



**LDC Name:** West Limerick Resources CLG

**Lot Number:** 21-1

**Title of Case Study:** Social Fabric - Covid19 West Limerick Mask Making Initiative

**Thematic Area:** The *Covid19 West Limerick Fabric Mask Making Initiative*, highlights the primary theme of **Collaboration**. While this initiative is found in Goal 1 under action 5 **Community Networks and Strategic Collaborations**, it begins in Goal 2, due to a SICAP client involvement and connection and the supports received under our action 8 **Lifelong Learning Pathways** and action 9 **Rural Employment Service**.

**Target Group:** The Unemployed

People living in Disadvantaged Communities



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## **Introduction:**

The SICAP programme of West Limerick Resources has worked and supported many of our communities and individuals through various challenges and setbacks over the years. However, no challenge has been greater for all of us than Covid19.

The word resilience was heard quite a lot since Spring 2020, in conversation, on TV and radio. One definition tells us that it 'is an ability to recover from or adjust easily to misfortune or change'. Since March 2020 in good West Limerick style, communities have rallied to create volunteer led Community Response Teams to help those who need a helping hand, those who are isolated and those who are at most risk. This happened without prompting, just the innate human response to want to help. It is this shared desire to help that is the glue that keeps communities and even society together.

The responses came in many ways; food collections, deliveries, filling prescriptions, delivering fuel even keeping conversation at the gates, while adhering to social distancing. The importance of keeping people connected and supported through these trying times remained key and it is this resilience and our ability to adjust to challenges that carried us on.

Then when you think you have heard the best of it, you find out that in homes across West Limerick and beyond there were people using their skills and talent to make face masks. The initiative came about when likeminded and creative people decided to use their talents to help tackle a global issue of a shortage of PPE for frontline workers that was unfolding and began to address it at a local and community level. There was a huge demand for and lack of supply of face masks in the early days of the pandemic so rather than sit and wonder what could be done, they faced down the challenge.

The seeds of our case study begin in Goal 2 but its growth and impact are felt also in Goal 1, in our action on Community Networks & Strategic Collaborations. This action focuses on increased sharing of resources, information and best practice underpinning collaborative actions and developing a more inclusive and strengthened Community. So at a glance:

- 10,000 Buttons
- 5,000 Ear Savers
- 4,500 Masks
- 2,000 Laundry Bags
- 1,500 Metres of Elastic
- 500 Metres of Fabric
- 110 Volunteers
- 61 Deliveries
- 23 Community & Voluntary Groups
- 16 Nursing Homes, Hospitals & Residential Facilities
- 5 months
- 1 Woman's perseverance & SICAP

To really tell this story we need to go back and start with that one individual's story which is intrinsically linked to it and that of SICAP.

### **Liz's Story**

Liz Kavanagh's engagement with West Limerick Resources was in April 2017 when she received support through the first Social Inclusion & Community Activation Programme (SICAP) 2015- 2017. Unemployed and having been through a dramatic personal experience she was beginning to put her life back together and needed a little support and advice and to rebuild her confidence. A seamstress for much of her early working life Liz was drawn to an in-house designed sewing course being offered and advertised by SICAP and has in her own words 'never looked back' since she took the step and responded to the SICAP advert in the local newspaper. The SICAP Education & Training Co-Ordinator was the facilitator for the sewing course but also worked on a 1:1 basis with Liz to establish her Personal Action Plan (PAP), setting short-term and long term goals with her under our Lifelong Learning action of Goal 2. This provided Liz with not just information but the supports to enable her to participate in the group and the lifelong learning opportunities.

A great connection was made and Liz always knew that she could come back to seek support or advice at any time. On reflection Liz says that SICAP gave '*opportunities to better yourself, there was always something coming up, imaginative and creative classes being offered*'.

Liz describes how the support and positive affirmation from staff, has always stayed with her, '*one of the things that always stayed with me from that sewing course was being told, there's nothing stopping you from being a sewing tutor*'. This was agreed as a long-term goal to which Liz would work towards. She also received employment-based supports under the SICAP action - Rural Employment Service goal 2, to have her better prepared for possible jobs.

In the interim, Liz went onto secure some work in the hospitality area in an effort to support herself and to rebuild the confidence she felt she had lost, but would need if she wanted to achieve her goals. Liz remained in touch with the SICAP Education & Training Co-ordinator for advice and support if and when she needed it. In August 2019, a very confident Liz returned to her meet the SICAP Education & Training Co-ordinator to discuss the goals she had set out previously and to plot her progress against the agreed PAP and revisit the idea of training as a tutor for sewing and craft. Together they identified a progression route through the LCETB in Raheen which was offering the QQI Level 6 Training Delivery & Evaluation module which Liz successfully completed in November 2019. With this now under her belt, work was done on her C.V to update it to reflect the new skills and training and to focus her in her personal action plan and job search.

