

Lot 29:3 (Castlebar & Claremorris) South West Mayo Development Company: Re-opening Communities post-COVID 19

SICAP Theme

Goal 1 project

Thematic Area

Build capacity of local community groups

Target group

Local community groups and social enterprises supporting SICAP target groups

In a nutshell ... summary

The COVID19 pandemic, which at the time of writing continues to rage globally, has been the most extraordinary global event in living memory. In Ireland, the community sector came to the fore as a mechanism to support people locally, a way to support people who were at risk of falling through the gaps. However, once the initial crisis passed, and restrictions on movement were lifted, community organisations, many of which are employers, were left with considerable challenges. How can they make the workplaces as safe as possible? How could they implement the Return to Work Safely protocol? How can they continue to provide services and supports to people in the community?

This case study looks at the supports that SWMDC, through SICAP, put in place to enable community groups to navigate these challenging questions and to re-open safely. In total over 60 groups benefitted from SWMDC SICAP support to re-open safely.

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Background – what is the problem that SWMDC was trying to solve and why?

On 27th March An Taoiseach Leo Varadkar announced a stay-at-home restriction with limited exceptions. Community centres were directed to close, with some exceptions for groups who were providing essential services to vulnerable groups. As the peak of the crisis was reached and cases began to recede, Ireland started planning for re-opening. A *Roadmap for Re-opening Society and Business* was published with (initially) five phases for re-opening, with the first phase commencing on 18th May. A mandatory *Return to Work Safely Protocol* was published on 9th May.

Part of Maria McHale’s work (SWMDC’s Social Inclusion Coordinator) under SICAP is to work with community groups and social enterprises. She kept in close contact with the groups in Lot 29:3, many of whom remained open providing essential services during the initial months of COVID19. It was in one of these support conversations that the need for assistance around re-opening was identified by a community group.

The *Return to Work Safely Protocol* is a comprehensive, practical document. It also poses several challenges for the community sector. In Lot 29:3 the community settings that remained open were still dealing with high demand for services and had little time or opportunity to go through the *Return to Work Protocol* in any depth and were perplexed as to how it related to them. There was (and remains) an understandable reluctance around re-opening and protectiveness around vulnerable centre users and staff.

Maria set about sourcing suitable training and supports for the groups, but all seemed quite generic and did not allow groups enough time to explore issues and talk through the specificities of their work and their premises. She decided to develop her own training session and resources specifically for community groups and social enterprises.

Maria, through SICAP, put together a package of bespoke supports for community groups and social enterprises around re-opening. This package included one-to-one support sessions with Maria delivered via Zoom, phone support, templates for compliance, induction training templates and group seminars to support peer learning and sharing of experiences.

What did SICAP support look like and what added benefit did it provide?

SWMDC SICAP support consisted of four elements:

1) One-to-one support sessions with groups delivered via Zoom

Maria designed an individual training session with an overview of the *Return to Work Safely Protocol*, signposts to useful resources on reputable websites and answers to commonly asked questions including revised first aid procedures and data protection concerns.

Maria delivered the session and the templates on a one-to-one basis with groups. This personalised element of the support was vital to its success and this came through in the feedback surveys, with Le Chéile Family Resource Centre commenting “*Maria produced a very*

clear and comprehensive training for us. She also made it about our Company which allowed us to ask specific questions.”

Maria has worked with these groups for many years and has strong relationships with them. She knows the premises and the activities that they carry out and this allowed a detailed and nuanced discussion with each group as to how the guidance applied in their situation. Each one-to-one session lasted between 40 and 60 minutes. There was no time limit put on sessions and this was appreciated by groups, with Mayo Travellers Support Group commenting how valuable they found *‘being able to talk it [re-opening] through’*.

2) *Providing templates and resources to groups*

Following a one-to-one session, either via phone or via Zoom, a suite of resources, drawn up by Maria, was provided to each group. This included checklists, risk assessment templates, sample safety statements, visitor forms and a sample induction presentation template. These templates were only provided following a discussion with the group – this ensured that the templates were used appropriately and that there was sufficient understanding and context around the broader re-opening.

The templates proved a useful resource for groups with many survey respondents particularly highlighting these as being extremely beneficial. Anne Cunnane from Ballyhaunis Social Housing noted that *“it was very useful in having procedures in place for the return of staff and required forms for them & the check lists ensuring I was doing everything in the correct manner”*. Another (anonymous) respondent simply said the support *“made life easier”*.

