empower
Enabling Change

Connect & Include

Eradicating Digital Poverty in Fingal

A case study on thematic area of Collaboration

SICAP Lot: 4-1

Thematic Focus

As part of the reporting framework for the SICAP programme, local development companies provide an annual case study to showcase specific projects under an agreed Thematic Focus. Empower, in agreement with the Fingal LCDC in 2020, have chosen to highlight a collaborative engagement strategy that supports all target groups experiencing digital inequality which has surfaced due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Connect & Include Digital Inclusion Initiative is an interagency, holistic and person-centered response to address digital poverty and exclusion by bringing multiple stakeholders together from the public and private sector. At Empower, we know that donating a laptop to someone who needs one is often not enough to address the challenges they face. If the recipient does not have the money to purchase basic software, cannot access broadband, or does not have basic digital skills, there is little they can achieve with the laptop by itself. That's why Connect & Include offers tailored, holistic supports to every single family and individual with whom we work. Connect & Include gets to the core of digital poverty by addressing the four elements that led to digital exclusion; hardware, software, connectivity and digital competency. The SICAP guidelines recognise, *"LDCs must develop a collaborative approach in their delivery of SICAP in order to increase the sustainability of their work and grow the potential to mainstream initiatives piloted though SICAP. SICAP focuses on synergies to be achieved between it and other local, regional and national strategies and plans for social inclusion, activation and community development"* (Version 1.1, page 12).

The horizontal themes for SICAP are set out in the diagram below. Connect & Include continues to reach out to SICAP target groups including Roma, Travellers, young people at risk of early school leaving, low-income families, New Communities, people living in a disadvantaged area and the economically inactive. We are witnessing vulnerable and marginalised communities becoming further distant as support services move to an online platform. It is doing this through engaging with DEIS schools, Community Groups, Family Support Agencies, disability services, One Step Closer (Social Enterprise), Transition, TÚS and the Local Employment Service.

Diagram of SICAP horizontal themes

1.Promoting an **equality framework** with a particular focus on gender equality and anti-discrimination practices;
2.Applying **community development approaches** to achieve the participation of disadvantaged and marginalised communities in the wider local development context;
3. Developing **collaborative approaches** with stakeholders to improve how mainstream policies and programmes are delivered so that they can impact more positively on the socially excluded.
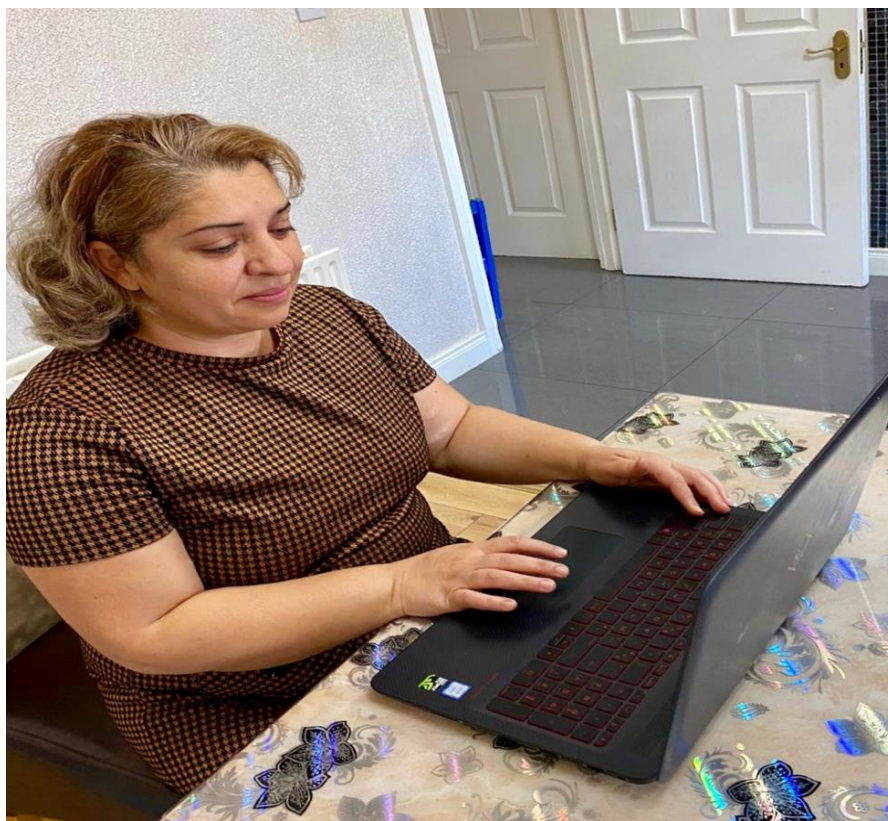
Initial needs and challenges