It was early February 2020 that Liz was given the opportunity to put her training into action when she was successful in securing a part time tutoring roll in a local secondary school to teach sewing evening classes for adults. The opportunity of this job offer alone, boosted Liz, but she felt as the role was for a self-employed person, she would return to SICAP for support and advice, as that would be a whole new departure for her. An appointment to meet the SICAP

Enterprise Officer was scheduled so Liz would be supported to understand and examine her options and to understand fully the demands of being self-employed. It was shortly after this that Covid19 hit, so the opportunity to progress on this path and work as a tutor was shelved while the country went into lockdown.

In mid-March 2020, Liz contacted the SICAP Education & Training Co-ordinator to discuss a voluntary piece of work that she had undertaken. She felt that by bringing this to West Limerick Resources and to the SICAP programme and to the staff there, she would be best advised as to how to progress it. She knew she would find answers and support. When asked what started it all Liz explains *'I first saw a post on Facebook from the voluntary group called 'Knitting for Premature Babies' which was asking people if they could volunteer to sew masks. My intention at the time was to sew some masks and send them to the group for them to give out to those who needed them, mainly Frontline workers'*.

However, it wasn't long before Liz realised that the demand for the masks was huge and through her own Facebook page she asked if anyone else would volunteer to make the fabric masks. According to Liz, *'I just asked, and people were willing to help'*. In those initial first days there were five women sewing masks in Newcastle West with Liz, four of whom had sewing businesses that had closed due to lockdown. They all gave of their time and whatever materials they had to support the mask making. They were people of all ages, backgrounds, and socioeconomic profiles; unemployed, working, retired and economically inactive; people who just wanted to help.



### **SICAP - Response and Role**

Liz and the SICAP Education & Training Co-ordinator discussed the project idea together & broke the project into two pieces of manageable work, one to be co-ordinated by Liz who by now was growing in her new confidence and clearly saw this as her opportunity to test her skills. Liz while she would put her sewing skills to use would also continue to recruit and co-ordinate the volunteers; her focus would be to manage the supply and demand of materials to them, providing the relevant patterns and templates she was using while acting as the contact and conduit for the project. She would liaise with SICAP and discuss any potential needs or supports required that were raised among the volunteers.

The other aspect was co-ordinated by the SICAP Education & Training Co-ordinator and would draw on WLR's SICAP experience in collaboration and leveraging resources from partners and agencies if needed. Together they discussed and planned out what was needed down to the Disclaimer that went with all packs of fabric masks for the users to be aware of; in the wearing of and washing and maintenance. Every aspect had been thought through and accounted for.



## Challenges

SICAP's role was to help with the promotion of the initiative, calling for volunteers, fabric and resources all to be done safely. The physical collection and distribution of materials and resources in the face of a pandemic and the country being in lockdown was a potential challenge but it didn't deter anyone. A SICAP team meeting over Zoom, soon put the structure around it and the SICAP Community Development Officer became involved and began to draw support from SICAP supported Local Community Groups (LCGs) particularly those with a craft based purpose including Crafty Corner in Newcastle West, Athea Art Group and with support from the Abbeyfeale Family & Community Development worker, the Abbeyfeale Craft Group were also drafted in.

The older members of these groups who were cocooning, (a challenge in itself) during these difficult days were only too delighted to volunteer and support such a worthy initiative. This activity contributed to their own personal development and wellbeing, a prominent theme in SICAP. Participation gave them a chance to focus on something else and for many provided a distraction to the situation unfolding. When asked about her involvement, Mary a member of the Crafty Corner told us '*It gave me a chance to keep my grey matter busy, it made me feel that I was useful, that our little group was useful, as we come to terms with this covid19*'. *To think we could do our bit from the safety of our homes, we were all happy to help*'. On a broader sense the initiative enabled them to overcome their sense of isolation and loss of connection. These were active members of groups that met on a weekly basis in SICAP hubs and community venues, so this was an opportunity to keep the connection alive and combat the increased risk of doubled social isolation.

## Collaboration

The SICAP Community Development Officer was the natural contact for LCGs, Social Enterprises, Community Services Programmes and recently formed Community Response

Teams who were trying to source PPE such as masks, hand sanitizers, gloves to enable them to continue to support Covid19 responses and services in their community. Supporting them with mask provision enabled us to bring them with us as needed within the project and to raise awareness of the breadth of the SICAP project.



