SICAP Case Study

Title of Case Study: The design, promotion and implementation of online training programmes for SICAP Goal 2 Clients

- **LDC: Westmeath Community Development**

  Lot: Westmeath County (13-1)

  •   **Thematic Area Engagement Strategies with SICAP Target Groups/Communities"
  (Goal 2 Project)**

  •   **Target Group – The Unemployed**,

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

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1. Introduction

Faced with a global pandemic that drastically altered everyday life with the instatement of the first Irish lockdown in March 2020, the many months that followed called everyone to adapt to a new way of operating, which for many people meant a world of screens, where virtual interaction reigned supreme and platforms like Zoom or Microsoft Teams became a normal part of every organisation's communication strategy.

Coronavirus had a profound impact not just on our daily lives but on global industries. One of the most affected sectors of society was the field of training and education. This was significant for us at Westmeath Community Development as our Employability Unit found itself quickly thrown into a new era where things operated differently.

As school and university staff were forced to adapt to changing circumstances, moving classes online and making amendments to examinations, so too did we at WCD have to change as we found ourselves tasked with exploring new methods of training and development of which we had not util1ised before. Soon too we met with new and unprecedented barriers which we had not had to grapple with previously.

Education is one of the strongest sources of empowerment there is. As Franklin famously said, "An investment in knowledge pays the best interest." At WCD we support this philosophy and have indeed seen firsthand the life-changing effects learning opportunities can have on the individual's development and opportunities. There is always a huge amount of potential in the world which remains untapped and unanswered due to countless different barriers, from gender, background, economics, discrimination, et cetera.

The changes the pandemic brought onto society threatened to serve yet another barrier challenging people's success as restrictions urged training opportunities to migrate online and threatened to isolate the disadvantaged further. We did not want our clients to be met with even more obstacles, and so we opted to dig deep into our system and practices, identify the obstacles threatening the progression of our clients and nip the growing barriers in the bud.

SICAP contribution was vast with staff adopting new methods of engagement, delivery, mentoring to all training providers having to provide WCD with methodologies that incorporated traditional classroom style delivery mixed with online learning platforms to ensure lockdowns no longer interrupted the flow of learning for our clients. To this end SICAP funded the following modules with such formats:

2021 Courses :

- Online Healthcare – 4 courses
- Online SNA/Childcare – 4 courses
- 1 Day Marketing Workshop – 3 courses

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- Youth Hospitality
- M.A.P.A. (Management of Actual or Potential Aggression) – 3 courses
- First Aid Responder Training -6 courses
- People Moving & Handling – 3 courses
- NPLQ (National Pool Lifeguard Qualification) – 2 courses
- Safe Pass
- Care Skills
- Manual Handling
- Care of the Older Person
- Rock 'n' Bowl Employer Course
- HACCP
- Barista Food & Drink Services
- Manufacturing Operations
- SNA Level 5

We collaborated with two employers to provide two different training courses:

- Our National Pool Lifeguard Training was provided via our partnership with Center Parcs, situated in Longford. Eleven of the 13 participants who completed this training went on to work as lifeguards with Center Parcs.
- Our Rock 'n' Bowl course was delivered in partnership with the local amusement centre of the same name and consisted of a curriculum of Basic First Aid, HACCP, and Manual Handling. All the participants who completed this training went on to work with the company. This course facilitated the employer reopen after COVID lock down.

- 346 trainees attended our internal courses in 2021.
- 148 beneficiaries in total participated in online training in 2021 = 42%.
- 276 clients successfully completed a lifelong learning course with us in 21% = 79%.
- 43 clients received individual funding up to €800 to complete external courses

2. Case Study

This case study, under the core project theme of "Engagement Strategies with SICAP Target Groups/Communities", outlines our experience tackling these obstacles identified and how we developed methods to make training more accessible to the disadvantaged, bolster the IT skills of our trainees with the increasing digitalization of services which the pandemic only served to accelerate, and to help our clients to adapt to a changing world as we in turn adapted alongside them.

3. The Value of Community

In preparing our courses for 2021 we knew that reinstatements of lockdowns could be announced on short notice. We therefore negotiated with all trainers hired for the year that all courses held would be able to be provided both in classroom and online to prevent any training from being cancelled or brought to a standstill by potential further restrictions.

