainora, Kalsoom, Olga - English students, Adult Learning)*

*"We have learned that remote learning is difficult and being isolated from your friends can be hard. I have improved on my computer skills immensely because I have been using a computer at home for three months. I enjoyed online learning at first but after a month, I missed being in Youthreach.. I also miss socializing with my friends and family. I much prefer being in Youthreach because the teachers can see your work and help you learn better." - Learner 2, Youthreach*

## Standing in the shoes of the learner - Adult Literacy

I was sitting at my laptop one day and my motivation was quite low and I started to think that if my motivation is low in a paid capacity, how is for students who aren't being paid and don't have to engage. I know some of our students are highly motivated and will engage but for those others I decided to provide them with an art project. I came up with this idea partly because a lot of people are turning to arts and crafts to help get through the lockdown and also some of my family members received hampers and were delighted to get something nice in the post. With that in mind, I decided to put together a basic art pack with instructions for some activities for each student that wished to be involved. I asked our art tutors for ideas for some basic art projects and invited all the tutors who had other ideas to come forward. I also thought that this would be an opportunity to feel that we are all part of a Centre and to get a number of photos for our FaceBook page and also a display for when the Centre reopens. The response from tutors was enthusiastic and the end result was fabulous with an art pack, written and video instructions and great interest from the students. Paula Lafferty and Una Egan did great work on the project, putting together very clear instructions and making video links. Admin staff in the Centre were extremely helpful, ordering and chasing supplies and helping with the packing and posting of packs.



Thirty-four students have engaged with the project so far and we hope to roll it out to more students over the next month. Over time we plan to link the project to craft modules at levels one or two and hopefully some of the students will gain accreditation.

**- Tricia Egginton, Adult Literacy**



## Re-imagining Guidance in FET

Spring 2021 and one year later it feels a bit like groundhog day. Our work and the way we deliver our service has changed dramatically over the year. We have learned brand new skills and ways to reach clients and learners that we could never have imagined before. We miss working with people in person, the group work and meeting our colleagues and yet there are many ways of working that we will bring forward when we are back in the centres.

In 2020, at the start of Covid we looked at how we could keep in contact with our learners and clients. We had been sending an information email as an internal method of keeping people informed in the FET end of LWETB of different events. We decided to use this platform and transform it into a weekly newsletter. We included a facility to subscribe to our newsletter and this facilitated an increased growth in our mailing list, with numbers increasing from a couple of hundred initially to nearly six hundred one year later. The newsletter now informs readers of courses local and national, national and international activities, well-being tips/webinars and jobs. In February, we conducted a survey of our readers and we received valuable information to help us in the delivery and planning of our newsletter. What was really interesting was that 85% of respondents wanted the general information we provide on course options to continue and 62% of respondents wanted further items on Wellbeing. So we have listened and we will continue to do our best in providing an interesting, relevant and helpful newsletter direct to your inbox every week. If you are not on the list and want to sign up please contact John at [jdoherty@lwetb.ie](mailto:jdoherty@lwetb.ie).



As we couldn't meet our learners in person we decided to look at how could we do our usual group work on-line. I want to sincerely thank the great team of John, Fiona, Patricia and Niamh who worked so hard and out of their comfort zone to figure out how to produce on-line Webinars for our students. We started in January with 5 Heads of Departments from AIT and the Mature Student Officer from Maynooth University delivering on-line workshops to our learners. Through trial and error and help from Tracey Anderson, FET TEL and CPD Co-ordinator we figured out how to best utilise Microsoft TEAMS for our learners and also the general public.

We learned what worked for students how to include people from outside LWETB, the correct timing, utilising the chat function and how to make people feel comfortable and at ease when joining. The wonderful part of our on-line workshops is that we are not constrained by location so we are able to offer our sessions to learners across LWETB and we have received wonderful feedback and uptake from across the two counties. Up to the end of June 2021 we will have delivered 24 Webinars from the initial college ones to progression options, to employment opportunities and for the Department of Social Protection. It really has been a team effort and I also want to thank our colleagues Liz Glennon, FET Employer Engagement Person, Pat Fleming FET Recruitment Officer and Tom Grennan Assistant Training Manager, ATC on their willingness to join in with our plans and provide such excellent presentations where needed. Our colleagues within the teaching staff and FET co-ordinators also helped enormously by enabling us reach their students, encouraging their students to access our work and joining in where necessary.

We also have Wellbeing Wednesday which is a lunchtime session we organise every month for our LWETB FET learners. In 2021, workshops have included Mental Health Promotion, Gentle Ways to Move, Mindfulness, Nutrition to Boost your Immunity and Anxiety Awareness. When we advertised the mindfulness workshop many members of staff contacted us to see if they could join in so we organised a second session for staff only which was very well received. I want to complement and thank the tutors from within our own FET teaching staff who willingly and enthusiastically delivered a quality Wellbeing session to our learners. We are very lucky to have such a breath of knowledge and expertise within LWETB.

Spring 2022 will hopefully look very different and we will look back in amazement on how we coped through the pandemic. The kindness and understanding that we had for our learners, colleagues and ourselves will be important to maintain as will the many lessons and new ways of working we have figured out along the way.

**- Caroline Cornally, FET Guidance Co-ordinator**

## Lessons learned during COVID - Columba College Killucan

The academic year 2020/2021 has been a year like no other. I am sure many school leaders, teachers, SNAs, wider school staff, students and parents never thought that they would experience an academic year like we have experienced over the past 12 months over the course of their life. If there is one lesson we have learned the last 12 months it is the importance of adaptation and collaboration.

The education sector has undergone such huge change over the last year however when you compare the first lockdown on the 12th of March to the second lockdown on the 11th of January – they bear no comparison. In such a short few months' education has vastly changed and we actively participated in and witnessed the progressive and adaptive nature of our schools, staff, students and parents with the changes to the Remote Learning Experience for all.

### What are the main lessons that we have learned as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic?

#### Adapting

Adapting is a skill we often talk about – however as a result of the COVID-19, we have adapted and changed so much over the past 8 months – from the structure of our day, to the layout of our schools, to adapting our methods to ensure the highest quality of teaching and learning, to overhauling our student supports and approach to the holistic development of our students and the ways and means that we support our students and families. We have adapted to so much change – this change would not have been possible without a clear shared vision and consistent collaboration between all stakeholders in our school, a positive and supportive environment for all. If the last year has taught us anything is that once we work together and collaboratively we can achieve anything.



Our students getting ready to sow some plants.



Student Council members receiving a cheque sponsored by Mullingar Credit Union. Funding will be used to purchase more outdoor seating for our students.

#### Equality in Education

Being a DEIS school it is our aim to provide equality of opportunity for all our students. Without doubt the Covid 19 pandemic has highlighted the need for additional supports for all students – we were in the lucky position that our school is an iPad school and that for those students who required the additional support in relation to IT that we were able to fulfill this to ensure that all our students had access to Remote Learning. Our DEIS supports of SCP and our HSCL were utilized to their full potential and we have adapted various different procedures and supports to aid our students but academically and holistically. Continuing to maximize these supports going forward to 2021/2022 is going to be essential, while acknowledging that we must never take these vital supports for granted.

#### Importance of Wellbeing for all

2020/2021 has been a difficult year for all, which has brought about its own anxieties and challenges. Returning to school in September, returning to Remote Learning and then experiencing Blended Learning before the cycle was complete with the full return to school on the 12th of April. This has been a roller coaster to say the least. One of the main lessons learned this year is one of empathy and support. Wellbeing of staff and students has never been more important and providing wellbeing structures for all has been essential to the success of this school year.

#### ICT and 21st Century Learning

As previously mentioned being an iPad school enabled Columba College to adapt seamlessly to Remote Learning in January 2021. We had learned from the first lockdown and in September ensured that all students and teachers were upskilled within the area of ICT should a further lockdown occur. We provided extensive Teams training to staff and ensured that our students were utilizing Teams to its full potential since returning to school in September. The move to personalized learning platforms into everyday teaching and learning has had a positive effect on all our students. They appealed to some way to all learning types, allowed student autonomy, offered Assistive Technology to students who required it and appealed to students who required to be at home and absent from school. Despite being at home our students were able to continue to engage with school work through the Teams platform.

### Importance of Communication with Parents/Guardians

Communication with Parents/Guardians has been an integral part to the success of the academic year 2020/2021. Engaging with our Parents/Guardians both formally and informally since August has improved the lines of communication and has continued to foster the positive relationships with parents to ensure that we are meeting the needs of our students. Structures of communication were set in place for every student in the school and our care structures continued to work remotely to support parents and students in any way possible.



A selection of our Student Voice committee 2020/2021

### Importance of Student Voice

Consultation with the student body regarding teaching and learning, experience of remote learning and their experience of returning to school in the midst of the pandemic has led to numerous changes for the better here in Columba College.

Engagement with our students and participating in an active dialogue regarding student's educational experience over the past few months, has made a difficult year easier as we all navigated the changing educational landscape together.



Our empty new basketball court

### What practices and procedures will we bring to our future planning/development?

There are numerous practices and structures that we will be incorporating into our future planning and development as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

1. We endeavor to continue to upskill our staff within the areas of Teaching and Learning and utilizing ICT to its full potential.
2. We aim to look at investigating the use of individualized learning platforms consistently across the school curriculum from 1st year regardless of the pandemic.
3. As a result of Remote Learning, we established a Parents Forum group, which had a weekly check in during lockdown to improve communication between parents and school management. This group was extremely successful, feedback provided allowed a more consistent experience of remote learning for all students and we aim to continue our parent's forum over the coming months.
4. The physical and practical changes to the school day for example the timetable have been very successful, we aim to maintain staggered lunch breaks for Junior and Senior Cycle students. The one-way system has also been a success.
5. Our school promotion team plan to reevaluate our approach to Open Nights, having orchestrated a detailed Virtual Open Night as well as the production of a brief promotional video – our enrollment numbers for the incoming first years exceeded our expectations. We aim to utilise our online platforms to promote the school further.

