



# COLLECTIVE ACTION IN AN ERA OF SOCIAL DISTANCING: COMMUNITY RESPONSES TO COVID-19

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# Collective Action in an Era of Social Distancing

## Community Responses to COVID-19

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## Introduction

The COVID-19 crisis and the challenges it has posed has been unprecedented. The restrictions imposed on communities and society as part of the response to the COVID-19 pandemic has posed many challenges for communities already marginalised by poverty, inequality and social exclusion.

The response to COVID has starkly highlighted the importance of the community development, local development and voluntary sectors. The Community Call has resulted in a much-needed and widely lauded response from people working on a voluntary basis to provide supports to people and communities made vulnerable by the pandemic. Starting where people are at, a universally acknowledged principle of community work, community workers have been to the forefront of dealing with complex needs within the most marginalised communities. While these are receiving less attention, they are essential and underpinning of the most impactful local responses.

In order to gather some of these responses, Community Work Ireland invited community workers and community development and local development organisations to contribute to a process of collating and highlighting some of the work that is being undertaken all around the country. It is important to note that this collation is not definitive but rather reflective of responses.

## Community Work Responses to COVID-19

The work of community workers locally and nationally is illustrating the capacity of marginalised communities and their representative organisations to respond rapidly and creatively in terms of needs identification, strategy and policy development, engagement with key agencies, building community awareness and involvement and supporting other communities where they have the capacity, skills and resources to do so.

Community work, a collective activity that seeks to address the issues faced by these communities, has itself been challenged to respond. Community Work Ireland has compiled a number of these responses that have sought to ensure that the worst effects of COVID-19 are mitigated.

As one of CWI responses to the COVID-19 emergency, CWI produced, ***Marginalised Groups: Planning for Resilience in the COVID-19 Crisis***. The framework used a modified version of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs adapted to reflect the needs associated with planning for resilience for marginalised groups in the COVID-19 crisis. The model identifies 5 stages of needs:

- Basic Physical Needs
- Safety
- Connections and Social Supports
- Participation Representation and Recognition
- Resilience

The work of community workers all over the country has been reflecting this hierarchy and has been initially concerned with the provision of supports for immediate basic physical needs, connections and social supports while maintaining a focus on the importance of participation representation and recognition and ultimately on the resilience of the most marginalised

CWI asked members to give us an idea of the types of work that they are currently engaging in and the challenges associated with the new approaches.



## Starting from where people are at...

Starting from where people are at is a key concept in community work. The theory is that the basic needs of people must be met before focus can turn to consciousness raising or collective action.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought a renewed focus on this aspect of the work and many community workers have told us that they are focusing on meeting the basic requirements of families and communities trying to cope in this COVID-19 induced reality.

Food poverty, social isolation, the risk of significant educational disadvantage and the needs of already marginalised communities have been key concerns for community workers.

## Participation and Decision-Making

Responses to COVID-19, in particular the Community Call and the establishment of Community Response Forums in all local authorities, provided opportunities to influence responses in a number of areas. Community organisations are closest to the ground and are best placed to know and understand issues as they emerge and the most appropriate responses to them. In a number of areas, this was recognised, and community organisations were involved in planning the responses to COVID-19 issues. However, in many areas, community organisations were not included in the Community Response Forums or in any other decision-making processes and this is an issue that needs to be addressed, particularly if the Community Response Forums are to be retained as is indicated in *Our Shared Future*, the new Programme for Government.

Outside of the Community Response Forums, public health responses to COVID-19 drew and were influenced significantly by community organisations, particularly in relation to the Traveller and Roma communities at national and local levels. This was critically important in ensuring that the needs of Travellers and Roma and other 'vulnerable' communities were specifically considered. A number of organisations stated that they welcomed improvements in, for example, Traveller accommodation that they had been advocating for many years. There is now a concern to avoid regression on these improvements as the country returns to a new reality.