Mental health began to plummet with the coming of the pandemic and the impact its restrictions had on day-to-day living. On a surface level, the very delivery of mental health services was disrupted, with many more therapy interventions being restricted to phone calls as opposed to the private one-toone interactions where sessions were previously delivered in a clinical setting. This was, of course, not the only concern relating to mental health, however. Isolation is a notorious negative influence which has been known for centuries to have a ruinous effect on the individual psyche, and statistics followed this trend of wide-ranging ramifications as reports naturally arose throughout the pandemic of plummeting wellbeing and increased feelings of anxiety and depression. For example, Paul Gilligan, the chief executive of St Patrick's Mental Health Services, testified to a monumental 15-20% increase in reports of mental health difficulties (RTÉ 2021) – and this report only described the people affected within the services of one organisation within Ireland.

It was therefore only natural to wonder just how many other people throughout the country were met with additional challenges to their psychological wellbeing following the arrival of Coronavirus. Speaking with our clients we found that a significant amount found online training isolating. When we provide training opportunities it is not just to support our clients to upskill but also to give them something meaningful they can occupy themselves with and take pride in as well as an avenue to further embrace them into the local community.

Online cannot live up to in-person interaction in the communal regard, and while we advised our clients to set up WhatsApp groups in the event of online training, virtual interaction always sacrifices some degree of intimacy and interconnectedness. In consideration of this, we decided that we would begin all of our training in a classroom setting and only offer online versions of two more long-term and demanding courses (namely, QQI Level 5 Healthcare and a combination course we often provide of SNA and Childcare training). If restrictions were instated later along the line we would naturally switch to online, but our ideal above all was in-person, face-to-face training that would provide our clients with an outlet for social interaction and close engagement with other members of their community.

Even without lockdown in action, however, certain standards had to be set. As our own training rooms are within the same building as our work premises where a number of our staff commenced blended working in in 2020 we determined that hosting in-person training here would not be the safest measure. Before Covid the majority of WCD staff were spread between open plan offices. Once we instated a system of blended working, our training rooms began to be used as temporary offices where certain units of coworkers would operate to support social distancing measures, containing groups within "bubbles" and limiting the risk of infection.

We therefore opted to book accommodation elsewhere for our training to take place. One which we made use of frequently this year was the Mullingar Town Band Hall which was a great hub for our activities and had all the resources we needed. It was also beneficial as the money we spent on accommodation was being reinvested into another community facility which would benefit locals and which our clients might make use of as well.

Throughout the periods where masks were mandated we naturally enforced this protocol and required our trainees to wear their PPE to shield themselves from infection. Tables and seating were also spread out to facilitate a degree of social distancing. On top of this our staff members conducted regular visits down to the premises on days courses were running to distribute Covid Health Checks which provided an additional layer of accountability and safety to our services by requiring that our clients signed a document for each day they were attending training declaring that they were not experiencing any symptoms of Covid and had not been exposed to it elsewhere. Once filled out by all clients (as was mandatory), we then collected them and filed them in our course folders to keep record of our clients' declarations. This proved to be an excellent protective measure as in the few events of trainees contracting Covid our courteous clients did not attend the course and instead phoned a staff member, letting us know that they had fallen ill and would not be coming in to training until they had a clear test. We likewise did our best to accommodate our clients' sacrifices by continuing to check in with them and, if the trainer believed that the days they had missed could be accounted for and the course could still be completed, allow them to continue on with the course once they were no longer viral and tested negative. Approximately 5 of our clients had to drop out of their courses due to Coronavirus but we nevertheless continued to provide our supports and offered to place them on the attendance list for the next provision we were planning of the course they had withdrawn from.

At the beginning and end of each course we requested that each client complete a **My Journey: Distance Travelled Tool**, or DTT abbreviated. This is an evaluation system provided by SICAP which measures client progress on soft skills relevant to their personal and professional development and wellbeing. It is a simple and approachable yet very effective tool to gauge how our clients have grown throughout their engagement with us and any lingering concerns or desires for improvement, through the clients' own input. The questions asked are basic statements to which clients can answer that they "strongly agree", "agree", "somewhat agree", "neither agree nor disagree", "somewhat disagree", "disagree", or "strongly disagree". This provides the perfect range of possible responses, not limiting the clients due to its generous scope but also obliging them to give specific and measurable replies. It is an indispensable tool for assessing the success and impacts of each training initiative as well as identifying where our clients might need help from us next.