### What does September hold for us?

This is the million-dollar question, while we will continue to work together in this new normal, to strive to do our best – who knows what September truly holds for us. We here at Columba College will be ensuring that our planning over the summer months is carried out in line with the most up to date government guidelines in preparation for a return to school in September.

We hope that our planned new extension will continue to become reality, as well as our new Autism Unit. We will also be busy preparing for the introduction of new curriculum options. No doubt we will be busy with all of that.

### What are our hopes for the future?

Our hope for the future, is that slowly but surely we can return normal, that our corridors will be filled with smiling students and laughter, of friends mixing with friends. We hope that classrooms can return to normal, that extracurricular will be back up and running. We look forward to our school musicals returning to the stage, and to class trips and adventure weekends which will no doubt bring joy at all. We hope that our school can return to being active members in our local communities through our involvement in junior tidy towns, fundraising and charity events and work experience and volunteering.

We hope for school life to return to normal – pre-COVID times, but in the meantime, we will continue to be resilient, we will continue to work together, to collaborate and adapt. We will fulfill our commitment to give our students the best school experience possible during the current times.

*- Natasha Greville, Acting Deputy Principal,  
Columba College Killucan*

## The Sound of Music - Music Generation Longford

From uncertain early beginnings, thrown into Covid19 lockdown within our first few months, to growing in a virtual world, Music Generation Longford has had a fruitful 2021 so far. Our online offerings continue to expand, reaching communities across the county. Our Early Years Programme has launched, we're now delivering lessons in secondary schools and our online music hub is in full swing. In March, we welcomed our new Administration Officer, Rachel Masterson to the team. Mary-Jane and Rachel have been working alongside the musician educators to give young people across Longford opportunities to create, play and perform music.



### "Zooming in" how Music Generation brought Early Years Music to Childcare facilities around Longford

Music Generation aims to bring musical education to all ages from 0 – 18. We want to make sure everyone, whatever their background, gets access to music tuition. With that in mind, in this reimagined world it's exciting to use technology to engage with Longford's youngest music makers.

March 2021 saw Music Generation zoom in to eleven childcare facilities across the county. All of the facilities received their musical packs so they were fully equipped to learn from our expert Musician Educator Gary.

Our musical bears all found their forever homes with these enthusiastic children and we're really encouraged by the response.

The children have fully immersed themselves in these new wave musical lessons; learning new songs and instruments each week. We're looking forward to continuously expanding this programme as we grow.

### The drums are echoing in Ballymahon

With a history dating as far back as 1300AD, the African Drums, also known as 'Djembe' has become a popular instrument as a way to celebrate, communicate and inspire. This traditional tribal instrument is the 'heartbeat' used during political events, ceremonies and religious rituals. They symbolise the sound of war, evoking excitement and passion. The drums are a central communication tool and one of the most interesting theories of the origins of the word "djembe" is from the ethnic West African Bambara's saying "Anke djé, anke bé", which translates to "everyone gather together in peace."

Considering the isolation felt by young people as they home-schooled away from their "tribe" of peers what better way to engage them than with this instrument of communication and community.

Twenty African drums found their way to the eager students of Ballymahon Vocational School TY room as our Musician Educators David and Jack "zoomed in" to class.

Over the summer term, these young people will explore and create while learning a new skill with everyone coming together in a safe and socially distanced environment.

### Music Generation tin whistle lessons strike a note with families across Longford

Music Generation encourages community and participation so we were blown away by the response to our family tin whistle classes which ran in early 2021. Thirty-nine families across Longford took part, promoting inter-generational learning and family bonding through music.

Over the six-week series, the families learned notes and songs which filled homes with lots of fun noise-making. We were delighted to facilitate this recreational activity which streamed lots of joy into the families lives.

We received some promising feedback, with one mother saying: "Thank you so much for the Tin whistle lessons, my son really enjoyed them and it was so beneficial to him as he had been doing a bit in school. It is such a great resource and hopefully they will resume again soon. I also enjoyed the time with him and I learnt from them also. So thank you for this amazing resource in these trying times."

Our mission is to create inspiring experiences for children and young people through music, so delivering this programme has been a meaningful moment in the early stages of our journey.



Music Generation Longford Bears finding their new homes as they were delivered across Longford Childcare Facilities



**Music Generation  
Longford  
an Longfoirt**

- Rachel Masterson, Music Generation

## Great hope for the Future - Athlone VTOS

Despite the fact that there may be some doom and gloom around, I do feel strongly that there is great hope for the future. Upon reflection - there have been a lot of positive things that have been happening recently at Athlone VTOS - despite the pandemic!

As a staff we have had to take on working remotely and had to learn how to work on Microsoft Teams. So we are hoping to have approximately 200 virtual QQI portfolios for the June assessment if everything goes according to plan, all done through Microsoft Teams. The staff has been fantastic - making videos and updating all their lesson plans to a digital format to enhance the learners' experiences. It has been a huge change for all of us but we have met the challenge - we know now we can do it and we will move forward with our new IT knowledge to help make the experience for students a better one!

Athlone VTOS have several students who are lined up to go to third level and who have interviews in the next few weeks. We have 2 brilliant Art students who have had their interview already and did exceedingly well with their portfolios. One student received 585 out of 600 for the Animation course and the other got 600 out of 600 for Graphics. We are so delighted and proud of them and their art tutor! Despite the fact that a lot of the art work was done on line - the students were able to produce an excellent portfolio that impressed the AIT Art department.

A couple of our students has also recently secured employment despite the current situation. One student rang me to say she was delighted as she had recently had a mock on line interview as part of her



Communications module with the Communications tutor and our Guidance Counsellor and that nearly all the same questions came up for her real interview - which gave her great confidence! She got the job! In her own words:

*"I have just completed a QQI Level 5 Business Admin course with VTOS. I was very apprehensive starting as I haven't studied in over 20 years and was really worried that I wouldn't be able to keep up. In fact, I have found it really enjoyable, the tutors have guided us through with kindness and good humour, encouraging us all the way and were mindful that we learn at different paces. We started in the Athlone VTOS building but due to Covid restrictions, tutors and students ended up working from home. We were given laptops and we continued our classes on Microsoft Teams. This added challenge didn't faze me too much and there has been an added bonus that we are all now very efficient on Microsoft Teams which is great to add to a CV. We had daily classes with added videos and class notes from the tutors. The other students in the class were great and we worked as a team which really helped when learning from home.*

*If you are considering doing a course, I would highly recommend VTOS. I felt very supported by the VTOS team and I have achieved Certification and a range of new skills which definitely aided me in getting a really good job that I would not have had the confidence to go for before the course." - (Laura Dowling. Athlone VTOS student)*

Guidance has organised a progression webinar for level 3 and 4 students and VTOS will explain the L5 options that are available. One of our current VTOS students who completed a level 4 course and has now nearly also completed the L5 Art will also speak on the webinar to talk about her experience and to encourage other students to continue on their educational journey.

We have put up posters to advertise the VTOS courses for September on our Facebook page as well as the Guidance Newsletter and the ATC website. Midlands radio has also agreed to put our information up on their Find Local jobs section which is to be launched in the next few weeks. Three great courses in Art, Business or Programming are available in September 2021 so ring 086 8522795.

At Athlone VTOS we have tried to turn our pandemic experience into one that takes the best parts and moves forward. We may be offering slightly different educational formats into the future - the mode of delivery may differ but we will still offer meaningful courses and teaching that will help support and encourage our students to enter this brave new world!



- Maria Ryan, Athlone VTOS

# SPOTLIGHT: Athlone Training Centre

## Precision Engineering - The Future is Precise

The start date for LWETB's brand new Precision Engineering course delivered by the LWETB Athlone Training Centre (ATC) is fast approaching. This programme is unique to the Midlands and only offered in a handful of locations nationwide. The Midlands region is Ireland's manufacturing powerhouse and at its core lies Computer Numerically Controlled (CNC) Milling and Turning (Machining) and Computer Aided Drawing (CAD). CNC Machining is a manufacturing process where computers are used to command a machine to perform a task to extremely fine precision, giving the new programme the accurate name of *'Precision Engineering'*.

LWETB has invested in a new state of the art CNC and CAD facility at ATC which boasts five CNC machines, two 3D printers, a Coordinate Measuring Machine (CMM) and a high spec CAD computer suite. The new facility will be headed up by ATC's newest team member Bruno Donatti (pictured right). Bruno brings 16 years of experience in precision engineering companies located across the world and is now seeking to impart his expertise and specialist knowledge on the future precision engineers of the Midlands. "I am very excited to join the LWETB team to design, plan and deliver our new innovative "Precision Engineering" course along with short industry specific training which will deliver the specific skills and expertise required by Ireland's fast growing manufacturing engineering sector. We are confident that the course will have a positive impact on both our students and their future employers who may be seeking to grow alongside Irish manufacturing engineering in general. I look forward to working with and training the manufacturing engineers of the future in our new state of the art training facility".

The 'Precision Engineering' program consists of five units related to Engineering and the Workplace which will introduce the learner to the basics of organisation and workshop practices along with the engineering units of CNC Milling, CNC Turning and CAD design. Learners will also receive expert training in CMM and 3D printing, two highly covetable engineering skills. The aim of the course is to provide our learners with the skills and knowledge to work in the constantly growing manufacturing engineering sector across Ireland. This sector includes industries such as Aerospace, Medical Devices, Oil and Gas, Automotive, etc.