## Advocating for marginalised communities

As United Nations evidence reinforces, marginalised groups become increasingly vulnerable during emergencies.<sup>1</sup> Ensuring that the needs of marginalised communities were met during the pandemic was to the forefront of concerns for national and local community organisations throughout the country. In order to identify areas of common concern, Community Work Ireland convened regular meetings of over 25 local and national NGOs focusing on responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. A joint submission highlighting the effects of the pandemic on a range of groups was produced and widely distributed, including to the NPHE Vulnerable Groups Subgroup and all political parties.

Pavee Point, the National Traveller and Roma Centre, and local Traveller organisations such as Galway Traveller Movement are working closely with public health officials and local authorities to ensure a response to mitigating the huge threats that a significant outbreak of the virus poses to the Traveller and Roma communities. Responses to issues such as the development of appropriate COVID-19 messaging to members of the Traveller and Roma communities has been key. These

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<sup>1</sup> COVID-19: How to include marginalized and vulnerable people in risk communication and community engagement - UN Women and Translators without Borders on behalf of the Risk Communication and Community Engagement Working Group on COVID-19 Preparedness and Response in Asia and the Pacific [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/COVID-19\\_CommunityEngagement\\_130320.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/COVID-19_CommunityEngagement_130320.pdf)

organisations have also been working at an advocacy level to ensure that the services required to enable Travellers and Roma to comply with the COVID-19 restrictions are in place.

Community workers in migrant organisations are working directly with undocumented people and those working in the lowest paid but essential sectors of the economy and striving to minimize the risks to these groups that the crisis poses. Others are working with those in direct provision to ensure appropriate accommodation is provided for self-isolation and to ensure that those working in the health care sector and living in direct provision are protected.

The Donegal Intercultural Platform has been working from the determination that the pandemic does not affect everyone equally and that poverty and the social and economic determinants impact particular poor communities disproportionately. They have been advocating for the inclusion of Traveller organisations, non-Christian faith groups and other minority groups in response planning and in the allocation of resources and interventions. For them, as for others, working in solidarity has become more challenging and have been trying to remote platform. This, may be finding, poses its own challenges and highlights gaps and deficits in IT hardware, software and the ability to use both.

Cultur Migrant Centre works with migrant workers, refugees and asylum seekers in Meath. They, and other similar organisations have seen a significant increase in contact from undocumented migrants who have lost their job and have no means of supporting themselves or their families. Culture has been working to support the workers and their families directly by ensuring they are provided with food and are also advocating on their behalf at a national and policy level. Cultur have also been working to support people living in direct provision and temporary accommodation centers who cannot practice social distancing because of their living conditions. They have also been working to respond to the needs of young people and others that have no or limited access to Wi-Fi to enable them to continue their participation in education and to maintain social contact. Cultur has been working to ensure improvements to Wi-Fi and to provide a printing service for young people that need educational assignments printed.

Limerick Resources CLG has been coping with the challenge of ensuring that messaging and supports are reaching new communities and people in direct provision. They established a local response group with an identified connection to the group who can speak and advocate on their behalf. They also created information packets based on language needs for distribution to various homes and included relevant signposting for supports and services. Louth LEADER Partnership has been developing similar responses to the needs identified in their communities, including the provision of social supports.

Galway City Partnership has worked consistently to support vulnerable communities, including migrants and those in direct provision, as well as working closely with Galway Traveller Movement and in the disadvantaged areas of Galway City.

Similarly, community workers in Longford Community Resources have been responding to the issues and concerns of isolated older people, people with low levels of literacy and/or low levels of English language, people with no/limited access to technology, Travellers, Roma, People in Direct Provision and young people. They have been ensuring that information reaches these groups made particularly vulnerable by COVID-19, providing assistance to fill out forms for emergency social welfare payments and others, and advocating on behalf of those in particularly challenging living arrangements that do not allow them to practice physical distancing or self-isolation. The

organisation has also been working to develop a register of all those at risk of significant educational disadvantage to identify and respond to needs.