3) *Follow up phone and email support as needed*

Following the one-to-one sessions, groups were advised that Maria was available for any follow up queries. The feedback from the participants highlighted the added value in the constant and ongoing support that SICAP staff are providing to groups, beyond the one-off supports. Mayo Abbey CLG commented that the support was *“very helpful, was able to ask her [Maria] questions afterwards and she was always very helpful and quick to reply”* and *“the **ongoing** [emphasis added] support is a great benefit to us”*.

During one of these follow up phone calls, one group suggested a group meeting to support shared learning and this, along with a telephone conversation with the Mayo PPN worker, led to collaborative seminars.

4) *Collaborative seminars*

In July SWMDC worked with Mayo North East SICAP, Mayo Volunteer Centre and Mayo PPN to roll out two seminars called *Re-opening Community Organisations*. SWMDC led out on this project and SWMDC’s Maria McHale delivered the presentation on the *Return to Work Protocol*. Mayo Volunteer Centre delivered a presentation on supporting volunteers. The seminar included break-out rooms so people could learn from each other and to promote solidarity. Questions were submitted via the chat box and the two speakers (i.e. from SWMDC and Mayo Volunteer Centre) provided answers.

Feedback from these seminars was positive, and the breakout rooms sessions were especially highlighted as beneficial. They enabled community groups to network virtually and to get support from each other. One attendee wrote *“We aren't the only organisation in the same boat of trying to open back up but being scared/worried due to COVID still being a real threat in society at the moment”* or as another attendee simply put it *“good to see we are not on our own”*.

What were the outputs and outcomes?

20 groups availed of one to one support sessions, with 18 of these sessions taking place over Zoom and two availing of phone support. Phone support sessions generally lasted 15 minutes, while the video support sessions lasted on average 50 minutes.

40 groups participated in the collaborative seminars and the seminars each lasted 90 minutes.

60 groups in total benefited from SWMDC SICAP support on this project.

Over two months (June and July 2020), 25 hours of direct support through SWMDC's Maria McHale has been provided to community groups and social enterprises to support efforts to re-open safely. An additional 40 hours of SICAP effort was invested in this project by Maria McHale through preparing materials, researching topics, and managing the logistics of the process.

It is important to emphasise that this support is not standalone– it is part of a suite of support that SWMDC, through many programmes, provides to groups, and has provided, over three decades.

What impact is there from the project?

SWMDC circulated a survey to each local community group and social enterprise to get feedback from participants. 10 groups completed this survey. In addition, separate surveys were circulated to all attendees who attended the group seminars, and a further 12 representatives completed these.

A specific question was asked around impact, namely *“What impact did these supports have on your re-opening?”*. We received 10 responses to this question and in general, the feedback was that the guidance helped management and boards **feel** safer in re-opening. Seamus Caulfield in Balla Community Resource Centre commented that SWMDC's support *“helped us comply with all guidelines and answered all our questions”*. Three respondents noted that the resources really alleviated pressure on management around bringing staff back, with one commenting *“I had all my protocol checklists, return to work declaration for all my staff, and just in general, the information we got was a great help to us”*.

It is obviously not possible to measure a long-term impact from the support as enough time has not passed, but the feedback from those who availed of the support indicates that the overall project was extremely valuable, to groups, and in particular the timely nature of it.

Challenges and learning

It is fair to say that 2020 has brought innumerable challenges and learning for all of us. This project will be an ongoing project; however, its delivery so far has been very successful.

Our one difficulty so far was a technical problem with Eventbrite when issuing a Zoom link for the collaborative seminar. We are still unsure what the difficulty was, but it resulted in several people having to be logged in manually and delayed the start of the seminar by 20 minutes. We have learned to test every element of the technology in advance just to ensure all works smoothly.

Future plans

Our ongoing support to community groups and social enterprise will continue as needs dictate. We also plan to deliver more collaborative seminars with Mayo North East, Mayo PPN and Mayo Volunteer Centre. We hope to revisit this collaboration in Autumn and Winter 2020 where resources allow.

It is worth re-emphasising that the success of this project was only due to the trust and faith that groups placed in SWMDC. This trust has been developed over many years, under a variety of programmes, and as part of the professional relationships that groups have with SWMDC. We look forward to supporting groups for many years to come.