

South West Mayo Development Company: Foundation 4 Life

Lot 29:3 (Mayo: Castlebar & Claremorris)

SICAP Theme

Although primarily a **Goal 2** project, *Foundation 4 Life* cuts across each of the three themes selected for the SICAP case studies. *Foundation 4 Life* showcases strong interagency **collaboration** and it highlights **successful engagement strategies** for young people Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEETs).

SWMDC has deliberately chosen not to include photos in this case study. We are including personal and sensitive information in this case study that young people have shared with us in trust. We feel it would be a breach of that trust to put photos along with these stories thus associating young people with narratives that they are trying to escape.

In a nutshell ...

Foundation 4 Life (F4L) is an innovative tailored life skills and activation programme, targeting disengaged young people who are not engaged in employment, education or training. F4L supported disengaged young people by using a *small step*, staged approach with accredited and unaccredited modules to suit the varied learning needs of the young person. Course content was complemented with wrap-around supports including intensive individual mentoring, supportive goal-setting as well as follow-up support on completion of the course. Young people were supported to access the course through contributions to childcare, travel as well as the provision of meals.

F4L was conceived by South West Mayo Development Company (SWMDC) under the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP), supported by the Western Region Drug and Alcohol Task Force, and brought to life through the collaborative effort of agencies and stakeholders working with disengaged young people. Now in its second year, F4L boasts an impressive array of outcomes, with a 94% completion rate and strong progression outcomes for learners.

The objectives of *Foundation 4 Life* are to:

- 1) Provide a space where young people feel safe, valued and respected and where their growth and development are promoted
- 2) Support young people to progress and grow at their own pace, with diverse pathways and outcomes
- 3) Facilitate strong attendance and ongoing engagement of young people in the programme
- 4) Achieve skills development and job readiness
- 5) Ensure continued commitment to the programme from stakeholders to support its development and sustainability
- 6) Develop a model for consistent application in other areas

Why did SWMDC develop *Foundation 4 Life*?

Youth unemployment, and young people not engaged in education or training, remains a pressing concern for policymakers and is a core area of focus under SICAP. Census data reveals that in 2016, just under one in six young people aged between 18 – 24 was not in employment, education or

training. This equates to a NEET rate of 15.9%, higher than the European average of 15.2% (CSO, 2016). In Mayo, at the time of preparing the SICAP 2018-2022 tender (September 2017), primary research revealed that 864 individuals were in receipt of unemployment benefit in the Castlebar & Claremorris. Of these 864 individuals, 302 (or 35%) were aged under 25 years.

It is widely acknowledged that disengaged young people who are NEET are difficult to reach and often reluctant to engage with mainstream services. Barriers to engagement are numerous and complex and can include:

- Negative experiences of education
- Low self-esteem and confidence leading to poor motivation
- Lack of positive role models
- Intergenerational unemployment
- Poor mental health, exacerbated by poor diet and poor sleep hygiene
- Poverty and social exclusion
- Lack of literacy and numeracy skills
- Substance use

South West Mayo Development Company (SWMDC), as a local integrated development company, is accustomed to harnessing, leveraging and harmonising resources to best benefit vulnerable individuals and communities. It is SWMDC's core work and *raison d'être*.

In F4L, SWMDC has utilised the experience of its SICAP-funded Youth Worker, Catherine McCloskey, and its Western Region Drugs and Alcohol Task Force (WRDTAF)-funded Community Liaison Worker, Pat Conway, to devise a nuanced, person-centred, tailored programme for vulnerable and disengaged young people.

What is *Foundation 4 Life*?

On the face of it, *Foundation 4 Life (F4L)* is a 14-week programme, incorporating a week-long work placement for young people. Classes are held in Lough Lannagh in Castlebar two days a week, Tuesdays and Wednesdays, from 9.30 – 4 pm. Learners receive a wide range of accredited and unaccredited training, complemented by team-building activities and supportive mentoring. As an enticement to come onto the course, learners could avail of €250 towards driving lessons if they achieved 80% attendance.

However, F4L is much more than a 14-week programme. At its core, it is a ten-month programme, providing a comprehensive and holistic suite of programmes and supports for very vulnerable young people. From a 2018 learner point of view, his/her first engagement with SWMDC was in February and engagement continues until at least October.