As indicated by the results of the DTTs completed, classroom-based training sessions were an overall success and through the precautions developed we managed to mitigate the risk of Covid spread as well as provide our participants with the opportunity to get out in the world and mingle with other trainees interested in the same topics as them, offering a boost to their mental health and a brief yet invaluable haven from the distress and isolation caused by the pandemic.

4. Digitalisation

Lack of technological knowledge is an understated yet massive barrier our modern society is being met with, and one that is often overlooked. It is the elephant in the room that is not often considered by service providers in their designs. As digital services advance at a lightning speed, access to the most basic of services now require some sort of technological knowledge and the hardware to use these services. Without appropriate knowledge access to services is naturally restricted.

The digitalisation of services and initiatives can be amazing for security, efficiency, and convenience, but unfortunately it can also leave many behind in its wake. There are many for whom this is not convenient and who are neither confident nor knowledgeable in operating technology, however "basic" it may seem. There is a tendency nowadays to assume that everyone under a certain age has and should have a baseline level of technical knowledge, but our work at Westmeath Community Development has taught us that this is certainly not the case.

Many service users – including those from rural areas, Travellers living in halting sites who have poor broadband service, people with disabilities, and other cohorts for whom social inclusion and support is paramount - can feel entirely excluded from engagement with a range of modern services. Technology is a powerful and invaluable force, but only if it is accessible to the person faced with it. While new digital business practices and EU regulations such as the enforcement of the Strong Customer Authentication method (Directive 2015/2366), aim to improve online transactional security, there is also a risk that certain cohorts of society without the requisite technological knowledge or familiarity are more open to online scams through phishing and other methods and in some cases are denied the opportunity to access certain services, which are used by others as part of their daily living - for example, a client without a smartphone and in an area with poor coverage is now unable to complete any online purchases they make unless they use their landline to ring their banking provider itself to request authorisation for each transaction.

As we were formulating a contingency plan for what would happen if lockdowns were re-instated and our training initiatives were forced to go digital, we considered this issue. Speaking with our clients also illuminated these issues, confirming our concerns about the feasibility of online classes for those with little experience with technology. These clients would tell us frankly that they didn't want to drop out but had no faith in their ability to wrangle online learning. Some simply did not know how to use a computer; others did not have one at home.

5. Levelling the Playing Field

It is the ultimate aim of our work as a Community Development organisation to break down barriers to progression in society. We therefore had to develop a strategy to conquer this elephant in our room.

Firstly, we decided that we did not want lack of computer or laptop ownership, due to financial restraints, to prevent a client from accessing our services and being able to participate in a course. We therefore established a system of laptop rentals, inspired by the "laptop loans" provided at universities and some public libraries. At least 20 individual clients benefitted from this service in 2021 as we provided each beneficiary with a functioning laptop device to take home a short while before the course started (giving them time to familiarise themselves with the device). Our clients could retain their laptops up to a month after the course had ended as we realised that an additional inequality might be the pressure an individual using a rented laptop would face as opposed to someone who

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fully owned theirs. Someone who had their own computer or laptop at home would possibly feel free to switch their device on and work on it at any time of day that suited them. Someone using a borrowed device might have a different attitude – perhaps they might feel pressured to return the laptop as soon as possible and therefore rush to get their assignments done and submitted as soon as they could to place the laptops back in our hands to be available for another person in need of a device.

We feared that those borrowing from us might feel they lacked the luxury of being able to take their time on their assignments and really commit themselves to their work. We therefore opted to establish a plan where all clients were permitted to keep the laptop up to four weeks after the course had ended, to allay any feelings of urgency and level the playing field between trainees who owned their laptops and those who were "renting".

Through this venture we managed to provide the relevant hardware resources to clients as a starting point of increasing familiarity with modern technology. Our next step? Equipping our clients with the knowledge they needed to undertake the online training.

6. Tech Training

Of course, there is little point in providing trainees with the physical equipment to engage with online services without the appropriate knowledge of how to make use of their device. In this regard we provided focussed and appropriate training to our participants. This training was tailored to meet the specific needs of the individual and provided our trainees with the requisite knowledge in how to engage with our online services and how to communicate with us electronically. Once the individual had access to the online services further training could be delivered through this platform.