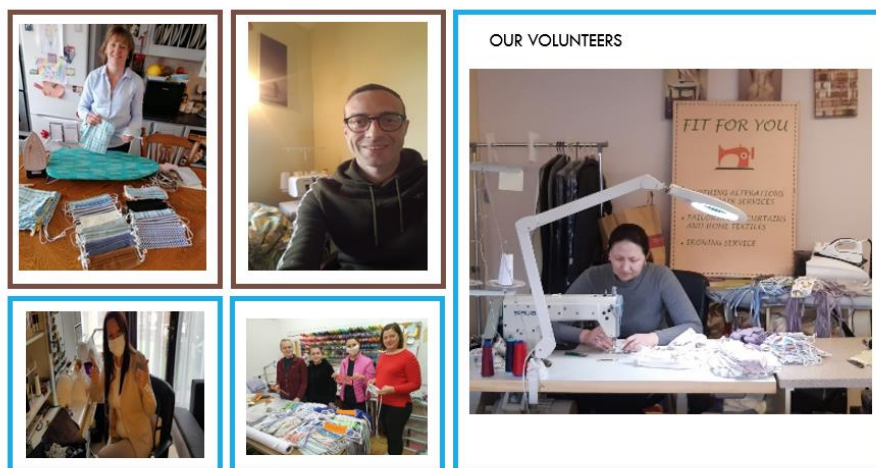
## SICAP – PROMOTIONAL MATERIAL

It was the collaboration with Local Link Limerick Clare (LLLC), and their drivers that gave SICAP and the volunteers the much needed impetus and support to achieve the outcomes. The SICAP Co-Ordinator sits on the BOM of LLLC, but we have collaborated on many projects, both sharing the aims and objectives of fostering strong community development and social inclusion in West Limerick over the years.

A schedule for fabric collection from across West Limerick was put in place with the Local Link Manager and drivers for a 2-week period; whereby the bus would park near prominent Community facilities in the key towns for an hour with the doors open and bags of fabrics could be dropped into it, while safely adhering to social distancing. A second schedule for distribution of the masks was also agreed, whereby materials were left at the gates of many of the homes of the volunteers for collection, so everybody could continue to work safely.

Nobody could have ever anticipated the shortage of elastic that took hold, locally and nationally! Rather than it becoming a challenge, SICAP funding was used by the SICAP Education & Training Co-ordinator to source supplies online. The Desmond League became aware of the initiative, they put out a call to the clubs under their League receiving a very positive result collecting €1,750 to purchase new fabric and resources to keep the initiative resourced. The recognition that mask wearing for everyone during this pandemic became more important and compulsory in some situations made this work seem all more important now. Everyone was pulling together, the collaboration grew in support an SICAP was the fulcrum.





Within 3 weeks over 50 volunteers and growing from across West Limerick had been connected to the initiative, sewing masks, laundry bags, ear savers and head bands for community groups, community volunteers, carers and frontline workers, based in West Limerick and beyond. They were organised under Liz's stewardship and though apart, they were quietly working away in homes across the community as a unit. These volunteers were everyday people doing extraordinary things. SICAP sewing machines from our community inventory resources were loaned out for use to volunteers, to aid the progress and increase outputs.



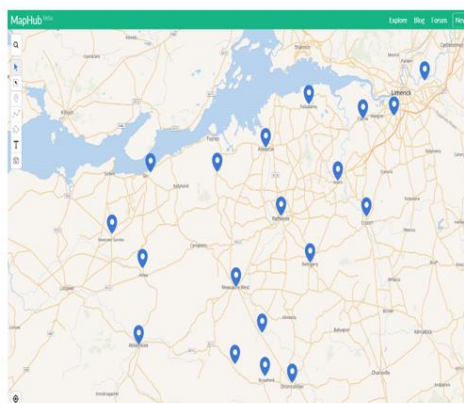
In response to the ongoing SICAP promotional pieces on Facebook, websites, and radio interviews given by the SICAP team, a number of local businesses also struggling with the pandemic stepped forward and gave of their time and resources including sewing machines and washing machines to help bring a quality product to realisation. Masks were packed, having been sanitised by The Washboard Laundrette into bags of 20 including the Disclaimer for each user. Each pack of 20 masks were bagged in a new zip lock bag, all done by the business completely free of charge.



THE WASH BOARD LAUNDERETTE OWNER NEILY HOGAN WITH STAFF COLLECTING FABRIC FOR CLEANING AND PREPARING MASKS FOR DISTRIBUTION

## Outputs

The initiative was developing and gathering momentum crossing over individuals, community, social enterprise and business. SICAP's role from March 22<sup>nd</sup> because of Liz's participation on SICAP enabled us to support and oversee the distribution of over 4,500 masks, 2,000 laundry bags, 5,000 ear savers to 16 Nursing Homes, Hospitals and residential facilities and a number of family carers in the West Limerick Community. A total of 23 community & voluntary groups, comprised of community response teams, social enterprises including the Local Link Limerick Clare drivers and staff of valuable community supports such as Meals on Wheels (MOW) operating under Community Services Programmes (CSP), Community Employment Schemes (CE) were all beneficiaries from across West Limerick and in some instances beyond.