Members of the National Collective of Community-Based Women's Networks (NCCWN) are working from a community work approach and with the most marginalised women including those experiencing poverty, isolation, domestic violence and those parenting alone to seek state responses to the needs of these women while providing a constant source of connection, support and engagement with women themselves.

SECAD Partnership CLG are providing supports to social enterprises to ensure they can continue to do essential work in disadvantaged communities.

## Responding to food poverty

Food poverty has increased significantly during the pandemic, particularly amongst families with children. Throughout the country, community organisations have mobilised to respond. These are just a few examples.

Clare Local Development Company is providing food to people and families at risk of food poverty and are actively engaged in the Clare Community Response Team, supporting agencies, community groups and individuals during this crisis period.

NEWKD Local Development Company are providing a call centre and delivery service for food and other basic needs to people who are cocooning. They also established a food bank and a laptop loan scheme for students with no access to technology.

Lifestart Services CLG in Donegal, the South Roscommon Family Resource Centre, and others are doing similar work, as are many Family resource Centres around the country, providing food packs to families at risk of food poverty and ways to keep young people and people cocooning engaged.

The PAUL Partnership in Limerick is working with the Limerick Food Partnership to collage data on all the many different food initiatives currently delivering to families in order to identify gaps and new target areas. This needs analysis is informing the Local Authority Community Response and the specific actions of the Food Partnership itself.

The COVID-19 NGO Group convened by Community Work Ireland issued a joint letter to the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection calling for the School Meals Programme to be extended throughout the summer.

## Support to mitigate against educational disadvantage

The prospect of further educational disadvantage is a significant concern for organisations working with communities where children and young people already at risk. The significant digital divide that exists is having a fundamental impact on the ability of children and young people to continue with the education. Lack of access to hardware, software and broadband are common for people in these communities. The ability to pay for increased Wi-Fi usage is also an issue. This is also a concern for Community Work Educators who speak of their responses to try to ensure that their students can remain engaged with their studies.

In the absence of a coherent national effort to support these children and young people, local responses have been developed by a range of community organisations. Galway Traveller Movement, for example, issued a survey to Traveller families in Galway to assess what barriers to engaging with education have been experienced by Traveller children and young people. Galway City Partnership is working with schools in the city and Tusla to identify young people that do not have adequate access to technology and collecting and reconditioning computers for distribution.

In response to concerns for the ongoing development of professional community work programmes at 3<sup>rd</sup> level and the challenges posed for students and educators, and The All Ireland Endorsement Body for Community Work Education and Training convened the Community Work Educators Forum bringing together community work educators from 3<sup>rd</sup> level institutions North and South to share discuss and address the many challenges for teaching a discipline which values participation, experiential learning, and collective activity at a time when online teaching and distance learning are to the fore. All shared a concern to promote the profession of community work recognising its necessity now more than ever. There was particular concern about fieldwork placements in the new academic year 0- an essential aspect of community work education and professional 3<sup>rd</sup> level endorsement and qualification.

## Complex Referrals and Social Isolation

As has been widely highlighted, social isolation and the distress and anxiety surrounding the pandemic are widespread. COVID-19 has also exacerbated pre-existing conditions for many with mental health difficulties. All over the country, community workers working with those experiencing mental health problems, worked intensively to identify appropriate supports, highlighting the many concerns and issues and changes needed in service provision in the current crisis while also attempting to maintain contact and support in extremely adverse conditions.

Community workers in many different organisations have been supporting the Community Response Forum Helplines with complex referrals and providing support to those that feel socially isolated, dealing with complex issues beyond the capacity of the valuable services being provided by volunteers, the Volunteering Centres and the GAA.

## Support for those that have to cocoon

Nationally, considerable resources have been invested in supports for those that have had to cocoon. Local responses have also been developed such as the provision of telephone and online supports, the delivery of food parcels and other social supports. For example, Westport Family and Community Resource Centre established a Community Response team and extended their Befriending telephone service, and Galway City Partnership worked close with the Galway Library Service and COPE to provide deliveries of books to those having to cocoon, also providing window boxes for flowers to older people.