Scan here to check out our new CNC facility and how these components were made



A Precision Engineering course encompassing CNC milling and turning units will enable graduates to seek employment in CNC manufacturing fields such as Operator/Machine Setter or CNC Programmer roles along with opportunities for Higher Education pathways. The CAD unit will reinforce the engineering skills and enable graduates to seek opportunities as a CAD designer or to progress into Higher Education courses. It is difficult to accurately predict what future careers will be essential in a post COVID world, however, the future of manufacturing lies with highly skilled manufacturing engineers at its core as industry 4.0 continues to flourish in Irish Manufacturing. The future is precise.

- Ronan Murray, Athlone Training Centre



## Serving Our Communities - Community Education

The announcement of the Mitigating Against Educational Disadvantage Fund (MAEDF) by Minister Simon Harris T.D. last November was a most welcome financial boost for community education providers across the country. The Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science established the fund to assist community and voluntary groups whose educational activities had been hampered by Covid-19. Under this scheme from the Government, LWETB provided funding to 19 groups across Longford and Westmeath. The Irish Wheelchair Association (IWA) in Athlone and Mullingar were two of the groups who were successful in their applications for funding under the MAEDF. They used the funding to purchase laptops, tablets, scanners, a camera, headsets, software and accessories. This equipment was loaned out to their service users to enable them to continue to engage with the service and with learning during this time. Prior to the MAEDF, the two IWA centres had been availing of supports from the Community Education service of LWETB for classes in Gardening, Art, IT, Woodwork, Tai Chi and Mindfulness. Due to COVID-19 restrictions many of these classes were operating on a reduced capacity or unable to run. The timing of the MAEDF was perfect as it coincided with the IWA's plans to engage with their service users remotely. They had already tried out virtual classes, online quizzes, bingo, a book club and Pilates on Zoom etc. but they had a shortage of portable IT equipment for their service users.

### No time like the present

The IT equipment that they purchased using the MAEDF grant is now in use for an art class with a teacher from LWETB. In addition the service users are using them for online shopping, paying bills and, most importantly keeping in contact with family and friends via Zoom and Skype.

Monica Hughes, Manager of the IWA Resource Centre, Clonbrusk, Athlone said "Staff and service users have noted that participation in classes with LWETB via the new digital equipment is only part of the positive impact of the funding. The fact that our service users can keep in touch with their family and friends is an added bonus". She added that "When we get back to our usual in-house services we will continue to use digital technology to include service users who are still at home or who want to do additional activities in their own time. This all helps people live independently".

Liz Johnson, art teacher with LWETB, noted that "It's wonderful to be able to connect with everyone at the IWA Centres through the online art class. This is a time when we all need the arts and culture in our lives and the online class has enabled wider access and participation. As an arts facilitator I'm delighted to be given an opportunity to develop a new online community of creativity that connects people across the county. It's inspiring to see everyone participating together and sharing their creative ideas and skills with each other".



### What do learners think?

Mia Samovich is really enjoying the Zoom art class. She said "I am a creative person, yet I have not had the opportunity to take part in art classes. Thank you to all involved in supplying the laptops and allowing me to be part of this wonderful project. I have been painting every day since and it is good exercise for my hands cutting out the various shapes required in one of the exercises".

Mary Gaynor, a service user in Athlone said "I am delighted to be able to participate in the Zoom art class as I have always had a keen interest in art. Last year was tough for me and I have been a bit down on occasion like so many other people. The classes have given me a reason to get up in the morning and has really lifted my spirits". Rita Flaherty, who has been able to do the art class from the resource centre, has had no problems following the online class and has already started making her own cards. With the assistance of Maureen Lee, the IWA's Young Adult Support Worker, service users of all ages have been included in the classes, which shows that with proper resources all kinds of barriers can be broken down.



### What's next for Athlone IWA and its service users?

The MAEDF has transformed the lives of IWA service users in Westmeath and has facilitated the development and expansion of LWETB's Community Education Service's suite of blended and online learning options. It has already reduced educational disadvantage, isolation, and the so-called digital divide, and has meant that 2021 was greeted with hope and expectation, rather than doom and gloom. Personal Development through mindfulness, chair-yoga, poetry and herbalism started in February, and once the weather picks up, it will be time for some online gardening!

*- Nuala O'Brien, Community Education Facilitator*

## The Changing Landscape of LWETB FET

Where to begin, in November 2019 I took on a new role within LWETB FET, that of Professional Learning Development and Technology Enhanced Learning Co-ordinator, having worked in various FET roles within the organisation since 1998. My focus from the start was on the policies and frameworks around my areas of responsibility, underpinned by my belief that collaboration among colleagues is essential to plan and implement effective professional learning development (PLD) programmes. This is a demand led approach which research has proven it to be an effective method for implementing successful PLD programmes.

By early March 2020 news of the Covid-19 pandemic hit our shores, it began as a whisper but quickly gathered momentum, it became apparent that we might need to consider contingency measures. My thinking at the time, in my innocence, that we possibly would never need to use them but nonetheless taking a "better safe than sorry approach".

Luckily teaching staff already had devices so we got everyone else sorted with a device relatively quickly, the next problem was how would everyone keep in contact with learners and run classes. It was decided Microsoft TEAMS would be the platform to allow the continuation of programmes through remote emergency teaching.

Lots of innovative ideas came from colleagues, the majority of the first lockdown consisted of upskilling staff on using educational technologies to support learning in their classrooms. I ran a series of short courses, webinars, provided one to one support and developed content to support staff. Looking back I wonder how I managed it all with having to also home school two children but my working reality had changed as had everyone else's within our organisation and we got on with things as best we could.

I wasn't the only one busy, the number of hours FET staff put into reimagining their courses and engaging their learners remotely will never be known to anyone outside that role, but it was nothing short of amazing. In addition to the Edtech courses I was providing staff were also completing courses in their own subject matter. Never has more change been achieved in such a short period of time and with such goodwill. The FET landscape has forever changed I believe and maintaining the use of educational technology will play a vital role in FET going forward and we welcome the inclusion opportunities technology in our classes provides to support our diverse range of learners.

Looking back on all we achieved and how we quickly reimagined delivery of FET Programmes is a credit to every single staff member, each of us cogs on a wheel, doing our bit to contribute. No-one knows what the future holds but what ever it is we will meet that challenge. We already have shown resilience in the face of unprecedented challenges and I've no doubt we will continue to do so. I look forward to the day when I can share a coffee with colleagues, many of whom, despite working with them for some time now, I've yet to meet in person.



- Tracey Anderson, LWETB FET

## Online programmes in high demand - BTEI Longford

A world re-imagined? In the BTEI service throughout Co. Longford, we think so. Change so vast, we did not contemplate where it's boundaries lay. We journeyed. We navigated. We reached a new shore.

During the past year, despite necessary safety restrictions imposed, in the main our programmes continued on schedule. Innovative teaching methods, supportive and determined staff and wonderfully willing learners emerged from the COVID-19 chrysalis. This change, to online and blended learning through new IT platforms, will remain for many modules. Demand has emerged for more online classes at higher levels. BTEI Longford has responded with a suite of online modules namely, L6 SNA; L5 Intellectual Disability Studies; L5 Payroll; L5 Bookkeeping & Accounts; L5 Spreadsheets and Databases and our L5 Healthcare modules using blended delivery, ensures practical skills are assessed to national standards. Our L4 Office and Reception Skills modules, new this year, were successfully delivered online. Also this year we introduced a new Barbering programme, VTCT L2 Certificate in Barbering with 14 learners receiving certification. No doubt their skills will be in demand once our economy begins to reopen. Demand for the September programmes is also high.

In conjunction with DDLETB, our plans to offer the Cambridge English B1 PET Exam also came to fruition this year. Our current learners are on track to attend their exam in May. Additional supports for ESOL students are available via our English Language Hub all year round. We introduced our first QQI L4 ESOL module this year and is due for completion in May - online delivery proving a successful platform. September plans include a new Level 2 Award in Barista Skills with City & Guilds. The coffee is brewing as we speak!

Like everyone, we are hopeful our return to classes in September will favour the important social role we love to engage in, as teachers and learners. Quite simply, we miss our learners and meeting our colleagues in the centre. Online delivery favours many but not all our learners and lends itself better to theoretical modules. Digital Skills support and the needs of learners at Level 3 will be a focus for the autumn term, with new modules planned in Food and Nutrition; Safety & Health and Health & Fitness. We are also discussing new paths for delivery with the Local Enterprise Board. The staff of Longford BTEI Service continues to respond to the challenges of living in a world with COVID. So far, we seem to be winning the battle...and are hopeful for the future.

- Eileen Donnelly, Co-ordinator, BTEI



## A sense of belonging - Athlone Community College

### What have we learned?

As we reflect on this school year, it is tempting to get lost in the myriad of challenges that we face. However, it is in the meeting of these challenges that we fully realise who we are as a school. Our lived school experience during this pandemic has reminded us of the importance of connection. Fostering positive relationships and acknowledging that relationships are the bedrock of all learning has helped us to ensure that teaching and learning continues in the face of enormous upheaval.

We have learned that nurturing a sense of 'belonging' to our school is not limited or defined by a physical building but 'belonging' is something that blossoms in the interactions between people and in the engagements in learning. We have learned that our strength as a school lies in our ability to reach out and connect meaningfully to all members within our community.

This pandemic has exposed the gaping socio, economic and educational inequalities that exist in our society. We have further learned that we do not have to take these inequalities as given. By holding fast to our connections and focusing on a shared sense of 'belonging', we can reach those most vulnerable in our school community. During this pandemic, we have learned that by rethinking how we engage with young people and by using the resources that we have in more innovative ways, we can identify and remove barriers for our learners, barriers that are magnified by the current pandemic.