Strategic Priority No. 7 in our 5-Year Strategic Plan is 'to identify needs, gaps in service provision and SICAP interventions in line with Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures, the national framework for children and young people.[1] This is done to improve opportunities and the quality of life for disadvantaged children and families across Fingal. Through a Leaving Cert Applied initiative, Empower SICAP staff began to support students attending two DEIS schools - Riverdale and Blakestown Community Schools early into the Covid-19 outbreak. It was quickly identified that disadvantaged students were unable to participate in online classes, and were being further disadvantaged due to lack of IT equipment, wifi connectivity and digital capacity. This first-hand need was substantiated by a number of research reports.

A report published by The Irish Youth Foundation highlighted that 47% of young people were worried about falling behind in education and exams and 21% indicated they did not have the resources for remote learning. The danger this problem presented was for a potential for a higher rate of early school leaving among young people in Blakestown and Mulhuddart.

According to separate research published by NUI Maynooth, the digital poverty was leaving many pupils further disadvantaged during the current schools' closure. The survey of close on 3,000 primary schools revealed that a fifth of primary schools did not have arrangements in place to keep in contract with children after March 12th when schools were forced to close. The results of this extensive survey highlighted digital poverty in relation to software, hardware and technological skills, which risk reinforcing social inequalities.

However, it quickly became apparent that digital inequality affected much more target groups than young people, and was much more complex than a lack of IT equipment. It would not be resolved by simply handing out computers.

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[1] Fingal is the youngest county in the State. Several of Ireland's youngest EDs are in Fingal-Ward 27.8, Tyrrelstown 27.8, Mulhuddart 28.7 and Balbriggan Town with an average age of 30.8 is the youngest town in Ireland. The most significant change in the secondary school population (13-18 year olds) in Ireland since 2016 was in Fingal (20.1%). Many of these could potentially become early school leavers in need of SICAP supports from 2018-2022. Inequalities of educational outcomes remain because marginalised groups lack the resources to be able to derive full benefit from the education on offer or because qualification inflation has occurred (CORI, 1999, p.4). Disadvantaged Young People often have a lower school completion rate and come from low-income households.

SICAP Contribution

Riversdale and Blakestown Community Schools are community-based secondary schools located in Dublin 15 that falls inside a RAPID area and have DEIS status granted to it by the Department of Education and Skills. DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) is the national programme aimed at addressing the educational needs of children and young people from disadvantaged communities. A SICAP Community Development Officer had been working closely with the schools to support disadvantaged students over a period of several years on our Post-Secondary Preparation (PSP) programme. Through engagement with the Schools Completion Officer in April, it become clear that the pupils SICAP had been supporting through the PSP programme were either at risk of not progressing into sixth year or completing their Leaving Certificate in June 2020.

SICAP staff also directly contacted individuals from hard-to-reach groups on the SICAP caseload. It became apparent that other vulnerable individuals and families were experiencing digital poverty more than ever as service providers moved online. Empower identified that within participant households, the availability of digital devices was inadequate and some were without a device such as a laptop. However, hardware was not the only issue. Inability to connect and lack of digital literacy, meant vulnerable target groups were further isolated from services such as health, banking, payment of bills, shopping and education. Simultaneously, families and individuals were reportedly experiencing a range of additional challenges, such as unemployment, food poverty, and mental health issues.

Changing the Narrative from Digital Exclusion to Digital Poverty

Despite strong use of technology across a large base of the Irish population, there remains a digital divide: the European Commission's Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI) recorded that, in 2018, 52% of Ireland's population did not have basic digital skills.

In addition, there is still not universal access to broadband in Ireland: the latest figures from the CSO (2019) show that 9% of households have no internet connection. Of the households with no internet access:

- 42% reported *Lack of skills* as a reason for not having household internet access.
- 10% cited *Access costs too high* as the reason.
- *Equipment costs too high* was cited by 9%.
- 7% reported *Broadband internet not available in the area*.

