LDC NAME: West Limerick Resources CLG

LOT NUMBER: Limerick West (21-1)

TITLE OF CASE STUDY: Goal 1

Comeback Creatives: Stitching Together Enterprise and Empowerment

THEMATIC AREA: Climate Action & the Just Transition

TARGET GROUP: Travellers

The Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP) is co-funded by the Government of Ireland, through the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht, and the European Union

Background

As a team we have been involved in delivering several environmental focussed initiatives across West Limerick under our SICAP programme. Building on this and on the call from Pobal in relation to potential new Community Service Programmes (CSP) in 2022, that had a focus on Circular Economy and Travellers, we decided to relook at the potential opportunities we had. Despite our unsuccessful CSP application, Pobal were interested in our concept and together with several other unsuccessful applicants, offered facilitated workshops with mentor support on how we might develop our ideas further in 2024 and 2025. Needless to say, we took the opportunity, stitching together Enterprise and Empowerment.

'This is not a SICAP success story ……..yet! And that's why it's an important story to tell'

~ Brenda Heath, Enterprise Officer West Limerick Resources ~

While some would have taken the unsuccessful application as a possible end, the SICAP team looked at what potential was there and reframed the work. We had built connections, engagements with community, carried out a previous feasibility study under Leader in relation to precious plastics, to look at creating a Social Enterprise (SE) that would marry purpose and profit. Some elements would need to change; the introduction of Ireland's Deposit Return Scheme (Return) in 2024, reduced access to the plastics needed, and the SICAP staff member who had been directly involved in the community engagement left the post. The team carried out a SWOT analysis and from this, we agreed that the core elements were valid and that we would take all learning to that point and pare back to a smaller initiative.

We facilitated dialogue with collaborative colleagues in the Abbeyfeale Family & Community Network including Foróige, Home School Community Liaison (HSCL), as we would have some overlap on a client base. We invited Traveller women to meet with us in St. Ita's Community Hall where we have our SICAP Abbeyfeale Hub for brainstorming workshops with the Pobal supported mentor on what might interest them and offer them an opportunity for meaningful occupation. Social Enterprise was discussed and what it meant and what potential lay within. With plastics out of the equation, old wool, yarn and old fabric would be centre stage. And so, Comeback Creatives was born late in 2025, and is being nurtured in 2026, in the hope of opening up opportunities for the Traveller community in Abbeyfeale. Our idea a Social Enterprise producing local handmade craft using recycled fabric and yarn – '*Handmade with Heart, Upcycled with Vision*'

Response:

With a renewed focus and energy, we have revised some of the original ideas from the CSP application, but we have kept two main aspects; this work will focus on 1) Traveller Engagement and 2) Circular Economy linking to Climate and Social Enterprise. Travellers are one of our three Local Priority Target Groups (LPTG) in our Annual Plan as selected by our LCDC and our response is to build on the connections we have with our Traveller community in Abbeyfeale and create opportunities for engagement. West Limerick does not have any Traveller Representative group or body, the groups that do exist are small, and in some cases could be better described as a collection of Individuals who come together for a particular activity. WLR through SICAP has a good record of Traveller engagement at an individual level, this initiative will be a new departure and opportunity to bring the engagement a step further.

In April 2026, SICAP recruited a Traveller Development worker, to strengthen engagements with Travellers across the SICAP programme as one of our LPTG groups. Part of the work also includes supporting the Enterprise Officer

and this initiative. The new worker has reaffirmed that the provision of the safe space, where the Traveller women are welcomed and respected is so important. This reflects and reaffirms the horizontal principles in the programme and how we do our work. Meeting people where they are at, listening and understanding and supporting access to resources, opportunities and have an equal voice at the table.

'What we learned is that engagement works best when people are respected, listened to and involved from the beginning'

~ Savannagh Harty, SICAP Traveller Development Officer ~

The new worker is building engagement with Traveller populations also in Askeaton, Rathkeale and Newcastle West on a 1:1 basis, currently working with 11 Individuals, all new to the programme. IRIS data at this juncture shows that currently 9% of the caseload is reporting as Traveller, which is very positive and in line with the LPTG programme % requirement.

Individual Caseload (KPI 2) by Target Group

Limerick West Rural (21-1)/2026	CAB/Lot caseload (KPI 2): *296*	
Target group	**Number**	**Percentage**
Travellers	28	9%

Inclusion Focus

There are a number of layers in the work. SICAP staff work with individuals on a 1:1 level, with most of the Traveller women accessing SICAP supports under our Goal 2 Family Support. Supports include addressing food poverty, fuel poverty, support to deal with issues of school refusal, anxiety among their children and overall concerns on mental health. Now we are working to achieve cohesion and connection among the individuals, among a target group that is seen to be the most marginalised and furthest from employment.

We cannot emphasise the importance of having a safe space for engagements and conversations, and the measured approach we take in our engagement work. For many of the Traveller women we work with, participation in an activity is possibly the furthest from their minds as they navigate the issues that they discuss with staff. By creating a safe space, we are working to build capacity and offer other supports, resilience, positive mental health but also progression pathways to lifelong learning and or employment.