GEOGRAPHICAL SPREAD OF MASK DELIVERY

## Outcomes for Beneficiaries

One of the local beneficiaries of the fabric mask initiative was the Desmond Ability Resource Complex, based in Newcastle West. It provides facilities and services to a wide range of people in the West Limerick area. The Complex offers day care facilities, a resource centre and an integrated childcare facility for both pre-school and after-school groups of children and their work is underpinned by a Community Services Programme (CSP). When the Covid19 pandemic started and lockdown began in mid-March the Complex in adherence to Government guidelines closed their doors to their senior citizens and vulnerable service users.



As is demonstrated in this piece already they too were not found wanting and made necessary changes to continue to provide a service to their clients. They moved from providing dinner in the Complex and began to operate a ‘Meals on Wheels’ type service they call Dinner Delivery Service! SICAP already had an existing relationship with Desmond Complex, supporting them with their CSP and so they were contacted by the SICAP team to ascertain their needs. PPE was in demand, so to ensure that they could continue to safely provide their service they were early recipients of the masks. According to the Complex Manager, Aileen Harnett *‘the quick response to a need that wasn’t foreseen by people in authority was amazing, the solution was found within our community.’*



DESMOND ABILITY RESOURCE COMPLEX  
—DINNER DELIVERY SERVICE

Aileen goes on to praise the volunteers saying, *‘hats off to the group, giving of their own time and experience’*. When asked how important the fabric masks were to the Desmond Complex at the time Aileen strongly reports that *‘we are still wearing them. They were so useful and having them available to us locally based without having to look for them allowed us to work on the immediate need at the time and concentrate on our services to the elderly and vulnerable adults’*. Over 30 dinners were leaving the complex each day, and this has continued to increase with demand. The collaboration with SICAP flagged a secondary need arising at the complex, whereby the individual volunteers were trying to deliver the dinners across a wide geography. A call to Local Link Limerick Clare brokered support; with the provision of drivers and buses to deliver out the meals on a daily basis. Wider synergies have developed from discussions and sharing of resources, to the greater benefit of the West Limerick area.

### Outcomes for Liz

Liz continued to oversee the initiative and worked tirelessly until the work came to a natural conclusion at the end of July 2020. By then PPE was available on the market and the need began to decline. With all loose ends tied up, Liz and the volunteers returned to their own lives, but remain in contact having shared a common purpose and focus.

For Liz she has truly tested her ability and skills; she has built a new evidence-based portfolio for her plans to work as a Sewing Tutor. She has clearly increased her skills and self-confidence and merged this with the accreditation achieved in 2019 by stepping up in a time of crisis and taking on responsibility for project co-ordination. She has seen and experienced first-hand what

Community Development means and she has reached her goal that was set out in her PAP. She is ready now to take this to the next level for paid employment and has earned it.

Liz had secured a new part time role in the hospitality sector locally. She has also worked with the SICAP Enterprise Officer to begin establishing herself as a self-employed tutor and will attend the Start Your Own Business and Booking Courses with SICAP during October 2020. Liz will tutor a Beginners Sewing course for West Limerick Resources under SICAP in late autumn for 6 weeks. This will afford Liz the experience she needs to further her career as a tutor and achieve her goals.

## Learning for SICAP

This year has tested everyone's mettle, even SICAPs. What has been evident is that our programme has this inherent ability to take on challenges and problems and find solutions, drawing on the good will of the people we work with, the community groups we support and the broader community. There is a very good sense of SICAP growing across West Limerick and more so now because of the flexibility of the programme to respond to community needs. Nobody could have written up a project initiative like this as part of an Annual Plan, yet we have designed and delivered this initiative meeting programme outcomes on a number of levels. We were able to share the template of this initiative with another neighbouring PI who were considering a similar piece of work, thus highlighting the good practice but also the challenges that we faced and overcame.

One woman's strength to say 'yes' and its ripple effect on the lives of many is incredible; those who volunteered, those who were cocooning but were given a focus and purpose to remain positive, the impact for those who got the masks and were able to go about their work providing their services, the bus drivers, those cooking dinners, the carers, nurses, undertakers, even the SICAP staff were given masks as they continued to deliver on SICAP actions. What is striking from this particular piece of work is the increased and strengthened sense of community that has developed in and across West Limerick, and from this we are encouraged and heartened. **#apartbutnotalone.**