In many ways, this pandemic is a great leveller. There is a surreal sense of calm and camaraderie for a school community in knowing that the struggles we face can be overwhelming but ultimately, these challenges are shared, we face them together and a new horizon awaits us all, one that we are etching out together.



College Week at Athlone Community College



### What practices and procedures will we bring to our future planning/development?

There are a number of new practices and procedures that were borne out of this current pandemic, which we intend to develop further in the future. The two that stand out and that are already in motion for the year ahead are our online learning progressions and our stakeholder forums.

Like many schools, online learning is the great success story of this academic year. We feel confident that online or blended learning is something that we will develop further into the future in a way that enhances our teaching and learning practices.

Connecting with learning through Microsoft Teams enhances our inclusive education practices, provides greater accessibility in learning and provides an avenue for wider forms of meaningful assessment. We aim to ensure that learning can continue even if a child or teacher cannot be in the school building for any particular reason, where feasible.

Student voice is close to our heart here in school and never has it been more important to listen to the voices of our students than during these times of challenge. We established a Students' Forum and a separate Parents' Forum at the start of the recent lockdown. These forums meet weekly with our principal and discuss any issues relating to the progression of learning. These forums have been invaluable in ensuring that we continuously meet the needs of our young people. What began as a means of responding to our students' needs in an online space has now become part of the fabric of how we operate as a school. Actively seeking out the perspectives of our students and parents on fundamental key issues around learning is at our core and it is something we are committed to developing into the future. Just recently, we have begun to review our Code of Behaviour and the starting point is with the students.

## What does September hold?

At the moment we are busy planning for our incoming first years in September. We are very conscious of their disrupted primary school experience and we aim to do all we can to assist them in their transition into our school. The choice of post-primary school is tremendously important for parents/guardians and children. Choosing the next pathway in a child's educational journey is a cornerstone in a young person's development and we are fully committed to ensuring that the transition of our students into our school will be as seamless as possible.

We are also planning for all of our year groups to progress into the next year. Inevitably, September will bring with it a number of worries and concerns as students and teachers begin to start afresh and plan learning for the year ahead. We will not rush in but rather take small steps, draw from what we have learned this year and move forward together.



## Hopes for the Future

Our hopes for the future are simple and we look back to look forward. Like many schools, we encourage our students to get involved in a variety of extra – curricular activities and this is one area that has been adversely affected over the last year. We aim to see a return to the host of extra – curricular activities that we offer, which are hugely important in the holistic and personal development of our young people. We didn't let the current pandemic stop us in following all extra – curricular pursuits as we moved into an online space but we look forward to when we can once again take part in live experiences and interact physically with students and teachers from other schools.

Our school is one of the leading schools in the country in Debating and Public Speaking. We are also heavily involved in BT Young Scientist and Scifest every year. We have a long tradition of staging vibrant musicals, which afford our students an opportunity to display their talents and give the public an opportunity to view first class productions. Sport at our school plays an integral role in helping to develop our young men and women to flourish in an active and competitive environment. These are just a flavour of the areas we aim to embrace fully once again as we move forward into the next school year.

Finally, we hope that we remember all that we have learned during this pandemic. We hope we remember the joy that is found in seeing a friend after a long time of being apart. We hope we remember that sharing a burden lightens the weight. We hope we remember learning is not static nor tied to any one physical space. We hope we remember that we did our bit for our community and that as a school community, we can stand tall and be proud of all that we have achieved. When adversity came, we didn't falter.

## 100% Learner Progression during COVID-19 - Athlone Community Training Centre

Athlone Community Training Centre provides second chance educational opportunities for Early School Leavers in the midlands, we offer QQI level 3 & 4 qualifications in a variety of employment-focused courses: Hair & Beauty; Mechanical Engineering; Catering & Hospitality and Information Technology and Retail Skills.

In March of 2020 we received word that we were, along with everyone else, going into lockdown to attempt to suppress COVID-19 transmission levels in the community, this was a sharp and sudden decision that left us with little time to plan and implement effective measures to move our trainees and staff onto an online provision platform to continue training while maintaining technical skill levels amongst our trainees. As it became apparent that the lockdown would be extended beyond the initial two-week limit it became imperative that we constructively addressed the myriad of impediments to our learner's engagement with online provision. Our greatest concern revolved around the possible dis-engagement of our learners; how their experience of disadvantage; lack of IT access, space and motivation and their previous negative experience of main-stream schooling might conspire to make the move to entirely on-line provision too challenging to achieve.

The mental health of our learners and their motivation in terms of overcoming these new obstacles to their personal and professional development were our main issues of concern, there were significant new skills that needed to be speedily developed to fully and productively engage with online classes; this was a steep learning curve for both staff and trainees. The 'digital divide' compounded the difficulty for a certain cohort of our trainees as a significant minority were only able to access online provision through smart phones which was not ideal; thankfully we were able to source appropriate hardware for our trainees with the support of LWETB and MAED Funding so they were all eventually able to engage with classes on their own laptops, making the process easier but also making the young person feel valued and supported to overcome the obstacles that COVID placed in their path in terms of developing their potential. This issue was particularly pertinent for those who were nearing the end of their courses and were expecting to enter the workforce or access further training opportunities on completion. There was a significant amount of anxiety amongst this group; would things open up in time, would there be any jobs available? Is there a recession coming? Would the move to online training create problems for me in terms of completing my course in time to access Level 5 courses?

The supportive relationship between trainees and staff which is the central element of educational provision in the Community Training Centre allowed us to constructively address these valid fears in a practical manner-all trainees were offered extra one-to-one support where necessary to maintain their completion timetable and the career path planning element of their educational journey was developed and supported by the youth advocate who provides a career guidance service to trainees. This constructive conversation between staff and trainees allayed fears about the impact of COVID on their progression plans and gave young people the confidence and security to maintain their plans in a time of



significant adversity the explicit success of this methodology was demonstrated by the 100% progression rate for trainees completing their QQI level 4 awards in 2020, with a 60%-40% split between those moving on to further education and those accessing employment.

Another challenging element of providing our services during COVID was bringing new trainees into the centre after the previous cohort has successfully completed their training, usually we conduct a number of meetings with prospective trainees and hold a group induction process, social distancing measures and continual lockdowns necessitated re-inventing the wheel in respect to this fundamental part of our operations. Individual induction interviews combined with a blended learning experience has successfully brought new inductees into the centre and their training continues apace although it is by no means ideal for a technical course such as mechanical engineering.



Overall, this has been a challenging experience for the training centre, as it has been for everyone, our success in dealing with the pandemic and maintaining the motivation of our learners in terms of constructively planning for their future has been based on our supportive relationship with our trainees and our empathy for their situation. This empathy allowed us to support and push our learners to successfully move to a blended method of learning, to overcome the presented challenges of the pandemic and to continue to plan for their future, whether that future entails finding a job or continuing with their education. Our experience shows that with a little support and some 'tough love' young people have the capacity to overcome significant adversity, thereby building resilience to life's challenges and developing the inherent strength necessary to plan for and successfully make the transition to adulthood.

This experience vindicated the educational methodology of our Community Training Centre, showing how the 'wrap-around' system of supports can be trans-formative in overcoming adversity, we would like to express our pride in this exceptional group of young people and wish them well in their future endeavours.

## Mullingar Community Training Centre 2019 to 2021 - The Lasting Change

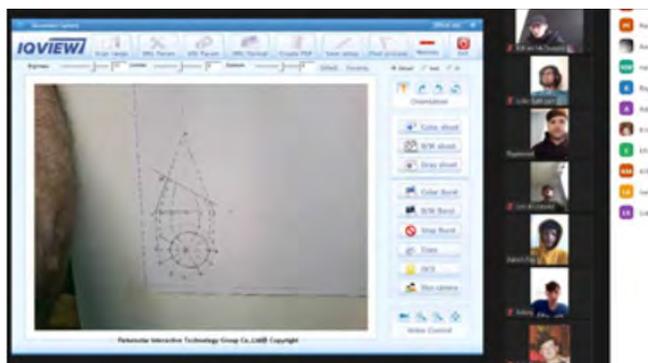


For years now, Mullingar Community Training Centre has been operating on "old-normal" conditions with halls and rooms full of learners. From Educational Trips to Activity days and everything in between, a hum and churning of progression was forever present. Nowadays the halls are a little more quite, the swarm of energy has moved on-line.

Since March 2020, our energy has been diverted through little green lights on modems and phones across the County, with the team in the Centre going above and beyond to ensure this momentum isn't lost, the efforts by our learners aren't in vain. Our communication now requires a camera and microphone, with MS Teams and Zoom a central focus. The experience of learning is similar with specific learner's packs being distributed around. From mannequins to books, T-squares to guitars, laptops to ingredients, we have been working hard to ensure each learner is not without. No equipment? we'll get it, no transport? we'll deliver it, no connection? We'll post it. In longing to return, our learners have channelled their motivation to embrace their circumstances and not without sacrifice.

Throughout this entire experience, our most vulnerable still get the sanctity of the centre, all be it for shorter periods! Coffee tables and park benches have all become places of learning. Zoom classes in the kitchens, phone calls on the hall and counselling sessions along the canal, learners have both embraced and struggled at the same time.

Our Pre-Apprenticeship tutor talks about the benefits of a "blended new normal approach", using visualiser's to facilitate sessions, seeing everyone's expressions whilst they translate the drawing, an important element of support which can be missed in the workshop. The opportunity to integrate this type of self-directed learning with the added supports of tutor guidance have been long discussed around the lunch table. "An opportunity to underpin skills of any successful college graduate must be nurtured". He stresses of how learners have been struggling mentally and the opportunity to delve into intricate developments gives them an escape, how instilling perspective is fundamental for learners during this historic period and open forums about stretched front-line services have spurred their motivation on as "doing their bit". "As the years pass, the learner's resilience astounds us more and more. From snow to Covid the appetite for learning in Mullingar shines through".