Foundation 4 Life 2018 schedule	
January	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Course timetable and facilitators confirmed ▪ Venues confirmed ▪ Engagement with agencies and potential referring bodies to outline details and timeline of 2018 F4L programme ▪ Information sessions held, and referrals received

February	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Initial conversations held with potential learners to assess potential learners' motivation, skills and eligibility for the programme ▪ Potential Learners invited to a structured interview
March	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Informal, semi-structured interviews held with potential learners ▪ Dietary restrictions checked, and catering booked ▪ Learners selected and offers made ▪ Course commenced on Tuesday 27th March with an initial focus on team building
April	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Course began in earnest, with sessions covering self-care, communications, sleep hygiene, sexual health and leadership. ▪ Manual handling Industry certified training provided ▪ Workshops were complemented by one-to-one mentoring sessions, team-building activities and job placement preparation workshops. ▪ Through April, learners started to disclose personal issues with Catherine and Pat. Catherine and Pat started to schedule additional sessions with learners in need to identify appropriate supports and to provide a referral pathway.
May	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ In May, the activation element of the programme intensified. Learners completed industry certified programmes such as Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points (HACCP) and received an overview in practical first aid. ▪ Soft skills development was supported through modules in customer services. ▪ The activation element was complemented by a strong focus on developing life skills with modules in cooking, self-care and drugs awareness completed. ▪ Learner began preparation for their Driver Theory test and driving test. ▪ Catherine and Pat continued to mentor, signpost and refer learners outside of course hours. ▪ Catherine secured appropriate work placements for 19 learners.
June	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ In June, the focus of the programme was on activation and preparation for work placement. CV preparation workshops were held, mock interviews were held, and the learners determined their own individual progression pathways. ▪ Following completion of work placement, closing sessions and a closing ceremony were held. ▪ Through SICAP, Catherine continued to support and mentor particularly vulnerable learners outside of course hours.
July	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ In July, a one month follow up review meeting is held with learners. At this meeting, progress is assessed against learner goals and the progression pathway is revised in accordance with learners' needs and wishes. ▪ Through SICAP, Catherine continues to provide support on a needs-led basis to vulnerable learners.
August - October	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ In October, a three month follow up meeting is held with learners. This will be the final scheduled review meeting as part of <i>Foundation 4 Life</i>. ▪ Learners can continue to avail of SICAP support and are followed up with on a needs-led basis and in accordance with SICAP requirements.

As is clear from the above schedule, *Foundation 4 Life* is an intense programme, both from the perspective of learners, as well as from a staff perspective.

What makes *Foundation 4 Life* work?

SWMDC, under SICAP and its previous iterations, has ample experience in engagement with vulnerable young people. Under SICAP, Catherine McCloskey used her experience to develop and codify a coherent and holistic programme to engage with NEETs. The strengths of the programme can broadly be classified under seven headings:

- 1) Pre-development and continual support
- 2) Staff skills and expertise
- 3) Overcoming Access Barriers
- 4) Supportive Group environment
- 5) Programme design and content
- 6) Budget flexibility
- 7) Interagency collaboration

1) Pre-development and continual support

A central feature of F4L was SWMDC's emphasis on ensuring ongoing, accessible one-to-one pre-development and mentoring supports to the young people. This was identified by learners as essential and a significant factor in their engagement and retention in the programme. As one learner said *"I first found out about the course from Mindspace Mayo and Catherine met with me to explain all about it"*

Another learner said *"Catherine took the time to listen to me and get to know me. I told Catherine that I am a recovering drug addict, I explained that I moved to Cork and ended up a heroin addict living on the streets. I told Catherine that I just moved to Mayo and was trying to figure out how to live a normal drug free life in Mayo, I just wanted to get back into society and maybe even meet some friends. Catherine's reaction shocked me, she didn't look at me different and she didn't make me feel ashamed of myself or my past life. Instead she thanked me for sharing that with her, said some kind words and explained all about the Foundation 4 Life course"*.