Alongside digital skills and connectivity challenges, access to ICT equipment and software can present a major obstacle. The cost of purchasing a basic laptop with an MS Office subscription is in the region of €350. For many of the families and individuals supported by Empower, this is not attainable.

Much attention has been drawn in recent years – and rightly so – to digital exclusion. However, the narrative around this issue typically focuses on how older people are excluded from online activities, and need training and other supports to get online.

From what we are witnessing on the ground, Empower believes this narrative needs to change – **rather than focusing on age as the principle cause of digital exclusion, we need to focus on digital poverty**.

Digital poverty is complex. It affects people of all ages, and can be the result of one or more of the following factors:

1. Lack of digital skills.
2. Lack of connectivity.
3. Lack of appropriate hardware (ICT equipment).
4. Lack of appropriate software.

Digital poverty is a human rights issue. We are meeting people every day who are being denied their right to education, healthcare, government services and a range of other supports – because they do not have the requisite mix of digital skills, connectivity, hardware and software.

Digital poverty has been compounded by the Covid-19 crisis. Digital poverty is not a new issue. As our economy and society became increasingly digitised in recent decades, many of those experiencing poverty and exclusion were left further and further behind. However, since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, this issue has become absolutely urgent. As educational and social supports have moved online, children and young people from disadvantaged communities, particularly those with special needs, have been excluded.

Phase One

Connect & Include: Offering Tailored, Holistic Supports

Empower's unique strength in relation to tackling digital poverty lies in our **in-depth knowledge of the families and areas where we work**. We have witnessed digital initiatives flounder in the past because the families most in need had no awareness of, or relationship with, the organisation providing devices and/or other supports. We have also seen families and individuals receive once-off supports (e.g. a laptop donation), but to little effect, as no tailored follow-up supports were provided.

Connect & Include offers tailored, holistic supports to every single family and individual with whom we work. Because **local people in Fingal already know and trust us**, and we have strong links and an excellent reputation in the most hard-to-reach communities in the county, we can deliver Connect & Include in a way that ensures every single piece of support provided under the programme is as tailored and impactful as possible. We are not aiming to provide the beneficiaries of this initiative with once-off supports and donations; rather, we are aiming to give them the ongoing resources and support they need to **achieve sustainable change** in their lives.

How Connect & Include Works

Connect & Include accepts referrals from DEIS schools, Home School Community Liaison Officers, community groups, youth groups and family support agencies.

Once a referral form is received, it goes to a screening committee, which assesses the needs of the referred individual/family against set screening criteria. If approved, a key worker is assigned, who then liaises with the referring agency around the individual/family in question, and draws up a bespoke plan tailored to their needs. In some cases, the support provided may be as simple as finding a laptop for them and getting them access to WiFi. In other cases, there may be a need for multiple devices (so a family of four, for example, can access both education and work remotely), as well as training in basic digital skills.

A six-month follow-up check-in takes place through the key worker and referral agency to assess the impact the digital support has had on the individual/family and to capture any further digital needs that need to be addressed. The Connect & Include initiative is fully compliant with all safeguarding and GDPR guidelines.

Support Pathway

For participants, the pathway through Connect & Include involves the following steps:

1. Referral to Empower.
2. Needs analysis.
3. Development of tailored support plan for the individual or family in question.
4. Provision of hardware / software / connectivity required for the individual or family in question.
5. Delivery of digital literacy training, as required.
6. Ongoing contact with Empower to ensure take-up of the digital supports provided, and to assess any additional needs/supports required by the family or individual (e.g. in relation to job-seeking, family supports, mental health supports, etc.).

Pilot Project with Students at Risk of Early School-Leaving

In spring / summer 2020, Empower piloted our Connect & Include initiative with two DEIS schools involved in the School Retention Programme. This Programme supports Leaving Certificate Applied Students to complete their secondary education.

The Home School Community Liaison Officer (HSCLO) in our region identified 14 young people in need of digital support through Connect & Include. Each young person in this group faced multiple barriers to educational progression, including poverty, disabilities and mental health issues, all of which had been exacerbated by the Covid-19 crisis.

Empower furnished each student with a laptop to support them to continue to engage in their education during Covid-19; and provided further supports in a very tailored way, by engaging with each participant's family to identify their needs and address them in a holistic manner.