Mullingar Community Training Centre caters for Early-School Leavers in Mullingar and the surrounding areas. Established in 1986, the CTC offers vocational training programmes and an array of certification. More info can be found at [www.mullingarctc.ie](http://www.mullingarctc.ie).



## Meeting the Challenges - St Anthony's Athlone

When we returned to the classroom in September 2020 there was a sense that the school closure beginning in March was a once in a lifetime event, not to be repeated. COVID cases in the country were low and we felt that the hard work of staff and students in maintaining the safety measures put in place were working and would see us through the academic year, the Junior Cert would be held in June and the worst was behind us. By early December this was beginning to look optimistic and by the time the Christmas holidays were imminent we had begun to prepare for the school to close again in January. Which of course, is what happened.

At St Anthony's in Athlone, we provide education programmes providing support and encouragement to young people enabling them to continue their education and achieve their potential. As a result these students have been affected by two periods of school closure. When teaching and learning moved online in January it became evident very quickly that parental support and engagement with the process was a major factor. While many students engaged fully with online learning others were somewhat less successful. Issues such as digital device and internet connection resulted in some challenges. However, in most cases for our students, this meant a smart phone on mobile data. Thus, online teaching had to be tailored accordingly. It was due to hard work by our teachers that significant learning was achieved remotely for three months. Major lessons learned over these periods of closure is the support required for young people to enable them deal with disruption outside of school.



Photos above: Various activities throughout the year at St Anthony's

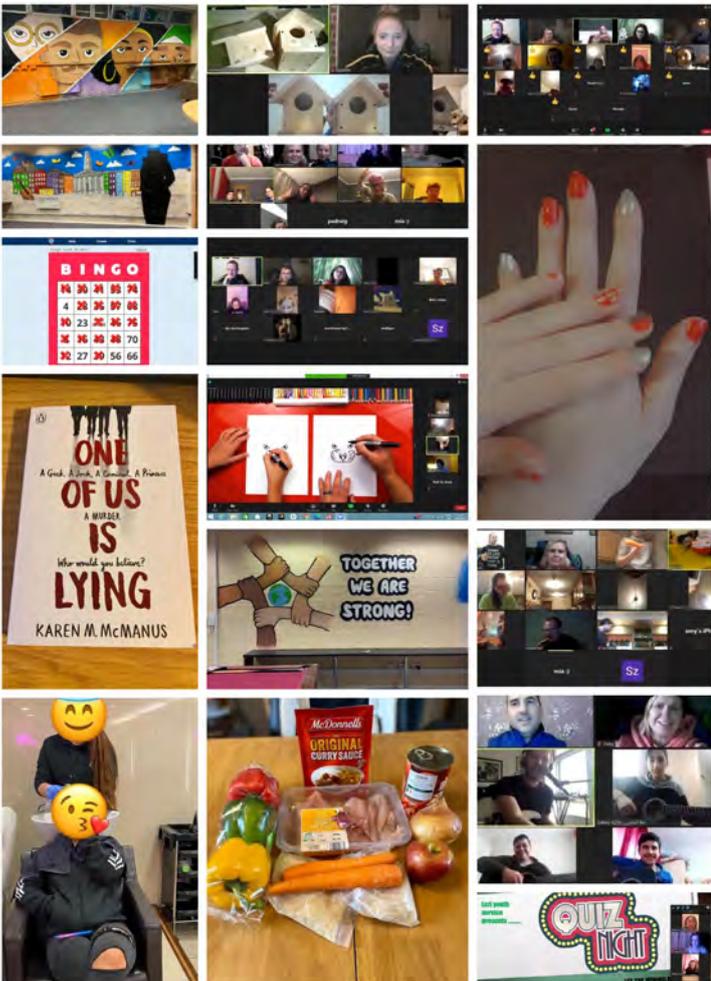
St Anthony's cater for students from first year to third year. Junior Cert has always been central to a student's time here. The cancellation of this state exam for two years running proved to be a massive setback for them. Fortunately, however, for the last three years we have been introducing the QQI system to the school to run parallel with the Junior Cert syllabus. The goal is for the third-year students each to achieve a QQI Level 3 Major Award Cert in General Learning. This is benchmarked at the same level as the Junior Cert. The modular format of the QQI system means that students are progressively attaining qualification throughout their time which are transferable to other settings should they leave before sitting the state exams. The introduction of QQI has meant that the cancellation of the Junior Cert has not had the devastating effect on retention as it has had on other similar centers around the country.

In September 2021, it is hoped that things will be substantially back to normal in school so that we can welcome our existing and future students of St Anthony's into a less tense atmosphere. I also hope that the school experience does not have to be as confined to our centre as it has been for the last year and we can reintroduce trips and other activities that were so much a part of life in school before March 2020.

## Young People look forward to brighter days ahead

Another April, another lockdown. Another St Patrick's Day, Easter, birthday, anniversary, school holiday, weekend, working week, significant event, spent like the last. Remotely. The most commonly expressed commentary I hear this time round is that any novelty factor associated with Lockdown 2020 has most definitely "worn off", swiftly followed up with "I'm sick of it". Now most of us understand and appreciate we're lucky to be just sick of it, and not sick with it. However that by no means lessens the very real struggles, challenges and uncertainties we are all experiencing in a myriad of manifestations since March 2020. And no one group is immune, not least our young people.

Stepping up to address this challenge, morning, noon and night are the youth workers across Longford and Westmeath who continue to utilise every available opportunity, tool and method to support their young people through this most difficult of times. The dedicated staff of County Longford Youth Service are one such group of workers. They asked some of their young people for their thoughts around the theme of this newsletter. Here is a snapshot of their responses, in their own words:



Above: A collage from County Longford Youth Service of just some of the things they have been up to with young people during COVID-19. Below: Art work from County Longford Youth Service.



### Hopes.....

*"That restrictions ease and we can get back to simple things like traveling to places in Ireland that we might not have went to before, even places in Longford we might not have thought of visiting before."*

*"That we will get to see Granny again."*

*"That shopping centres re-open soon."*

*"That we can just be young people again instead of feeling like we are prisoners."*

### World Reimagined...

*"Face masks are here to stay, especially if you have a cough or cold, definitely on public transport."*

*"We have a new found respect for washing our hands and hygiene."*

*"Travel has definitely changed forever from meeting to your summer holidays it's going to be different."*

*"A lot of us need better internet."*

*"The world is going to become more accessible from our devices especially for things like college."*

### What have we learned...

*"What really is important to us is our family, meeting friends and the choice to go where you want or meet who you like."*

*"How important your voting is!!"*

*"To be more grateful for the things we have when we have them."*

*"The screen will never replace things in real life."*



**An Roinn Sláinte**  
Department of Health



**An Roinn Leanaí, Comhionannais, Míchumais, Lánpháirtíochta agus Óige**  
Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth

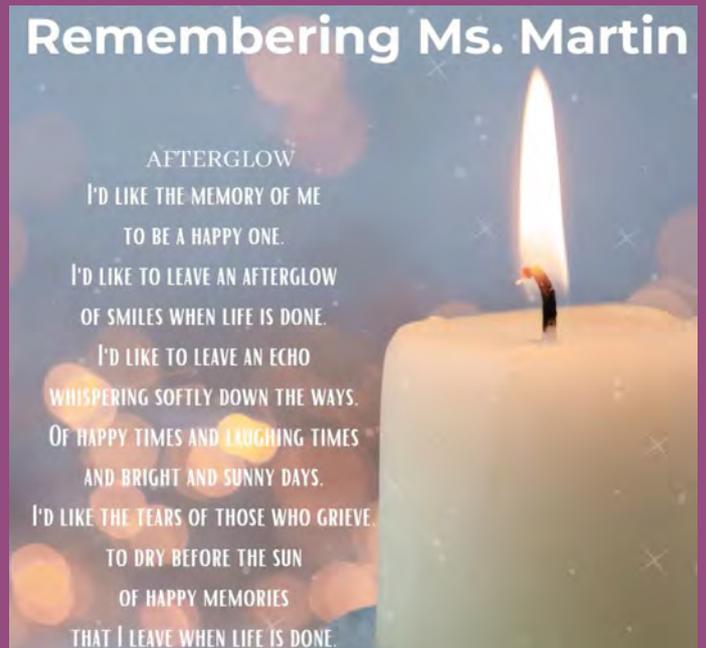
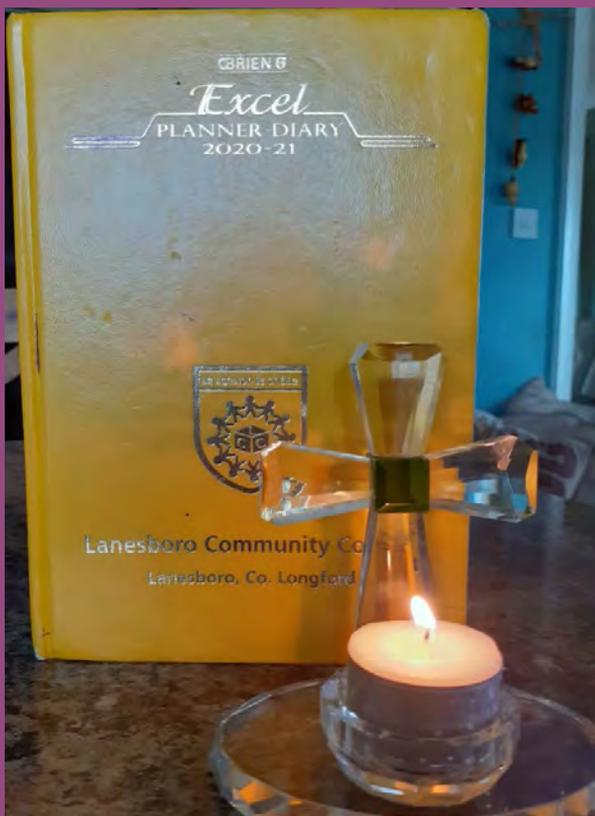
- Maria Fox, Youth Officer

## 'Neart le chéile' - Lanesboro Community College

'Neart le chéile'... there is strength in being together, wherever or however we assemble, be it online or in school...on a computer or in a classroom. Keeping that sense of togetherness alive was the main task for us all over the last 3 months. We had to work hard at it and we all found it difficult, but we found ways of keeping our school community informed, engaged and energised. Keeping our shape and our structures meant that there was sense of purpose and a familiarity that allowed us to connect and continue to teach and learn. It wasn't any easier but we had learned the lessons from the last lockdown and we had become more effective in terms of delivery and time management. Staff put in extraordinary efforts to reach out to their students and ensure they got the best possible learning experience.