2) Staff Skills & Expertise

SWMDC staff showed considerable sensitivity, skills and experience in supporting the young people throughout F4L. Learners spoke very highly of staff, reporting that their role and approach contributed significantly to the young people's positive experience. One learner stated, *"Catherine and Pat exceeded all expectations of what someone who works with the young people should be"*.

SWMDC, through Catherine and Pat, worked hard to develop a supportive environment, in a safe space, valuing diversity, inclusion and respect. As time progressed, the challenges and issues experienced by some young people began to emerge. As their trust in the staff and process strengthened, learners began to share more with each other and staff. Some extremely challenging and complex issues were disclosed by learners in the programme. These issues necessitated thoughtful, considered and appropriate responses from staff.

3) Overcoming Access Barriers

The young people experienced several challenges in joining this programme. For F4L to succeed in its objectives, it was vital to break down access barriers. This was done by providing a contribution to childcare, travel cost, supporting access to laptops and providing breakfast and a hot meal throughout the course duration.

4) Supportive Group Environment

The young people on *Foundation 4 Life* come from a diverse variety of backgrounds and experiences. This exposed learners to others from different backgrounds and helped to promote empathy and understanding. As the course progressed, learners grew to understand that despite difference, they had much in common and so developed a natural affinity and respect with each other.

The support learners received from peers and from staff allowed young people to thrive and build their confidence. It is important to recognise that the pre-development work carried out by SWMDC was essential in building a supportive learning environment. The recruitment process and selection criteria focused on identifying young people who were a *good fit* for the programme, both in terms of their needs and their willingness to engage with all elements of F4L. The careful selection of learners at the outset contributed significantly to the strong sense of connection within the group.

5) Programme Design & Content

Foundation 4 Life's diverse programme content was valued by learners and helped retain their interest. The mix of skills development and personal development modules delivered in an informal, yet structured, setting was a further strength. Many learners highlighted the team-building activities as particularly enjoyable:

"We received amazing training and qualifications as a part of this amazing programme. From HACCP Food Hygiene, First Aid and Customer Service training to Manual Handling, Prime for Life and work placement. All of these make us more appealing and more prepared for the working world".

The bespoke programme design was relevant to the needs of the learners and ensured that the needs of the group were targeted and addressed. SWMDC carefully considered the timing of F4L and decided to run it over Spring and early Summer, thus facilitating learners to progress onto education/training opportunities in the Autumn. Learners identified that the length of the programme (13 weeks) was long enough to hold their interest and commitment, but not too long to lose their attention.

Careful attention was paid to creating the right learning environment which was needs based and flexible, including group work as well as discussion-based activities. This ensured that the young person is an active learner in the learning process.

6) Budget flexibility

Ensuring ongoing, meaningful engagement with participants throughout the programme required considerable thought and planning. Central to this was the creation of a needs-based environment, with a flexible approach to learning and personal development in a youth-centric model. This approach was supported by the increased flexibility around eligible expenditure in SICAP 2018-2022. It was important that the young people were actively supported to overcome barriers to participation, such as childcare, transport, food and laptops. This resulted in additional expenditure which could be accommodated under SICAP 2018-2022.

7) Interagency collaboration

This is extensively detailed under the collaboration section in this case study.

What are *Foundation 4 Life's* challenges?

Challenge 1: *The needs of disengaged young people are extremely complex. To develop their potential, a person-centred, supportive and tailored approach must be taken. However, this approach is labour-intensive and demanding on staff. The time spent on supporting 20 young people (6% of SWMDC's C&C caseload) is difficult to justify under SICAP where other targets need to be met.*

Any reduction in the SICAP targets for 2019 will support SWMDC to carry out further intensive work with hard-to-reach groups

Foundation 4 Life was originally conceived as a 14-week programme, with intensive pre—development work and a limited number of review meetings. However, as is shown in the schedule above, it has evolved into a 10-month programme of work under SICAP. Some young learners disclosed complex issues such as self-harm, suicidal ideation and/or suicidal behaviour and food poverty.

As SWMDC staff were the first point of contact for these disclosures, Catherine and Pat supported the young people into appropriate services by making, and following up, referrals. This included supporting young people to get medical cards and to access appropriate health care. Catherine also sourced food packages for young people experiencing food poverty.