The HSCLO reported significantly increased levels of educational and social engagement amongst all 14 students involved in this pilot project; higher self-reported rates of commitment to school completion; and increased levels of wellbeing.

Phase Two

Following on from the success of this pilot project, we have expanded Connect & Include by establishing a working group that combines the knowledge of staff across different funding streams to fully utilise our model of integrated-service provision. This working group was led by the SICAP team. The referral process and screening criteria was further developed by the SICAP Clinical Psychologist. This allowed us to identify the full range of supports needed and respond quickly to the needs of vulnerable people. SICAP funding has been contributed to meet the need of SICAP target groups.

In order to fully implement Connect & Include, Empower sought donations of laptops, tablets, dongles and Wi-Fi support through our social media channels and staff maintaining

corporate social responsibility connections with supporting partners. Empower also purchased refurbished hardware though our social enterprise One Step Closer (OSC).

SICAP staff have also been networking with external organisations to source additional supports/benefits and highlight any new requirements and or needs identified. This included supporting SICAP target Community Groups, Networks and Social Enterprises under Goal 1 to identify and apply for Connect & Include packages for their members.

Empower delivered a second pilot programme for SICAP clients through the Connect & Include initiative called "Best Foot Forward". This online programme provided two groups with online industry certification in the Healthcare sector, the digital training in employment supports, that included online Jobseekers training, interview techniques, mock interview supports collaborating other agencies to support people with the changing job market platform and help them prepare for employment opportunities.

In addition, Empower's SICAP Diversity & Inclusion Coordinator again engaged extensively with the private sector through the Chambers of Commerce, IBEC, Business in the Community, the CSR Hub and Open Doors in order to leverage support for the Connect & Include Initiative. Some corporate partners who have supported us so far include: Norton Lifelock by providing a package of support to Connect & Include which addresses all four of the elements of digital poverty through donations of refurbished laptop devices, internet safety software products, a grant of €1,500 from the Blackbaud Giving fund, an employee giving campaign and volunteer Internet Safety trainers who are helping us establish an Internet Safety Education Programme for vulnerable families and their support workers.

IBM has assisted Empower to develop the support we can offer around digital competency by gifting us a licence for their Skills Build Reignite education platform. IBM volunteers are working with Empower in order to tailor this platform and online content to the needs of our target groups. LinkedIn have also supported Connect & Include by getting behind Employee Giving. The campaign has raised awareness of the complexity of digital poverty among its staff and has so far raised €3,425. This amount is expected to rise in the coming months and

years. The Neighbourly COVID-19 Community Response fund supported us with a micro grant to support the purchasing of hardware and software.

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Connect & Include Digital Inclusion Initiative is one of Empower's responses to the COVID-19 Crisis as many vulnerable individuals and families are experiencing social exclusion during this time.

As services and social supports have moved online, this has caused a Digital Divide for individuals and families from disadvantaged backgrounds, particularly those with special needs.

Our Connect & Include programme is seeking support from the business community to try and bridge the digital divide.

We are looking for donations of:

> Laptops (new or refurbished)
> Tablets or mobile devices
> Dongles (for wifi capability)
> Wifi support for a number of months

Empower will work with:

> Local Community Groups
> Family Support Agencies
> Disability Support Services
> Primary and Secondary schools

to ensure your generous donations reach those most in need.

This will assist individuals in need to connect to public services, local communities, family members and friends who can help.

Please help us reach our goal of connecting and including 100 individuals/families in our community by donating devices or contributing to our fundraising campaign:

The Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP) 2018-2022 is funded by the Irish Government through the Department of Rural and Community Development and co-funded by the European Social Fund under the Programme for Employability, Inclusion and Learning (PEIL) 2014-2020.

To find out how you can help - contact Paula Murray
087 138 6893   pmurray@empower.ie

SICAP Outputs and Outcomes

Goal 1

- SICAP Community Groups, Networks and Social Enterprises were supported in applying for various funding streams to purchase packages for their members

- Empower had a key role to play in increasing collaboration and co-operation between relevant stakeholders to address social exclusion and inequality.[2]

- Empower has provided extensive social enterprise supports to One Step Closer.[3] This has helped sustain the financial viability of this training operator during Covid-19 that is located in a disadvantaged area.[4] One Step Closer CSP community-training model was forced adapted its model to respond to the current pandemic. All programmes and training supports moved online and offer a range of employment focused training.

