

Subject area:	Women as a marginalised group in rural Ireland.
Project title:	Longford Women's link.
County:	Longford
Date of project:	1995 – 2010 and ongoing

Purpose:

Longford Women's Link (LWL) is a local organisation aimed at increasing the participation of women in the economic, social and cultural life of their Longford community.

From its origins in the Irish Country Women's Association in 1995, Longford Women's Link has grown and evolved to become an established and widely respected organisation providing a range of supports and services for the women of County Longford, particularly focusing on marginalised groups.

Aim:

-Supporting individual women by ensuring they can access their rights and entitlements for both themselves and for their children.

-Building community capacity through education and training, supporting women's collective action.

-Lobbying and advocacy at local and national level on gender equality issues.

Size of the project:

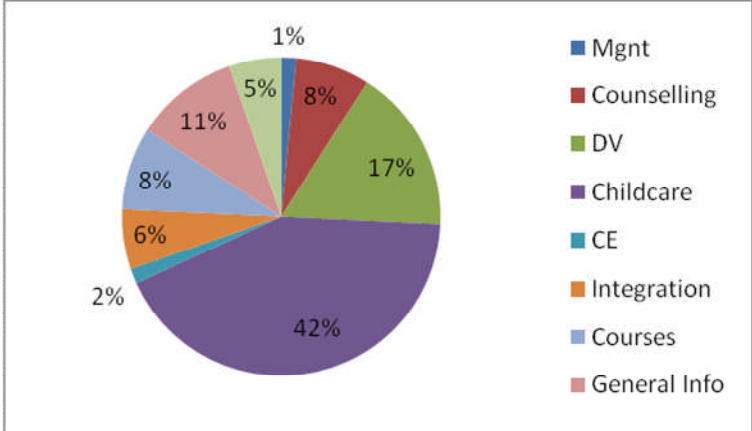
This project encompasses the whole county of Longford, however if women need help from other counties and approach LWL they will not be turned away.

Objectives & Results:

Strategic Objective: Individual Women in Longford can access their rights and entitlements for themselves and for their children

LWL's direct support assists women who need to access information and services (either through LWL or by directing them to the appropriate services) that can improve their situation and bring them to a point where they are in a position to take more control over their lives.

The services provided here are domestic violence support, migrant women support, counselling and community childcare. The following chart is a breakdown of the services women accessed in 2009:



(Information provided by LWL)

Longford Women’s Link Domestic Violence Service (LWLDVS)

In 2009, a total of 380 women were supported by LWLDVS, broken down as follows:
 Numbers of Women accessing Domestic Violence Services (LWLDVS) One to One Service 261
 Numbers of Women with Migrant Issues Only 37
 Numbers of Women accessing LWLDVs Groups 50
 Numbers of Women accessing Migrant Support Groups 32

Services to women from the migrant communities have shown a consistent increase. However this has put an additional burden on our resources for the following reasons.

- 50% (130 women) of our service users are from the migrant/3rd country national communities and require language support.
- 25% (65 women) having little to no English.
- 36% more time required to support woman from migrant community

Groups facilitated by LWLDVs 2009

While a significant proportion of the DV (domestic violence) work is delivered on an individual basis, supporting group work is becoming a bigger feature of the work of the DV team. Furthermore, they support other staff members to ensure that women experiencing domestic violence can access and participate in other LWL women’s groups on an equal basis.

Coming Back Home 15 Participants:

Peer support group for women who are or have experienced Domestic Violence with childcare & transport provided.

Making New Links 35 Participants (Two groups in 2009):

These are 12 week courses introducing women to a variety of different opportunities to taste hobbies, yoga, sewing/knitting self defence and arts and crafts. Aim to support women to ease into accessing groups and explore areas of interest. Domestic violence survivors are target group but other women from community are also invited to participate to ensure that the group is not identified as DV specific.