The complexity of the issues disclosed means that work with the young people has continued far beyond the course duration. This approach is very much in line with best practice in youth work, however, it is time-consuming and intensive work for staff, as well as being difficult to measure and value under SICAP.

It also raises questions about what level of support learners can expect from *F4L* and what are the parameters of the programme? SICAP is a programme that aims to 'fill the gaps', however, is it realistic and fair on staff or young people to expect SICAP to fill such a large gap? Where does the responsibility of other stakeholders' lie?

Challenge 2: *Maintaining ongoing and sustainable funding*

SICAP is the primary funder of *Foundation 4 Life*, both from staff time and from the action budget. Excluding staff time, in 2018 SICAP contributed €17,400 towards the programme, an extremely significant proportion of the limited action budget. It will not be possible to sustain this level of funding from SICAP given the other demands on the programme budget.

The complexity of the programme also draws heavily of the time of staff funded under SICAP, primarily Catherine, as the *F4L* Coordinator, but also finance and administrative staff, and the

SWMDC CEO. In 2019, SWMDC plans to target another twenty disengaged young people under F4L and to provide the necessary wrap around supports for each learner to ensure positive individual outcomes and progression into education, employment and/or training.

SWMDC has requested LEADER funding to continue Foundation 4 Life in 2019 and this funding seems likely to materialise. Nonetheless, funding, and the time associated with managing funding, will continue to be an issue into the future under the current model of *F4L* and SICAP's current parameters.

Collaboration

Foundation 4 Life is a collaborative programme, managed through SWMDC under SICAP, with the support of the Western Region Drug and Alcohol Task Force (WRDTAF). Support and guidance are also provided by an interagency steering committee with representatives from the following groups:

- Western Region Drugs and Alcohol Task Force
- Mayo County Council
- Mayo Local Employment Service (LES)
- Mayo Sports Partnership
- Mayo Sligo Leitrim Education Training Board (ETB)
- Irish Association for the Social Integration of Offenders (IASIO)

An on-site clinic was held each week with the LES mediator thus facilitating learners to engage with agencies in a non-judgemental, informal setting. Intreo staff also supported the programme and worked from a needs-led basis to engage with the young people. A weekly onsite clinic was also held with the WRDTAF-funded Drug and Alcohol Family Support Worker. Mayo Sports Partnership provided an *Active Leadership* module, as well as a *Team building* event and MSLETB provided a tutor and materials for a cookery and nutrition module.

Mayo County Council contributed €4,200 towards the overall programme, WRDTAF contributed €3,000 and MSLETB contributed €1,000. Mayo LES funded driving lessons and HACCP for learners.

In-kind contributions were made by several stakeholders, including Mindspace Mayo, HSE Drugs Service, Tacú Family Resource Centre, Local Employment Service and Mayo Sports Partnership. Mayo Sligo Leitrim ETB offered career guidance workshops to the learners to support progression planning. As a result, participants were introduced to a range of services and supports.

The level of support that agencies have given to F4L is impressive and shows the genuine goodwill and meaningful engagement that stakeholders have with the course. It is also a measure of the worth of the programme and the need for such a programme for young people who are falling through the gaps.

Engagement Strategies

A community development approach was taken with recruitment, with staff making connections within communities and working with key local stakeholders to identify potential learners. F4L was

not publicly advertised, instead relying on word of mouth and referrals to engage with young people.

SWMDC will continue to recruit using this approach. The course will not be publicly advertised in 2019 as the demand for places on the F4L course would be too great. This in and of itself proves the need for such a programme as F4L.

Agencies engaged with included the WRDATF, Intreo, LES, Mayo Sports Partnership, Mayo County Council, MSLETB, Mindspace Mayo, Family Resource Centres, Probation Services, and the HSE among others.

Outputs, Outcomes and Impact

Foundation 4 Life 2017 & 2018

- 35 participants started the course and 33 participants completed the course.
- 33 progression plans developed for their next steps in life.
- 25 participants completed a one-week work experience placement.
- 21 participants completed their provisional license and accessed €250 funding towards the driving lessons. 6 young people already had their provisional or full driving licence before enrolling on the Foundation 4 Life course.
- 9 participants progressed into full time employment.
- 9 participants progressed into part time employment.
- 15 participants progressed onto further education.