Goal 2

- In April, Empower engaged with 14 young people living in disadvantaged areas in conjunction with the Schools Completion Officer of DEIS schools. [5] This built on good working relations developed in previous years via the Blakestown and Riversdale LCA Initiative.[6] Eight young people who received Connect & Include supports from a SICAP staff member completed their Leaving Certificate in June 2020. The remaining six students are now in Sixth Year and will complete their Leaving Certificate in June 2021.[7]

- Empower selectively re-contacted specific target groups of SICAP such as people with disabilities, people living in disadvantaged areas and New Communities to identify if

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[2] G1 - 4:2 Collaboration and co-operation between relevant stakeholders in addressing social exclusion and inequality is increased.

[3] G1 - 5:1 Contribute to a social enterprise sector locally and support social enterprises contribute to achieving SICAP outcomes.

[4] G1-5.2.2 Social enterprises still in operation after 12 months

[5] The children who are at risk of early school leaving have been supported over several months on a group basis. They receive interventions such as CV mock preparation, and attend courses such as Safepass and Manual Handing.

[6] G2 -7:1 Gaps in labour market and education provision are identified and addressed through joint planning and service delivery.

[7] G2 - 3:3 Young people at risk of early school leaving remain within the education system.

they were experiencing digital poverty and to offer them education and training opportunities.[8]

- It is anticipated that more individuals supported through Connect & Include will achieve a higher level of qualification.[9]

- Empower has had a critical role to identify and address gaps in labour market and education provision through joint planning and service delivery.[10]

- It is also expected that individuals who complete online training in conjunction with One Step Closer that receive labour market supports will progress into supported employment programmes such as TUS and Community Employment or progress into open employment.[11]

- Empower has engaged extensively which the private sector through the Chambers of Commerce, IBEC, Business in the Community, the CSR Hub and Open Doors in order to leverage support for the Initiative. In doing so, it is helping promote a more inclusive approach to recruitment by local employers.[12]

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[8] G2 - 2:1-SICAP clients receive information about opportunities for lifelong learning.
[9] G2 - 2:3 SICAP clients achieve higher levels of qualifications as a result of participating in lifelong learning.
[10] G2 - 7:1 Gaps in labour market and education provision are identified and addressed through joint planning and service delivery.
[11] G2 - 4:1 SICAP clients are better prepared to enter the labour market.
[12] G2 - 4:3 Local employers are supported to have a more inclusive approach to recruitment.

Conclusions

Digital poverty and inequality is an issue that will continue to affect SICAP target groups for the foreseeable future. Raising awareness of this is crucial from a social policy perspective, as the impacts of Covid-19 are likely to be long lasting. Barriers in relation to computer hardware, software, digital competency and reliable broadband connectivity for the caseload of people we support is something that needs addressing at a national level. It is an equality issue. It impacts on the most vulnerable, and is as much a barrier to access of services as the named barriers of the SICAP programme.

Although Connect & Include initially supported teenagers at risk of early school leaving, the initiative quickly developed to support the identified need of all SICAP target groups. The Home School Liaison Officer reported increased levels of educational and social engagement of all five students on the initial pilot and higher self-reported rates of commitment to school and leaving cert completion as well as increased levels of wellbeing.

Connect & Include is supporting other SICAP target groups by enhancing their social and digital inclusion. This requires a bespoke response recognising that each individual and their set of circumstances is unique.

Empower's Connect & Include working group is responding with a multi-agency solution across Fingal. Staff have been networking with external organisations and focusing on a range of aspects to source additional supports/benefits and highlight any new requirements and or identified needs.   We have allocated a specific keyworker from within Empower to every person registered for Connect & Include. We are also engaging with the person after carrying out the initial process ensuring any follow-up work is completed and provide device set up, information and support meeting.

Empower will continue to seek match funding through a fundraising, CSR and philanthropic campaign. This will enable us furnish students with digital devices in order to support them to continue to engage in their education and other target groups of SICAP who will attend employment based training delivered by One Step Closer: https://www.justgiving.com/campaign/connectandinclude

Empower will continue to collaborate with Community Groups, Family Support Agencies, disability services and DEIS schools to identify those most in need of digital connection and support.