Russian Speaking Women's Group (32 Participants)

Peer support group for women from mostly Eastern Europe who all speak Russian. Share information and resources. Five information sessions provided with guest speakers and study visit to Garda Station & Court House

16 Days Campaign against Violence against Women 2009

The 16 days Campaign is an annual international event in which LWL participates. In 2009 LWLDVS organised the following events:

Walk of Remembrance

Approx 55 people walked from the Market Square to no 46 Main Street to remember the women who were murdered in Ireland since 1996

In Her Shoes Exhibition

A local landlord kindly allowed us to use an empty property on the Main Street to display 159 pairs of shoes for every women murdered

Migrant support

Nearly half of the women supported by the domestic violence service are migrant women.

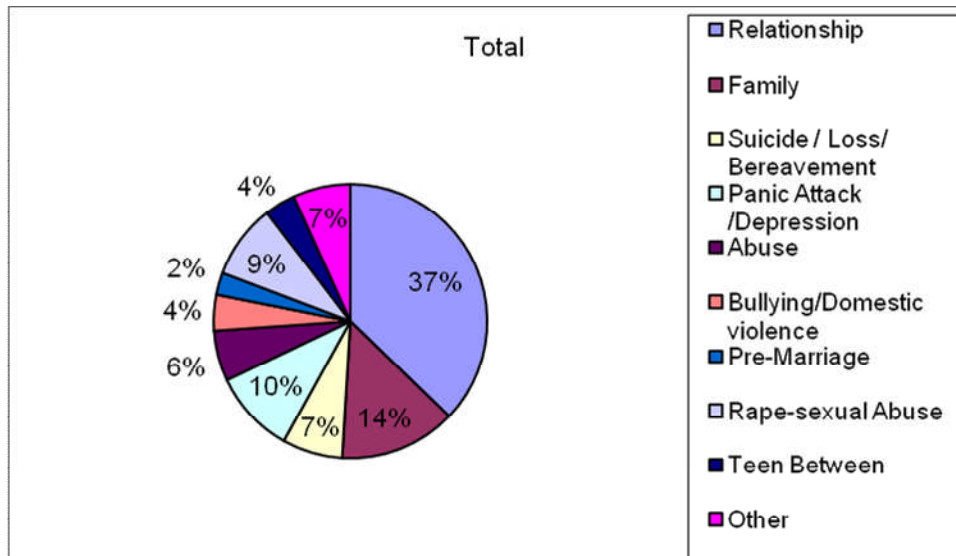
For migrant women not experiencing domestic violence LWL have set up weekly clinics where women can get support with migrant issues on an appointment basis.

Counselling

LWL counselling service provided almost one thousand individual counselling sessions last year in addition to 12 pre-marriage courses. Twenty six teenagers accessed our teen between service for teenage children who are impacted by parental divorce or separation. In addition thirty one women were provided with support by Athlone Rape Crisis Centre in LWL. This work is funded through a grant from the Family Support Agency and small donations from individual clients. MRCS provides the pre-marriage counselling, teen counselling and couple counselling.

In 2008, the funding application had to be submitted by November. Due to government cuts, applications forms for 2010 funding have not been received as yet.

Counselling provided.



Community Childcare

Catkins Nursery

Catkins currently has a full time staff of six (manager, 4 play leaders, crèche worker, crèche cook). The service is supported by a CE Scheme comprising a full time supervisor and fifteen participants. In 2009 a total of 100 children attended Catkin's Nursery.

All full time childcare staff are currently participating in Fetac Level 6 Childcare which is being held here in LWL.

Catkins on the Move

Catkins on the Move operates as a mobile crèche and Relief Childcare Staff Service, funded by Pobal as a Community Services Programme and LCRL. Catkins on the Move was set up in response to a lack of adequate childcare provision to enable women access e.g. training and education and participate in other community based activities (mobile crèche). The crèche is usually set up in a room near to where training is taking place and gives women easy access to childcare while they undertake retraining.

Mobile Crèche

To date the service has supported 24 organisations/events with 158 crèches.

Relief Childcare Staff

In 2009 the relief childcare service supported five community based organisation and one private crèche, spanning out to a total of 233 bookings.