Learner story – Mary*

Mary, a white Irish female, registered for *Foundation 4 Life* when she was 21 years old. She was unemployed, living in a disadvantaged area and had never worked. She had completed secondary school. She could not drive.

Mary had recently moved to Mayo to live with her grandmother, a pensioner living in a rural part of the county. Prior to moving to Mayo, Mary was homeless and was living on the streets in Cork. She was using heroin and misusing alcohol. At the time of SICAP registration, Mary was in recovery and had been six months sober and free from drugs.

Mary engaged intensively with F4L and SWMDC's supports. 18 interventions are recorded against her on IRIS, including one-to-one meetings, phone calls, information sessions and group meetings. Mary actively strove to develop her life skills through the programme. 12 outputs are recorded against Mary, including attendance and participation in the following life skills workshops:

Communicating Effectively	Stress Management Strategies
Prime for Life – A Drug and Alcohol prevention Model	Team Building Activities
Cooking and baking skills.	Mindfulness Practice
Money management and budgeting Skills	Healthy sleep habits.
Sexual Health Awareness	Exercise workshops
Support Services Workshops	Volunteer opportunity workshops

* Pseudonym used to protect Mary's privacy

Activation and Industry Certified training Mary attended included:

Customer Service Training	Youth Active Leadership Training
Manual Handling Training	Driver Theory Test
Occupational First Aid	CV Development and interview skills
HACCP Food Hygiene Training	Driving Lessons
1-1 Career Guidance	Progression planning workshops
Interview Skills	

Other Outputs:

- Referral to the Local Employment Service
- Referral to the Family Support Worker with the Western Region Drug and Alcohol Task Force
- Referral to Castlebar College of Further Education

On completing the course, Mary gave the following testimonial

“I’m feeling good and able to handle things better, I applied for a Social Studies Course, something I never thought I was capable of ... I hope that one day I can help change someone else's life like the Foundation 4 Life course has changed mine. I leave the Foundation 4 Life course with friends for life”

Mary’s outcomes

- ✓ Mary now holds a provisional driving licence, is half way through her Essential Driving Training and is insured on her mother's car.
- ✓ Mary attends a Family Support Worker with the Western Region Drugs and Alcohol Task Force regularly for additional support outside of her Alcohol Anonymous and Narcotic Anonymous Meetings.
- ✓ Mary has an updated Curriculum Vitae and feels much more prepared for interview situations.
- ✓ Mary was inspired by the Foundation 4 Life Course and would like to work in a similar area. She has enrolled with Castlebar College of Further Education and is now completing an Applied Social Studies Course with Psychology Level 5.
- ✓ The ‘Distanced Travelled Tool’ highlighted an improvement for Mary in several areas; including reduced anxiety, better problem-solving skills, improved self-esteem and more confidence and optimism overall.

Summary

The Foundation 4 Life programme is now a developed proven model of best practice for engaging young people not in employment, education or training. SWMDC’s wealth of experience in harnessing and leveraging state resources to support disengaged people shines through in *Foundation 4 Life*. Our experience in working with very disadvantaged young people has led us,

through SICAP, to design and deliver a highly effective bespoke training programme for young people who are falling through the gaps in state services.

The interagency nature of the programme enabled the provision of a broad range of supports and skills development. The Steering Committee also facilitated oversight by interagency stakeholders and a joined-up approach to meeting the complex needs of the young people in Mayo.

The Foundation 4 Life Course has proven to be very effective in engaging one of the most marginalised of the SICAP target groups, young people not engaged in employment, education or training. To date Foundation 4 Life has engaged 35 learners with a completion rate of 94%.

F4L's return on investment is significant with 100% of participants achieving progression directly after the programme, including accessing employment, education and training. This demonstrates excellent value for money and highlights a measure of the worth of the programme for young people who are falling through the gaps.

Given enough time and resources, SWMDC plans to make *F4L* an integral part of its SICAP 2018-2022 work and an annual feature of our SICAP workplan.