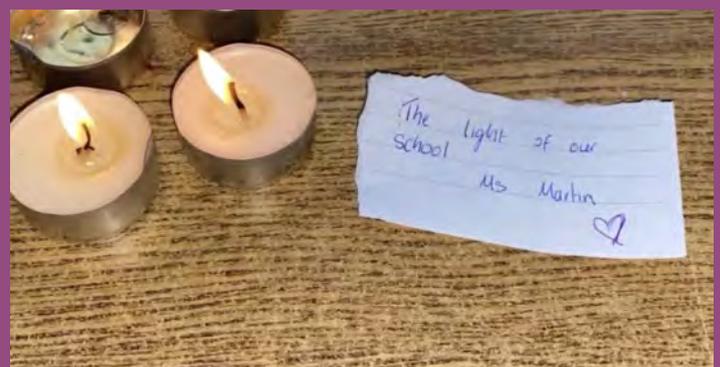
Members of the school community gave freely of their time in setting up online activities and opportunities which brought us together even as we stayed apart. Students played their part in leading and helping each other. Parents were supported and gave great support themselves. Staff found new ways of linking in and helping each other. We all went the extra mile. We all minded each other.

It is good that we did because during this lockdown we lost our Principal, Bernice Martin. Our hearts were broken for her and her family. We mourned her passing and her absence. We looked for ways to honour her memory and celebrate her time with us. Her warmth, her strength and her commitment were an exhortation and encouragement to the whole school community. Her short time with us an inspiration that was shared by staff, students and parents. The tributes, the letters, the thoughts and prayers that we said and shared at this time were a great comfort to us and to those who loved her. We hope we did her proud...we will continue to strive to do so.



So as we entered into the last days of March we were all weary of lockdown and student's interest was waning. Families were at the end of their tether...parents and pupils were tired. The return to school was a welcome relief and it is wonderful to hear the sound of students chatting and classroom buzzing as you walk the corridors. Spring is in the air...there is a sense of new beginning... a fresh start... we are daring to hope again.

We have learned much over the last year...but by far the most important lesson was that we are capable of coping with whatever comes at us as long as we work together. Putting time into supporting the people around you is the single most important thing you can do each day. This gives everybody the freedom to act, to work, to focus on our shared goals. It creates a synergy, a dynamic which means better outcomes and a happier school. These last few months has lent us all a very different perspective on life and work. Maybe we are a little wiser... certainly we are all grateful to be able to be back at school. Who knows what September will bring? What we do know is that we will meet whatever challenge that comes our way with increased optimism and a realisation that when we work together we can achieve great things. Ar Aghaidh le Chéile.



- Mike Lyons, Acting Principal, Lanesboro Community College

## A Bright, 'Green' future for Mullingar Community College

The sudden switch to remote teaching and learning in March 2020, undoubtedly came as a huge shock to teachers and students alike. However, whilst the virtual learning environment of MsTeams may have at first appeared daunting; however, once the initial teething problems were overcome then the true value of this platform for clear for all to see.

The collaborative culture of 'professional learning communities', that has long been established in Mullingar Community College, took on a whole new dimension. Ms. Farrell - MCC's 'Teaching & Learning Coordinator' led the establishment of a dedicated channel for all staff to share new innovative methodologies and strategies and to offer peer-based instruction on how to maximise their potential. Teachers volunteered to take turns presenting and training their colleagues on everything from OneNote to Padlet.

Since the reopening of schools, the use of these educational software packages has continued to evolve and now MsTeams has become an integral part of teaching and learning in Mullingar Community College. In fact, the successful integration of these online learning platforms has allowed certain subject areas to begin transitioning to become essentially "paperless" subjects. Not only will this move result in considerable cost savings for the departs but also forms part of our school's environmental strategy. To our collective shame, Ireland is the worst producer of plastic waste in Europe; Irish households produce 61 kilogrammes of plastic per person per year, included in this are approximately 220,000 plastic bottles. These plastics eventually end up in our oceans and result in the death of approximately 1,000,000 sea creatures every year. As a school community, we are playing our part in trying to reduce the amount of plastic going to landfill. With the generous support of Mullingar Credit Union, MCC are supplying all first-year students with new reusable water bottles and aim to expand this initiative to all junior and senior cycle students in the near future.



**Pictured: Ms. Emma Farrell with a group of first year students proudly displaying their new reusable water bottles.**

In September 2021, Mullingar Community College will offer Transition Year for the first time our school's history. Planning is currently at an advanced stage and after what has been a challenging 13 months or so, the anticipation of TY programme is providing great excitement, not just for our 3rd year students but for our entire school community. We are confident that the introduction of the Transition Year programme will bring with it a host of new and exciting learning opportunities and further develop the long-standing relationships which our schools enjoys with local community groups and businesses.

## The importance of communication - Ballymahon Vocational School

The past year has been a learning curve for the Ballymahon Vocational School School Community. We have realised how resilient and adaptable our teachers and student body can be when faced when the unknown arises. We are very proud to say that we continued our teaching on learning each day on Teams, following the students timetabled classes. To date, feedback from our school body has been very positive. Teams also allowed us to stay in constant contact with home and support the greater wellbeing of our students. As we slowly begin to reflect, we recognise that the pandemic has highlighted how supportive our parents/guardians/caretakers/secretary and the greater Ballymahon community have been to Ballymahon Vocational School. As we look to brighter days we endeavour to build on existing structures within our online platform by integrating it into our daily classroom environment. We will approach future planning with an open mind to change and with a view to embracing new methodologies when needed. As we look forward to a new school year we look forward with Hope. We look forward to returning to our classrooms on a more permanent basis and continuing the important work of educating and working with our young people.

We look forward to welcoming our new 1st Year students and ensuring that they are happy and content in their new learning environment.



**Pictured above: Overseeing COVID planning in Ballymahon Vocational School, Mr. O'Rourke, Principal and Ms. Calvey, Deputy Principal.**

Our aim is to resume all normal school activities when it is safe to do so. There is a great tradition of extra-curricular activities in our school; school musicals, sport, etc, and we will be working hard to rekindle these over the months ahead. These are essential practices that are provided to ensure a holistic education in Ballymahon Vocational, a school 'Where the Individual Matters'. Stay safe and continue to be kind to one another over the weeks and months ahead.

## Looking to the Future - Castlepollard Community College

Everyone at the college was delighted to open our doors and welcome back our sixth year students in recent weeks. It has been a huge relief to get our students back in through the doors of the school. At the college, we believe that nurturing our students' needs and ensuring they are happy in their studies is of paramount importance, therefore we placed the wellbeing of the sixth year students at the forefront of their return. Students were treated to a wellbeing morning where they were allowed time in a socially distanced fashion to enjoy breakfast from our canteen and time to walk on our exercise track to catch up with their friends before returning to their classrooms. Students were also welcomed back formally by their tutors and Principal Mr Walsh who outlined the work that the staff had been doing and continue to do, to ensure their safety.

As a school it was reassuring to see that once again our use of IT to enhance student learning and teaching stood up to the test of COVID. Students engaged with lessons throughout the recent lockdown. We even managed to run a range of extra-curricular activities through Strava in PE and we began our journey to find the Castlepollard Community College Artist of the Year. There are so many lessons to learn from the pandemic but the main one was that our staff and students were very well equipped to continue teaching and learning during the lockdown.

Here at Castlepollard Community College, we try to ensure that students have the best equipment possible to achieve their goals. The achievements made in our practical subjects have been up there with the best in Ireland and the school have been pleased to achieve national recognition in Engineering were former 6th year student Allyssha Moore received a certificate of Distinction for her Higher level H1 Engineering project by the E.T.T.A (Engineering Teachers Technology Association).



### Looking to the Future

It was encouraging to return to the school to see a range of new developments in terms of facilities in the school. In order to maintain the high standards we have invested greatly in the facilities available to our students. In Woodwork, our students have been given a massive boost with the installation of top of the range equipment over the last two weeks. The new equipment will ensure that the students' creativity and designs can be completed to the highest standard thus ensuring our students will leave having developed key skills to the best of their ability.

Woodwork teacher here at Castlepollard Community College, Mr. Burke stated, "All the new machines offer the latest in technology and will allow pupils the opportunity to work safely in practical situations which will enhance their projects for exam assessments." When talking about the more technical aspects of the subject Mr Burke added, "This will allow pupils to undertake wood-turning safely and more artistically in terms of design. The scroll saw allows for more accurate cutting of curves and the drill stand and sander will enhance project diversity." These are exciting developments in our school and we are looking forward to seeing the fantastic projects our students will produce over the next few years.