Community Employment Scheme

The FAS Community Employment (CE) Scheme has provided an invaluable support to Catkins Nursery since it opened in 2000. In return LWL has provided education, training and work experience to a group of local women. The scheme currently comprises 17 participants and a supervisor.

Through the CE scheme LWL aims to continue to support women who are eligible for the scheme by providing training and work experience to improve their employment prospects.

The criteria for participating in the Scheme are based on age (minimum 25 years old) and length of time in receipt of various social welfare payments. Placement is for at least one year and up to three to five years depending on age and circumstance (with specific criteria for travellers, ex-offenders, refugees, people with disabilities and those referred by a Drugs Task Force). The Scheme is financed and delivered through FÁS, Ireland's training and employment authority. FÁS gives financial support in the form of allowances and funding to assist with the CE Scheme, for example participant wages, supervisor salary, materials grants and specific skills training grants.

CE Supervisors provide individual support to participants through an 'Individual Learner Plan' process, which focuses on meeting the learning needs of participants. The Individual Learner Plan provides for the planning, organising and recording of the work experience, training and development that each participant receives while working on CE, assisting them to enhance both technical and personal skills. The training provided through Community Employment is delivered within a Quality Assurance framework.

Impact of CE Scheme and Training at Longford Women's Link

Thirty four women have participated in LWL's CE programme over the last three years.

Of the thirty-four, fourteen currently remain employed at LWL

Of the 20 women who have left LWL having completed their CE placement, 14 (ie 70%) have secured some further form of employment

Having developed an awareness of their specific goals through participation in the CE Scheme, together with the confidence to pursue further training/education opportunities with LWL, three (i.e. 15%) are currently under-taking further education having finished the Scheme

Experience of the CE Scheme at LWL

The longer the participants had been on the Scheme, the more positive the experience. Participants identified a number of very specific reasons for this transformation.

It was felt that the length of the CE Scheme provided 'space' to develop confidence and learn or re-learn skills. This contrasted specifically with the experience of some 20% of trainees who participated in the same or similar courses previously at an adult education centre, where they reported feeling under enormous pressure to complete assignments within the established educational schedule.

The attitude and approach of the CE Supervisor, LWL trainer, and contracted external trainers, were all seen as critically supportive – 'I wouldn't have stuck with it unless it has been for them', 'I didn't feel intimidated – the atmosphere made all the difference', 'It's completely different here'.

A number of the participants formed a peer-support study group and this was identified as an essential factor in the successful completion of a full FETAC Award in childcare – ‘we helped each other, and encouraged each other’, ‘We got the work done and had a laugh’.

The ‘Individual Learning Plan’ focus of the CE Scheme, which meant that training - at, or through, LWL - offered options that met the individual needs, aspirations and learning pace of the participants. The extended time factor of the Scheme also meant that participants could think about what they wanted to do without feeling under pressure to make an early decision.

Growing confidence was repeatedly expressed and affirmed as one of the most important outcomes for participant.

Strategic Objective: Longford women's social and economic independence is increased
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Strategic Objective : Women's collective voice in Longford is making a positive impact on the local community

Within this area, LWL's move from providing direct support to women to providing opportunities which will help them to develop themselves. This is achieved predominantly through the provision of appropriate education and training supports. A key priority for LWL within this area of activity is to support women who may be lacking in confidence, who may have had negative experiences of education in the past, who may wish to up-skill or who want to get themselves back into the workforce. These kinds of opportunities begin to develop the capacity of individual women themselves, with knock-on positive impacts for their children, families and the broader local community. As well as providing women with the skills that can develop their potential for economic independence and civic engagement, the aim is to build towards a critical mass of women who are both active in the local community and working towards creating change and improving circumstances for those who continue to be affected by disadvantage in Longford.