Comeback Creatives initiative under Goal 1 Social Enterprise action of our Annal Plan stitches the following supports in:

1. Confidence & Self Efficacy
2. Communication Skills
3. Connection with Others
4. General Work Readiness

We are acutely aware of the impact of creativity, and community-based opportunities on key health determinants, supporting social inclusion, participation and supporting people to be more connected to their community. For the Traveller women supported in this story, these are the first steps we are taking together. There is a process and product here; intertwined and both needing intensive support, which SICAP is providing. The flexibility of the programme enables us to develop and tailor responses as needed.

Developments & Events:



Towards the end of 2025, the Comeback Creatives began to work on ideas and designs, and with the festive season around the corner, a number of pieces were decided upon by the members. A facilitator funded through the programme was subcontracted in to work with the participants and support SICAP staff who remain hands on. Work on this initiative also created a link to the local Abbeyfeale Mens Shed; the Shed members designed and cut wooden stars and trees for decoration by the Traveller Women using old fabrics. This would be a new departure for both parties; the Shed commissioned to create pieces and for the Traveller Women, an awareness of this valuable community group and their skills. It led to a collaboration never seen before, with both groups engaged in really meaningful complementary work.



Christmas Markets were scheduled into the work plan, with some of the Traveller women attending and manning the stall in a more local market. They were able to talk to talk to customers about the inception of the initiative and the products. SICAP staff were needed to facilitate the markets outside the immediate geography of Abbeyfeale, when the women clearly were not comfortable to do. The products were well received by the community with strong sales, and practically all the items being purchased.

Participant learning:

Discussions on upcycling and waste are key to the workshops and sessions, with an increased awareness on diverting waste from landfill to create new products. Participants are taking on board the information, learning, changing attitudes and behaviours and beginning to see the benefits.

Before that I would see old material and old things, I definitely would throw it away. But now learning how to make something out of nothing.

~ Katrina Coffey, participant Comeback Creatives~

Hand stitching and sewing are skills attributed to many of the Traveller women, so the idea is to encourage those with existing skills to demonstrate through peer led training where possible and to widen the crafting skills. SICAP also has a suite of sewing machines for community use. Training will also be provided on these too, as the skills inventory builds.

'Well, hopefully we're going to get to learn how to use a sewing machine. That would be a great achievement, because I can sew a bit, but the sewing machine would be lovely for me to show my girl, because she older now and she does her own little few bits, so I would like to see that now next'

~ Helen O'Brien, participant Comeback Creatives ~



Holy Communion was identified as a key celebration on the calendar and with renewed energy in early QTR2, the group began to design and make items suitable as souvenirs for the celebration of the sacrament. Again, the ideas come from the group, and we can pivot to areas of interest as identified and agreed by them. See the sample of the pieces that were created from fabric remnants, left over Christmas stars made by the Abbeyfeale Shed, reconfigured for an alternative use. SICAP purchased small embellishments for the finished products, but as the emphasis is on upcycled, and the SICAP team continue to receive and use donations of wool, yarn and fabric, so the spend has been low.

Challenges:

Weekly workshops were scheduled however attendance was sporadic among the 7 Traveller women, due to personal circumstances, which impacted on everyone. Personal and family issues would understandably take priority, but the wider Traveller Family aspect played a part. Abbeyfeale would be home to older more established settled families and there is a greater sense of connection among them, compared to our experiences of families in other towns. So, if one family is impacted, they are all impacted. Re-engagement in the New Year after the hiatus of Christmas meant that staff were once again looking to reconnect and bring the group back together.

Staff were once again out knocking on doors to promote the initiative, collaborating also with our own colleagues on the Primary Health Care Project for Travellers (PHCP). With kids back at school, a workshop was scheduled with the arts facilitator for the making St. Brigid's crosses to encourage the participants back out. We are working with women who come with limited civic engagement, little or no work history, and many perceived barriers to employment so building them up is a slow process at an individual level and as a collective under the mantle of a Social Enterprise.

Lessons Learned

SICAP staff learned a lot from the initiative; scaling back our expectations in line with the capacity being demonstrated by individuals was a key piece of learning. The role of Traveller women in the home tells us that they are, more often than not the one who does the majority of caring and minding of children and elders in the community. Awareness of the sense of pride that the Traveller women have on their homes and that they hold Monday as their cleaning day, was quickly seen as something to change. An alternative day was needed if we were to see attendance improve and the initiative succeed. SICAP staff listened to the women and took on board the feedback from them, recognising that this can only develop with their input. There remains among the women a sense of 'not putting their heads too far over the parapet', lest it would cause upset in the Travelling community. We still have a way to go in relation to the empowerment and ownership by the women of this initiative and the long-term objectives. While they enjoy the new skills, the space to meet and talk and access a support or information, it's nowhere near being a standalone Social Enterprise. Yet.

Next Steps:

As a team we are committed to this nascent initiative. It is just about 1 year in, and while it may seem to be fragmented and slow, we understand that this is the pace at which we must move. We are seeing very positive Traveller engagement with the initiative, new opportunities for learning and the connection building between the Comeback Creatives and community. Seeing the opportunities between the initiative and the local Shed; between the initiative and a local shop who displayed the sale items in their window; between the women and those who purchased the goods, as they told the backstory. We recognise that they are becoming more visible; occupying a new space which they feel slightly unsettled in. We will be guided and will move with them, giving them the support they need as individuals and as the Comeback Creatives in our West Limerick community. We are all back at the crafting table, as we plan and prepare for the festive season once more, with new ideas and designs and renewed optimism for the year ahead.