Concerns at the approach to cocooning were raised during the CWI consultation. Many believed that the approach was blunt and implemented without consultation. The approach, many felt, did not adequately take into account the rights of older people and others, and their capacity to make decisions and to participate and contribute. There were further concerns that many of the approaches to supports were based on a paternalistic view of what older people need.

## Support for children and young people

While significant resource was rightly invested in supporting older people and those that have to cocoon, investment in supports for children and young people were completely inadequate. Locally and nationally, organisations working with marginalised communities used limited resources to devise responses.

For example, to support young people at home with nothing to do and families not knowing what to do, Westport Family and Community Resource Centre send parents suggestions for an activity day. The children complete the task or activity, and the parents send a photo that is uploaded onto social media so that children are able to see the results of what they and their friends have done. In response to young people not physical distancing, the resource centre established a youth outreach team made up of staff and youth project volunteers, who worked on an outreach basis to engage with these groups of young people. under the current lockdown. The response was so positive that the team was stood down.

The Dolphin Creche in Rialto works with marginalised children. They have been proactively responding to issues of food poverty by providing food, lack of support for children by supplying and delivering arts, crafts and stories to children and their families, lack of support for parents by ringing all parents weekly to offer phone support and a listening ear for anxious parents and to identify family needs to implement supports and the lack of support children with a delay in development by organising for children to register with a home parent programme remotely.

## Community Work Concerns

In seeking to provide local responses to the needs of marginalised communities, many community workers and community work and local development organisations have highlighted a number of concerns:

- The loss of agency and personal choice that the public health restrictions have imposed on many people but particularly older people that were required to cocoon.
- An uneasiness with the charitable model and a dependency that has developed as a result of this.

- A concern to return to rights based community work.
- While innovative and responsive, many of the initiatives that have been developed are not sufficient to meet the need and national responses are required. This is particularly the case in relation to food poverty and the digital divide and education, and the increased risk of significant educational disadvantage that COVID-19 has imposed on already marginalised communities.
- A concern in relation to the effects any subsequent recession will have on already marginalized communities and on the community organisations that work with them.
- A concern in relation to participation and decision-making and the need to ensure that community organisations are involved and engaged in all decision-making/response-planning structures.

## Post COVID-19 – Recovery & Recommendations

The importance of community work has been starkly highlighted by the COVID-19 crisis. It will remain critical in developing responses to the effects of a post-COVID society *and* in developing resilience for future crisis planning. *Sustainable, Inclusive, Empowered Communities* provides a framework for autonomous community work and the development of an enhanced community development infrastructure, but resources will be required. All actions must be underpinned by the values and principles on which the strategy is based.

Issues such as poverty, discrimination, the challenges of increased global migration and the rise in populism, climate justice, homelessness and inappropriate living conditions, and mental health issues are likely to all be exasperated by the effects of COVID-19. Education disadvantage will be a critical issue for children and young people that are unable to maintain their education during this time.

Post-COVID-19, resource allocation will be critical. What must be bore in mind is that community development has not recovered from the cuts during the previous recession so that the starting point is now much more precarious. The effects of the last round of austerity measures are still being felt.

### Post COVID-19 – Recommendations

Looking to the immediate and longer term future, while continuing to respond to individual needs, we need to extend the focus to the development of essential collective resilience. The following are a set of recommendations to create the conditions for the development of this resilience.

- In the context of action 4.1 in *Sustainable, Inclusive, Empowered Communities* provide core funding for autonomous community development and local development at local level, including employment of professional community workers.
- In the immediate term, provide a programme to resource additional community workers throughout the country to be channelled both through existing structures such as the Traveller organisations, women’s organisations, Local Development Companies and Family Resource Centres and emerging structures to work with the most marginalised groups and those made vulnerable by COVID-19.
- Resources to develop and promote community work responses to COVID-19.
- The development of a national initiative to promote long term community resilience.