The objectives in this area fall under two broad headings:

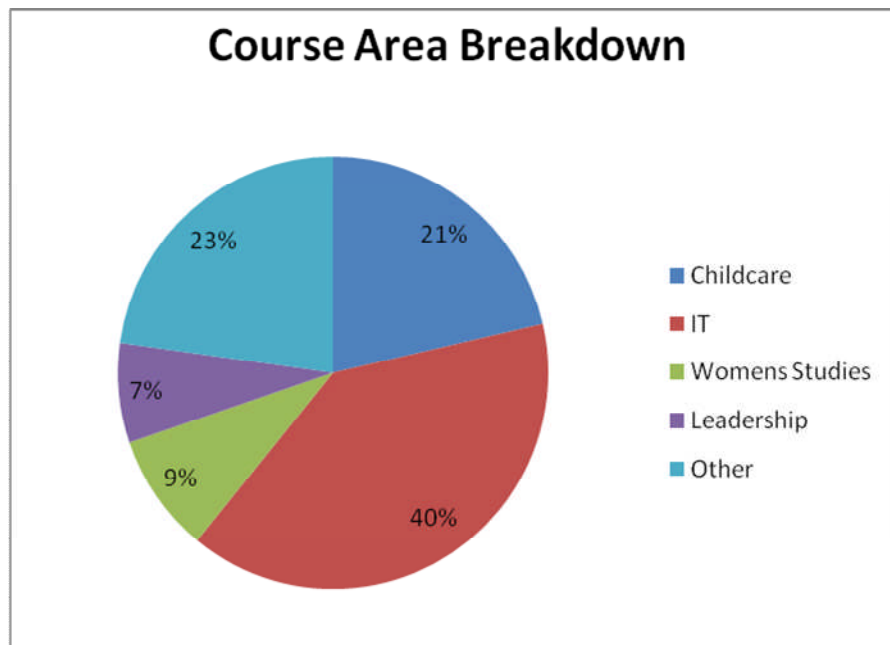
Providing educational opportunities for individual women to develop their own capacity;
Building a critical mass of women in Longford who can work together to improve and develop the whole community.

Education and Training

Accreditation: LWL has been a FÁS Gateway training centre since 2003. LWL is also a FETAC accredited training centre which means that we can choose the modules LWL deliver, enabling flexible responses to the changing needs of women in Longford and ensure all qualifications are recognised nationally.

In July 2008, LWL applied for funding under the Equality for Women Measure to develop the Education & Training section. However, due to the economic crisis the Equality for Women Measure was cut drastically and LWL were informed in August 09 that their application was unsuccessful but would be put on a reserve list should funding become available. The FAS Gateway was also discontinued in 2009

In 2009, 281 women availed of the courses detailed below.



3.2 Building collective community capacity

Building Collective Community Capacity.

Specific courses like Women’s Studies and the Leadership Course contribute to building the social analysis and leadership skills of local women.

Longford Women’s Manifesto Group

In terms of the broader civic engagement, LWL used the local elections as a focus for this work. This work began with attendance at a presentation by Longford County Council on the role and remit of Longford County Council, followed by a meeting of women interested in “having their say” in local decision making. Over 250 women engaged with the campaign for a recognised structure within Longford County Council where women could have their say in the local decision making process. From attendance at the council meeting in December 2008, there has been a continuous presence of women at the monthly meeting of Longford County Council throughout 2009. A core group known as the Longford Women’s Manifesto Group was officially constituted in November 09. The group has been invited to make a presentation to Longford County Council early in 2010 outlining its demands.

The work of the Longford Women’s Manifesto Group represents a key part of the advocacy work carried out and supported by LWL.

Advocacy

LWL's aim within this focus area is to advocate for the long term change of local, regional and national policy and practice in order to improve the lives of women and their families in Longford. Through its experience in the provision of Direct Support and its involvement in developing Community Capacity, LWL has now established itself as both a credible and influential voice on issues relating to women and their families at a local and national level. However, LWL are very aware that this experience needs to be complemented by a solid evidence base that can be used to illustrate and strengthen arguments for positive change. In 2009, LWL began the process of developing a database that will capture this evidence in a user friendly format.

In 2009, the rapidly changing economic environment meant that the position of the most disadvantaged women worsened considerably. For example, new criteria for housing support mean that often women are unable to leave violent situations. A rigid application of the habitual residence rule means that migrant women fleeing violent situations are not entitled to any financial support from Community Welfare Officers. LWL continued to raise awareness of the hardship caused by this policy change with relevant organisations throughout 2009.