### New Equipment

The school are currently waiting on a delivery of new equipment for the Engineering room too which is incredibly exciting for our staff and students and will help to provide for the next generation at the college. In 2018 LWETB provided funding for a state of the art Laser Cutter in which not a lot of schools have. This huge piece of machinery has greatly enhanced our Technology department. The school received a positive boost recently with an extremely generous donation from a very supportive local institute, Mullingar Credit Union. Looking at the school post pandemic, a boost like this has made the return to school even more enjoyable. Everyone at the college would like to thank Andrea Corroon and all at Mullingar Credit Union for their sustained and generous sponsorship of key projects at the school. The funding will go towards new equipment and facilities identified by our Student Council. The student voice is very important in the college and it was a huge success when our Student Council, who meet on a weekly basis with Mr. Caffrey, put their ideas and opinions together to formulate the best use of the funds. Listening to the student voice means that we can provide our students with a safe and nurturing atmosphere ensuring that they can achieve and work to the best of their ability. Some of the equipment the Student Council have selected included a 3D printer, new storage units of ASD classes, new kettles, chopping boards & mini oven for the Home Ec room, a lacrosse set and new bibs for PE, an MMA welder and thermostatic water baths for the Science Lab. We pride ourselves on providing the best environment for our students to achieve and with this help from Mullingar Credit Union students can achieve even more in their classes.

Ms. Leonard's Music classes also received a major boost in terms of lessons next year with the addition of the "Soundtrack" Music Software package. This is a state-of-the-art piece of software which compliments the creativity in Ms. Leonard's classes. Students can use the software to create music and podcasts of their own. They will develop their skills in sound engineering, mixing and various recording techniques.

## Virtual extra-curricular activities during COVID at Ardscoil Phádraig

We were delighted to welcome our entire school community back to Ardscoil Phádraig after our Easter break, some members after an absence of almost four months. While the unprecedented period of remote learning presented some challenges, there have been many lessons learned over the course of this pandemic which will impact on education in all schools for many years to come. The sense of togetherness and collegiality which prevailed throughout this time served to remind us all of the important role of collaboration in the success of all aspects of school life. The effective use of digital technology provided the basis for this collaboration and allowed teaching and learning to continue remotely throughout the first school term of 2021. A full timetable of live classes was facilitated by all teachers each week,



allowing all of our students to maintain their normal daily routine, something which provided much needed structure to their day during an uncertain time.

Our frequent link ins between management and staff also ensured that staff were fully supported and could support each other throughout the unforeseen circumstances which have been presented to us over the last few months. As we look forward with anticipation to the further reopening of society throughout the coming months, we must also continue our preparations for the coming school year and beyond. Upon our return to school, it became evident that many of the practices and procedures implemented in adapting to school life during the COVID-19 pandemic must also be carefully considered as part of our future school development plans. Will base classrooms and split break-times continue to form part of our daily routines? Will our one-way system of movement and socially distanced classrooms ever become a thing of the past? In terms of classroom practices, the powerful role of digital technology in supporting teaching and learning has never been more evident and will continue to be further embedded into our daily school routines. The effective use of ICT can aid us in encouraging collaboration, enhancing differentiation, providing varied forms of assessment and feedback, varying our teaching and learning methodologies as well as assisting us in the leadership and management of our school communities. Digital technology is ever evolving and therefore provides endless possibilities not just now, but into the future, as we plan for continued school development post COVID.



While teaching and learning is at the heart of everything we do, our broad range of extra-curricular activities are central to the vast array of supports which we provide for student wellbeing. The limitations placed on these activities throughout the past year has undoubtedly left a void in school life for many students and we look forward to the full return of activities such as sport, drama and music during the coming year, as well as face to face meetings for our many student committees, all of which form an integral part of student life in Ardscoil Phádraig. Having said that, our innovative staff have facilitated some wonderful activities throughout the last year in lieu of those which could not be facilitated. Our Fitness Challenges, Photography Competitions and individual subject practical tasks ensured that students enjoyed a variety of extra-curricular activities in our virtual environments, while the presentation of prizes for these activities proved to be a highlight of our school re-opening for many of our winners. Our students have also enjoyed fantastic success in areas such as the BT Young Scientist and Technology Exhibition, the Certified Irish Angus Schools Competition and both local and national Enterprise Programmes, all of which have taken place virtually in recent months.

In what has been a very surreal year with unprecedented challenges presented to us all, the provision of teaching and learning has continued and evolved. While there is much work still to do prior to our summer break, our students and staff deserve huge credit for the immense work which has already been completed. As we look forward to the further easing of restrictions over the coming months, we will continue to reflect on the lessons learned over the past twelve months in informing the decisions we make on future school developments, as we prepare to embrace yet another set of new educational norms in the 2021-22 school year!

## Keeping us safe - The COVID Task Team

The COVID-19 Task Team continue to meet weekly to strategically plan and consider the safe navigation of our organisation during this time. However, it is with renewed hope that we face into the summer months with the roll out of the vaccination programme and the gradual lifting of restrictions.

Every section of our organisation continues to be represented on the Task Team - schools, FET centres and offices in addition to all members of our Senior Leadership team. Current members of the Team include Liz Lavery – Chief Executive, Antonine Healy – Director of FET, Brian Higgins - 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 – OSD, Human Resources, Shauna Doherty – Adult Education Officer and Geraldine Lee– OSD, Corporate Services.

The Task Team continue to monitor national Public Health advice and provide support and guidance for the continued remote working and also the safe reopening of our schools and centres.

Over the last few months we have continued the development of supports for staff who continue to work remotely but also those who have returned or are returning to the workplace. A dedicated resource section for teaching staff is now available on the COVID-19 Workplace Response Sharepoint site. The First Aid Responder training and Refresher training which was postponed in January is scheduled to begin next week. Refresher training has taken place for all our Lead Worker



Representatives and plans are underway for refresher training for all our caretaking and cleaning staff. In addition, the wellbeing support section continues to be available on the COVID-19 Workplace Response Sharepoint site with many schools/centres and offices undertaking their own wellbeing initiatives.

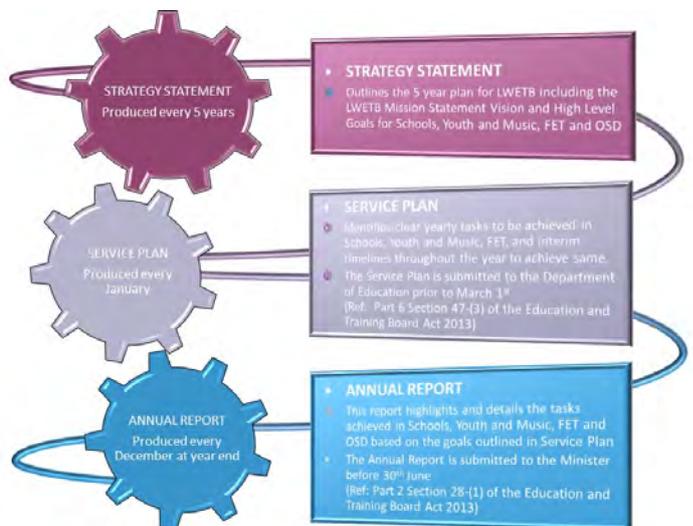
The Task Team will continue to meet for the foreseeable future to continue to support and maintain the health and safety of all our staff and learners. If you have any suggestions, concerns, or queries in relation to the COVID-19 workplace response you can raise these via your local Lead Worker Representative. We would like to thank you all for your vigilance, cooperation and commitment which has been instrumental in aiding our organisation to navigate its way in this time. It has been challenging, it has been tough but as we look to brighter days remember – it may be stormy now, but rain can’t last forever.

- Shauna Doherty Chairperson, COVID-19 Task Team

## LWETB Strategy Statement 2022-2027 – Vision, Planning and Reflection

A new Strategy Statement for LWETB will commence in January 2022. This Strategy Statements will set out the operational direction of LWETB for the years spanning 2022 – 2027. It will set out the direction for our organisation, its vision, mission and goals, and will inform the LWETB Service Plans and Annual Reports during those five years. To support the development of this new Strategy Statement, Liz Lavery, CE, established an LWETB Strategy Statement Development Committee. The committee will deliver this important document by 31st December 2022. The group is chaired by Nicola Galvin, Adult Education Officer and supported by Liz Lavery, CE; Brian Higgins, Director of Schools, Youth and Music; Geraldine Lee OSD; Elaine McEvoy OSD; and Noeleen O’Donoghue OSD.

The committee is currently planning on methods to engage with our staff, students and stakeholders and ensure that the perspective of our key partners underpin the strategy document and our future development. We do hope you can once again contribute to this Strategy Statement as we engage with you during the next few weeks and months. A dedicated email address has been established to support this project and should you wish to contact the team you can do so at [strategystatement@lwetb.ie](mailto:strategystatement@lwetb.ie)



## Minister Harris full of praise for Belvedere School of Horticulture

There aren't many courses that can boast an 80 per cent progression rate for its students, but then again, there aren't too many courses like the one run by the School of Horticulture at Belvedere House and Gardens. A three-way collaboration between Westmeath County Council, which owns Belvedere House and Gardens, Longford Westmeath Education and Training Board, which funds the course, and Westmeath Community Development, which runs it, the Level 5 full-time course provides students with necessary skills and knowledge to gain employment or move on to further education.



A recent zoom call with Minister Harris

Delivered by John Smyth, who is also the course co-ordinator, and tutors Valerie Beck and Eileen Maguire, pre-pandemic, the 50-week course was broken up into 50 per cent outdoor training at the Victorian walled garden in Belvedere and 50 per cent work experience. For a good portion of the last year, classes had to move online due to COVID-19 restrictions, but it is hoped that with the vaccine roll-out under way and hopefully the gradual return to normal life, that will soon become a thing of the past.

Minister for Further and Higher Education Simon Harris extended great praise to this wonderful programme and congratulated all involved in the success of managing to keep the course going over the past year.

