Comhlacht Forbartha Áitiúil Uíbh Fhailí
Offaly Local Development Company

LDC Name: Offaly Integrated Local Development CLG
CAB number: 12-1
Title of case study: A Step Further – from social walks to stronger communities
Case study theme: Thematic focus – Older people in isolation
Associated action: Collaborative Responses
Media Type: Video

Context

Research links loneliness and social isolation with poorer mental health outcomes (Domènech-Abella et al., 2019). COVID-19 restrictions introduced in March 2020 had the potential to increase isolation across the population. Social walks became one of SICAP's most widely used community supports across Offaly, offering an accessible and safe way to connect, get outdoors and support wellbeing.

As restrictions eased, Offaly Local Development Company developed the Social Walk Leader Initiative into a sustainable, community-led model. Piloted in Kinnitty in 2024, training has since been delivered across Offaly in partnership with Offaly Sports Partnership, equipping volunteers with the skills, knowledge and insurance to lead safe, inclusive local walks.

With Ireland reporting high levels of loneliness (Mohan, 2024), the initiative brings together physical activity, social connection and nature, helping to reduce isolation and foster a sense of belonging (McMullan et al., 2020).

Stakeholder Involvement

The initiative is built on strong partnership and community ownership. Members of the SICAP team, with support from Offaly Sports Partnership, lead the programme, with input from Frank Fahey ensuring trained leaders can access free Walking Group Co-ordinator/Volunteer Walk Leader Insurance through Get Ireland Walking.

At the heart of the initiative are the trained volunteer Social Walk Leaders and the communities they serve. Their commitment and voluntary contribution are central to its success. The Social Walk Leader Network strengthens this model by providing ongoing peer support, shared learning and opportunities for further development.

SICAP's Contribution

SICAP transformed an existing community response into a sustainable, community-led model, building local capacity to support wellbeing and reduce social isolation. In partnership with Offaly Sports Partnership, SICAP developed training in nature connectedness, social inclusion, health and safety, and walk coordination, equipping volunteers with the skills, knowledge and insurance to lead local walks. SICAP also provides each leader with essential equipment – including hot water flasks, tea and biscuits – because no social walk is complete without a post-walk cuppa! This gives communities the capacity to continue providing a low-cost, accessible activity that supports connection, physical activity and wellbeing.

SICAP also established the Social Walk Leader Network to provide peer support and ongoing learning, while building members' capacity to manage it independently in the future. A dedicated website is being developed to strengthen the network, increase engagement and help people find local walks.

Challenges

The initiative has faced challenges in maintaining continuity, particularly in the context of staff turnover and the time required to build relationships with volunteers and communities. Changes in staffing impacted programme design initially, but through well maintained team dynamics, the coordination, communication and the ongoing support available remained consistent.

Managing participant expectations has also required a careful balance, as some participants may initially look to SICAP for direct delivery and ongoing coordination, while the initiative aims to build local ownership and independence. Supporting this transition requires clear communication, realistic expectations and continued encouragement, ensuring volunteers feel equipped and supported without becoming overly reliant on SICAP. These challenges highlight the importance of strong partnerships, consistent communication and gradual capacity building to support the initiative's long-term sustainability.

Programme Outputs

The programme has been delivered in 5 separate locations since commencing in 2024, with 49 course participants registered in total on IRIS.

Currently there are 44 members actively engaging with the Network.

Four walking groups have been developed, mapped on Get Ireland Walking's website and supported by SICAP staff. Four other groups are supported by SICAP, but not yet mapped on Get Ireland Walking's website. Network members also offer consistent support to social walks facilitated by the SICAP team across the county, supporting over 300 people through Non-Caseload Activities since the commencement of this SICAP in 2024.

The initiative demonstrates a clear progression from a pandemic response to sustainable community-based support.

Conclusion

The initiative demonstrates SICAP's impact in building local capacity, strengthening connections and supporting wellbeing. Evolving from a crisis response into a community-led network, it provides a sustainable model for participation and social connection, with the longer-term ambition of becoming an increasingly more important link in social prescribing.

Full video available at [link] https://youtu.be/2VKJD-5NDSg
Short clip available at [link] https://youtu.be/rfmQ9XqNwu4

Domènech-Abella, J., Mundó, J., Haro, J.M. and Rubio-Valera, M., 2019. Anxiety, depression, loneliness and social network in the elderly: Longitudinal associations from The Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing (TILDA). Journal of affective disorders, 246, pp.82-88.

McMullan, I.I., Bunting, B.P., Burns, A., Smith, L., Cunningham, C., O'Sullivan, R., Blackburn, N.E., Wilson, J.J. and Tully, M.A., 2020. Is physical activity associated with loneliness or social isolation in older adults? Results of a longitudinal analysis using the Irish longitudinal study on ageing. *Journal of Aging and Physical Activity*, *29*(4), pp.562-572.

Mohan, G., 2024. Who is Lonely in the EU's Loneliest Nation?: A Post-pandemic Examination of Loneliness among the Adult Population in Ireland, and Associations with Mental Health. *Journal of the Statistical & Social Inquiry Society of Ireland*, *54*, p.113.

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SICAP
Social Inclusion & Community Activation Programme

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LCDC

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Tá an Clár um Chuimsiú Sóisialta agus Gníomhachtú Pobail (SICAP) cómhaoinithe ag Rialtas na hÉireann, tríd an Roinn Forbartha Tuaithe agus Pobail agus Gaeltachta, agus Ciste Sóisialta na hEorpa Plus faoin gClár Fostaíochta, Cuimsiú, Scileanna agus Oiliúna (EIST) 2021 -2027.