Longford Women's Link has developed an integrated and cross-organisational approach to its advocacy work. The 3 focus areas of Longford Women's Link combine to form a single mission for the organisation as follows:

Longford Women's Link will:

- (1) Provide and facilitate a range of supports and opportunities for vulnerable women and their children,
- (2) Advocate for models of mainstream service provision that demonstrate good practice, and
- (3) Drive policy change in order to address issues affecting women and children.

Relationship building, information exchange and collaboration with other voluntary organisations and statutory agencies.

During 2009, LWL reviewed its external representation. Within Advocacy meetings, it was agreed that all external representation will fulfil one of three objectives

- Achieve direct outcome (specific benefit to LWL or women as a disadvantaged gender)
- Achieve indirect outcome (relationship-building process)
- Raise LWL's profile

Strategic Objective: LWL's long-term viability is secured

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Strategic Objective: LWL's organisational and governance structures support the delivery of our vision

Human Resources

With the recruitment of the Head of Services, LWL now have a management team which meets on a weekly basis to oversee the day to day work of the organisation.

A formal Appraisal process was implemented during 2009. This is being used by all levels of staff with a review planned for July 2010. In addition to regular support and supervision sessions, monthly staff meetings were held to ensure that all staff teams were fully informed of the day to day work of the organisation.

Funding

A grant of €200K from the One Foundation, renewal of the FAS CE, NCIP and CSP Schemes, an additional allocation of €30k from the HSE and the continued support of LCRL, Longford VEC. (See detailed breakdown under 'Finance'.)

Supporters:

- Longford County Council
- Longford Community Resources Ltd
- Longford against Racism – Embracing Diversity
- Global Longford (A voluntary organisation that provides advice and advocacy for new male asylum seekers in the Direct Provision hostel on a wide range of issues from the asylum process through to the provision of information on services and rights.)
- The ACORN project provides independent advice, advocacy, training, and recreation facilities for socially excluded men in Longford including the Traveller and asylum seeking communities.
- The Longford EDI Centre for the Unemployed has recently employed an Employment Mediation Officer who speaks Polish
- The VEC provides some English language classes for newcomers to Longford

- Longford Library provides books and leaflets in a range of languages, hosts LaRed meetings, acts as a 'signpost' for information, and facilitates a Polish mother and baby group
- HSE – provides funding for LWL to provide domestic violence support.
- Gardai – investigation of crimes, provision of information on civil remedies and relevant services.
- Courts – hearing of cases when the woman has secured legal counsel, or if the case is being taken by the Gardai, the woman is only a witness and has no legal representation
- Crisis accommodation – available for women in Longford only in Bethany house, a hostel for homeless women.

-In addition to the standard services, the local Citizens' Information Centre has a legal advocate, a Polish information officer and a weekly Slovak information clinic.

-The Catholic Church is developing its services for the New Communities – e.g. a Polish priest is currently provided