Since the course began in 2009, the vast majority of students (80 per cent) have progressed to employment or further education. Many of the public gardens, garden centres and nurseries in Leinster and further afield are managed by former students, while more than 25 graduates from the course have completed third level qualifications, mainly from the Botanical Gardens in Dublin.

"Many of the students come from the LWETB's Level 4 Horticulture courses, which take place in Marlinstown, Athlone and Longford. That means they have a genuine interest in horticulture and want to make a career for themselves in the area. They also have already acquired some of the basic skills that John and his team can build on. "Secondly, the work experience portion of the course is popular with students and provides an invaluable real world dimension to complement their studies and practical work in Belvedere. We have a good database of public gardens and landscape gardeners for people going on work experience, while a few years ago a group of people went over to the world famous Kew Gardens in London.

"Finally, the quality of the teaching provided by John, Valerie and Eileen is second to none and leaves students well prepared to enter the workforce or continue their studies. The high progression rate really is a testament to their expertise and teaching ability, Mr McCormack said. Ms. Liz Lavery, Chief Executive of LWETB, extended a huge congratulations to everyone involved in this project and also thanked Minister Harris for his virtual visit.



Belvedere House and Gardens where the horticulture students attend their outside training

### Past Student Testimonials

*"After working as a motorcycle courier for many years, I wanted a change in direction in my career, I was encouraged to study Level 5 Major Award Horticulture programme at Belvedere House and Gardens. I enjoyed every minute there learning and working in the Walled Garden, growing and cultivating plants. It opened a new world to me and I got the bug. John Smyth (horticulture tutor) persuaded me to pursue dream opportunity to engage in work experience at Dublin Zoo under horticulturist Dr Stephen Butler - it was one thing I always wanted to do, it was fantastic! I would advise anyone with an interest in nature and horticulture to pursue the Level 5 programme at Belvedere. John Smyth and Valerie Beck are extremely knowledgeable and helpful. Having traveled the same route, they understand what is needed to become established in the industry."*

*"I would encourage anyone who wants to start a horticulture career to study Level 5 at Belvedere. I found horticulture tutor John Smyth to be very helpful and encouraging. I progressed to Level 7 at Botanical Gardens, Glasnevin, where I completed my studies. I am now entering my last year of Level 8 in Botany at Trinity College, Dublin, where I will become a botanist. I couldn't have done it without the help and support of the tutors at Belvedere and WESTCD."*

More information on the course is available at [www.westcd.ie](http://www.westcd.ie) or call 087 7923349 | email: [schoolofhorticulture@westcd.ie](mailto:schoolofhorticulture@westcd.ie)



Rialtas na hÉireann  
Government of Ireland

Tionscadal Éireann  
Project Ireland  
2040



## Encouraging employee wellbeing - The OSD Wellbeing Team

COVID-19 continues to bring many challenges to our lives. LWETB are continually adapting to this new norm; to some our home has become our office; our IT resources has become our primary communication tool. There are so many changes that could not have been envisaged some 12 months previous as we continue to work remotely. To encourage employee wellbeing, the Organisation Support and Development department has created a Wellbeing Team. The team is made up of staff members from across all OSD sections to source, prepare and introduce various Wellbeing initiatives.

For the launch of this wellbeing initiative, we recently welcomed international guest speaker and author Mr. Declan Coyle in which he introduced us to the 'Green Platform' online via Zoom. The Green Platform encourages personal empowerment and promotes positivity in our everyday thinking. His personal stories, strategies and positive self-talk resonated with so many staff, both on a personal and a professional level.

The OSD wellbeing team are planning several key events and activities to promote social, mental and physical wellbeing which will run during and after work times over the weeks and months ahead including during World wellbeing Week which takes place in June.

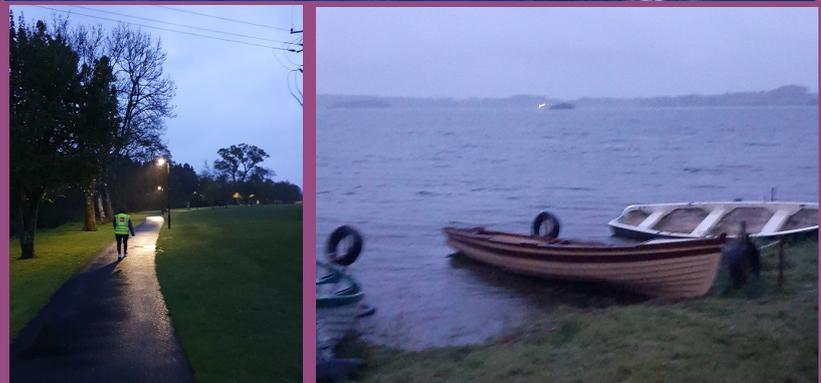
On May 8th, thousands of people from across the country joined together virtually for this year's Pieta Darkness Into Light Sunrise Walk. Each year the walk provides an opportunity for people of all ages to show their support for those who have been impacted by suicide and to connect with their local community.

The Wellbeing Team invited staff to mark this annual event by walking, swimming or cycling and to simply share their sunrise moment with us. While we could not be side by side this year we were still able to connect virtually and share one sunrise together to show our support to those affected by suicide and self-harm.

This year has been especially difficult for people as we entered our third lockdown. Pieta provides 24/7 support – if you are suicidal, self-harming or bereaved and you can contact Pieta 24/7 via the Freephone crisis helpline on 1800247247 or you can text HELP to 51444 (standard message rates apply)

The Wellbeing Team would like to thank everyone for taking the time to join them and for sending through these wonderful photos which were captured by staff on this beautiful and poignant morning.

Hopefully we can all join together in 2022 and mark this event as one.



Above: Darkness Into Light 2021 sunrise images shared from staff

*#Staysafe #Stayhopeful  
The OSD Wellbeing Team*

## Recent Retirements at LWETB

It is fair to say that 2020 brought many changes to our lives and 2021 is proving no different. As we all face into another "new normal" way of living so too do some of our colleagues. Retirement can be bittersweet; sweet as colleagues enter into an exciting and well-deserved break and sad for those they leave behind. As some of our colleagues, Ann Duignan (Human Resources), Cora O' Dowd (Finance), Helen Kiernan (Human Resources), Mary McKeon (Procurement) and Marian Whelan (Pensions & Human Resources), enter into the next joyful and, hopefully more relaxing, stage of life we will all greatly miss their knowledge, expertise, guidance, support but most importantly we'll miss their friendship, the laughs shared and the memories made along the way. And there have been many!

It goes without saying that you will all be missed in the office but funny stories and tea time chats will never keep you far from our minds. Your colleagues and friends in LWETB would like to wish you a long and enjoyable retirement full of health and happiness. Make sure you work just as hard at relaxing as you have worked in your long career. Wishing you all the best on your next adventure. Now it's time to switch off the alarms!

*- Bronagh Maguire, Human Resources*

## Looking at the positives - Templemichael College

Schools are by their nature very busy and very social places. There is so much going on during the day in schools. If the pandemic has shown us anything – it's the important social role that schools play in the lives of parents, children and the wider members of our community. It's where our young people gather to learn vital skills, to follow the curriculum and learn more about the world around them.

For our young students, school is where they gather with their peers to learn about the curriculum and work towards the common aim of completing exams. It's where they meet their friends every day, to share in their common interests, to celebrate their achievements and help each other navigate their own lives. Lunch time can be as important as the lesson and for many the best time of the day for students. It offers the students a social outlet, a reprieve; time outdoors for them to have some fun and let off a bit of steam that may have been building up from the restrictiveness of social distanced desks, masks and individual work in class.



Teachers comment on how quiet students are in class compared to pre-pandemic. The school environment is not what it was; the corridors are much quieter, even though the classroom doors are open into the corridors to allow for ventilation, there is an unusual quietness even during class. Pre-pandemic there was the bustling sound of learning coming from classrooms, now it is mostly the just the sound of teachers voices in the corridors. For the moment as teachers, we must adapt our practices temporarily for the greater good of social distancing and avoid the group work that would have brought students together.

We have had to demonstrate our adaptability and with reluctance may have revisited some 'chalk and talk time' again and create more individual work assignments to reduce social interaction within the class. Meanwhile our students carry on without complaint; happy to be back at school and among their friends, working together by following procedures to keep us all safe in these challenging times.

There have been some positives in the way that the pandemic has highlighted the need for a highly structured physical environment where there are large numbers of people gathered. Some of the routines and structures which we have put in place have meant more smooth running of the school. Reducing numbers in classrooms has meant that there is no overcrowding and students have more space to move around in.



Base classrooms and having lockers in the room have also given students a sense of security as they have all their belongings with them and have meant that they do not need to leave the classroom.

The one-way system has also been a great success at regulating the traffic flow around the school. pre-pandemic, transition time would have been a trigger point for behavioural incidents stemming from the mass movement associated with students traveling in opposite directions. Students would often get delayed in the corridors and have been late to class there may have been congestion in the corridors. Nowadays, students must follow a one-way traffic plan, out and back into the school, which has turned out to be very smooth and successful at allowing students to change class without any drama.



We look to September with optimism that we are the exit end of the pandemic. Students, parents and teachers can look forward with expectations of more certainty around Junior and Leaving Cert exams for June 2022.

COVID-19 will still be with us for a while yet but the roll out of vaccination plan will mean that our vulnerable family members will have protection so this will also give us some comfort that they are protected.

This may give us some room to relax some of our restrictions around social gatherings at school. Over the pandemic, the continuation of school curriculum has been prioritised. Some of the big things missed at school have been the extracurricular activities that contribute to our wellbeing such as sporting events, school trips and tours, opening our doors to invited visitors and celebration events and awards in school. What makes a school is its community, it would be fantastic if we were able to start doing some of these activities and offer students and families something to look forward to.

*- Lorraine Farrell, Templemichael College*