Finance

2009		
2009 Income - Longford Women's Link	Actual	
Grant Income		Funder Explanation
One Foundation	200,000	Philanthropic support to strengthen organisation's processes and systems - <i>(Restricted Funding with Dependencies)</i>
Child Care Subvention	214,890	State support for the provision of Community Childcare - allowance based on parents welfare status - <i>(Restricted Funding with Dependencies)</i>
Ceiding Funding	14,000	Specific project funding from Minister for Children - must re apply each year - not hopeful in current climate
LCRL - area based partnership company	57,000	Salary & Activity Budget for Women's community action facilitator, plus €2k towards IWD Celebrations and €5k running cost grant for CSP - <i>(Restricted)</i>
Community Services Programme	101,853	Subvention towards development and running of mobile childcare service - for review y/e 2010 - <i>(Restricted Funding with Dependencies)</i>
Health Services Executive Core Funding 2009	130,821	Salaries and associated costs for running Domestic Violence Services - <i>(Restricted Funding with Dependencies)</i>
Family Support Agency	25,300	Subvention towards counsellors fees -must be applied for annually - <i>(Restricted Funding with Dependencies)</i>
Commission for the support of Victims of Crime	25,000	Support for court accompaniment-must be applied for annually - <i>(Restricted Funding with Dependencies)</i>
3256-123 DV Grants received COSC	3,000	Once off towards Domestic Violence Raising Awareness Campaign - <i>(Restricted Funding with Dependencies)</i>
Daughters of Charity	6,000	Funding for support group for victims of Domestic Violence - <i>(Restricted Funding with Dependencies)</i>
FAS Community Employment Scheme	279,309	Return to work training for 17 participants and project supervisor - <i>(Restricted Funding with Dependencies)</i>
Back to Education Initiative	35,617	Education for early school leavers -must be applied for annually - <i>(Restricted Funding with Dependencies)</i>
Vocational Education Horticulture Grant	17,500	Subvention towards running of Horticulture course and maintenance of grounds - reapply annually - <i>(Restricted Funding with Dependencies)</i>
3259-125 WEP Grant - Training & Ed	2,500	Once off towards enterprise training - <i>(Restricted Funding with Dependencies)</i>
Vocational Education Women's Studies Grant	18,301	Subvention towards 3rd level cert in women's studies-must be applied for annually - <i>(Restricted Funding with Dependencies)</i>
	1,131,091	
Generated Income		
Room Rental Main	5,002	Used for Centre running costs
Other Income Main	2,581	Tax refunds, interest etc.,
Family Fun Day + Various collections	5,839	Internal fundraiser, collections, court donations etc., plus targeted fundraising going forward
Child Care Fees - Main Childcare	119,576	Parental Fees - used to support running costs of this services and towards cost of indirect overheads - <i>(Restricted)</i>
Mobile CC Income - CSP	23,281	Event Fees - redirected back to running costs of this service - <i>(Restricted)</i>
Counselling Fees	9,521	Contributions from Clients - redirected back into the provision of this service
Training income	15,790	Course Fees - to contribute to the cost of tutors, materials and OH associated with courses - <i>(Restricted)</i>
	181,589	
Total Income:	1,312,680	

Main beneficiaries:

Women in County Longford.

Problems encountered:

Lack of space

The lack of space in LWL has been a constant source of concern so in 2009 with funding from Longford Community Resources under the Rural Development Programme, LWL carried out a feasibility study on what options for expansion were available. As a result of the study, LWL have decided that building a separate training facility in the garden was the most feasible option. LWL are making a proposal to the RDP in regards to this.

Migrant workers, refugees and asylum seekers.

Like the rest of Ireland, the population make up of Longford has been significantly altered in recent years, with large numbers of migrant workers, refugees and asylum seekers from the new EU states, Eastern Europe, Asia and Africa coming to live in the county. This unprecedented and rapid change has led to a number of different challenges including: Negotiating the complexities of asylum seeking, residency, family reunification laws and processes, and social welfare entitlements.

Challenges for migrant children:

- Difficulties with language, some children may have missed periods of schooling and need extra support to catch up, making friends and socialising in an unfamiliar environment and culture, residual trauma or distress for some refugee and asylum seeking children, separation from other family members and friends.
- Different cultural attitudes towards women and the role of women, particularly in the area of domestic violence.
- Issues of racism, discrimination and cultural misunderstanding
- Exploitation of migrant workers.
- Language difficulties compound the other challenges and increase isolation

Many of the migrant and refugee women from a range of different cultures and backgrounds who have approached LWL, have found settling into a new country, maintaining their cultural identity, finding a job, and becoming familiar with housing, education and health services confusing and stressful, not least through the language barrier. Refugee women may also have to deal with having had to leave family members in another country. Stress,

depression, feelings of hopelessness and helplessness are common among both migrant and refugee women, as are feeling alienated, unsafe and unsure about where to go for services and support. These factors can lead to migrant women being at high risk of social isolation.

Tess Murphy, CEO, LWL.

How was this problem addressed:

Critical Levers

- Enhanced engagement with relevant support agencies to promote and facilitate better understanding of new communities issues and more effective work practices
- Practical supports for women and families from new communities to access their rights and entitlements
- Emotional supports (counselling, peer groups etc)
- Information provision
- Anti-racism and intercultural training and projects to encourage understanding, acceptance and positive attitudes from the local host community
- English language classes for women
- Improved access to interpreters and language-skilled advocates that can act on behalf of women and their families when engaging with local services

Key achievements in 2009 included

- Completion of a feasibility study on improving the facility came up with three options for expanding the space available.
- Development of a referral tracking database across the organisation. This will allow LWL to have greater insight into the journey of service users through the organisation and enable us to track the level of engagement across all services.
- FETAC evaluation process which highlighted the quality of the course provided, and the FETAC recommendation that the commitment of the participants and the quality of the training indicated that we should provide training at level 6 in addition to the level 5 currently provided.
- Nineteen women completed the Diploma in Women's Studies.
- In the area of female entrepreneurship, the Longford Leader supported "Women in Business Recognition Event" was held in November. The aim of event, which was a partnership between LWL, the County Enterprise Board the Longford Leader (LL), was to profile local business women to serve as role models to others in the county.
- Catkins Nursery its reputation for high standards in childcare. Working at capacity, Catkins Nursery continues to deliver a quality service to children in Longford. In

2009, Catkins Nursery secured funding and took actions to enhance quality of provision including in the area of equality and diversity.

- Catkins on the Move has increased its customer base and is becoming more sustainable, hence ensuring greater participation of women in economic, educational and social activities.
- LWL has developed specialist supports for migrant women experiencing domestic violence.
- The Domestic Violence Service has introduced a number of initiatives and groups to raise awareness of domestic violence and provide spaces for women to support each other.

The Manifesto Group has achieved widespread recognition in Longford and elsewhere in Ireland. Election candidates signed up to a petition calling for a recognised structured process of engagement. Since the election, the Manifesto Group was asked to make a presentation to the Local County Council (which subsequently took place in February 2010).

Background information on Longford:

Longford is the second smallest county in Ireland, with a population of 34,391 (CSO, 2006), representing an increase of 11% since 2002. It is a predominantly rural county: 7,622 people live in Longford town, and only one other town in the county has a population in excess of 1,000 (Edgeworthstown). The demographics of the county have changed in recent years, particularly in Longford town with a significant increase in the numbers of individuals and families from new communities, in particular from African and Eastern European countries. A report for the Longford Area Partnership Company concluded that Longford was among the *four most disadvantaged rural partnership areas* in Ireland. The most disadvantaged areas are situated in the North of the county but there are pockets of disadvantage scattered throughout.

Longford town itself is designated as a RAPID (Revitalising Areas by Planning Investment and Development) whole town initiative. This means that it has been identified as one of the most disadvantaged areas in the country by the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs.

Disadvantage in Longford is characterised by a number of factors:

1. Very high ratio of lone parents – in Longford town, 38% of family units with children consist of mothers with children, against a national average of 22% (CSO, 2006)

2. Low levels of educational attainment – 23% of people aged 15 and over having left school with no education or only primary education against 18% nationally (CSO, 2006)
3. High concentration of refugees, asylum seekers and migrant workers – in Longford town 13% of people identify themselves as Polish, Lithuanian and ‘rest of world’ (non EU), against a national average of less than 6% (CSO, 2006)
4. High concentrations of unemployment – 10.1% in the county overall, the 4th highest nationally (CPA, 2005)
5. Higher than average proportion of age dependants - the 4th highest of all the counties in Ireland (CPA, 2005)
6. Relatively high levels of local authority housing – 13% of households, compared to 9% nationally (CSO, 2006)
7. Indicators of relative deprivation one and a half times the national average (CPA, 2005)

Contact person: Tess Murphy, CEO, Longford Women’s link.

This case study could not have been compiled without the generous co-operation and assistance of Tess Murphy, CEO, Longford Women’s Link.