We avoided a "one-size fits all" approach as we knew and appreciated that our clients were hailing from a number of different contexts and backgrounds, instead tailoring our training specifically to the individual. This meant that some of our clients started their tech training journey with the fundamentals, such as learning how to use a mouse, create an email, use desktop files and folders, and browse the Internet. Others began a bit further on, receiving tutoring in how to use Microsoft Word, setting fonts and formatting documents, using spellcheck, and so on. Naturally, however, our end goal was ensuring that all clients had been trained to access the relevant course management/online classroom systems for their courses where needed, as well as supporting them to download and navigate the video conferencing application *Zoom* and set up their webcam and study areas to ensure they were facing into their online training completely prepared.

7. Keeping in Touch

No person was left isolated in their training journey – it was not just a case of providing the equipment and basic knowledge and leaving our trainees to their own devices once the course in question began. Instead, we were with our online learners every step of the way, just as we had been with our inclassroom trainees as we conducted visits down to their sessions.

Weekly communications through phone calls and e-mails were maintained with our online trainees to monitor progression, offer one to one mentoring, and deal with any problems which might arise. We also took the initiative to reproduce the Distance Travelled Tool in digital format so that we could

assess our online trainees just as we would our classroom participants. We created a highly accessible form, converting all the questions and possible responses to digital format. The software we used to accomplish this was Microsoft Teams. This was chosen due to the esteemed quality of Microsoft products and the convenience it could provide our clients as it allowed us to administer the forms to them through simple email – something all of our clients would have set up before embarking on their online courses.

As we were modifying a resource which was not ours originally, we contacted Pobal to let them know what we were considering implementing and to request they had a look. The response was overwhelmingly positive and our virtual DTT was approved. Our staff were praised for the ease of access provided to our clients as all they had to do to answer each question was click the button relating to their desired response – the virtual equivalent of ticking a box. The layout was straightforward and professional and worked for our clients, allowing us to gather their feedback and place their responses in their files just as we had done with our classroom participants.

As we refer to our check-in services as "wellbeing supports", we have long been determined to live up fully to the meaning of this phrase. In this vein we also provided our clients with a sympathetic ear to discuss their progress on the course and their assignments with us – other non-IT concerns they may have – leading us onto our next topic…

8. **Education Supports**

As the standard and quality of accredited QQI Courses in Ireland ever increases, so too do the standards their participants are held to, with assessments necessitating the knowledge and use of academic writing skills – including referencing and the sourcing of academic studies and publications – becoming more and more commonplace.

In third level colleges across Ireland, students can attend seminars to avail of tutoring and advice. Many also provide "Writing Centres" where they can benefit from the support of other students in their final years or on a Master's programme in completing their assignments. Universities also provide Disability Offices which have advisors and special supports available and which allow every student with a disability to register as such and receive any and all necessary accommodations, from learning aids to technology and free counselling sessions.

Unfortunately, many training courses outside of this realm do not have the same resources available, with many courses not having any time allocated to providing training in these skills. Many of our clients are early school leavers, others have not been in education since their Leaving Certificates, which can be decades behind them. The prospect of facing the requirement for academic writing and referencing in an assessment can be extremely daunting in the absence of prior training. It can be a demotivating factor for trainees – who have already overcome barriers to access and diligently complete all modules of a course – to be faced with another barrier in their final assignment.

This was brought to the attention of WCD staff by trainees and we promptly acted on it. We highly value equal opportunity and therefore were eager to provide resources to our clients to redress the balance. Free classes in academic writing and referencing were provided by us in order to assist

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trainees in the submission of their assignments. Many clients availed of this service and our trainers testified to the impact this additional support had on their final grades as they no longer were met with the risk of losing points for incorrect referencing and formatting and acquired the skills needed to communicate what they had learned in a polished and articulate manner.

9. Social Media Outreach

WCD recognises the need to not only engage with current participants in our services but also potential users of our services. Prior to 2020 a lot of our outreach and marketing consisted of attending and hosting events, offering flyers to other community services and requesting they display and distribute them to promote our services, and running leaflet drops in neighbourhoods. Many of our clients also came from Intreo referrals from the Department of Social Protection. We maintained an organisation website and social media presence, but it was not too in depth.

The pandemic, of course, urged us to adapt as many local facilities closed their doors and social distancing and infection prevention became essential. The majority of social activity migrated online and the Department curtailed its referrals. Consequently, we were called to swim with the tide and began investing further in our digital relations. We pinned a post to our website and Facebook page listing our head staff of each unit alongside their contact details to ensure prospective clients would not encounter any difficulty finding someone to connect with. We also increased our posting schedule, uploading our course posters a few times before the start date to increase our likelihood of showing up on feeds. In the event of prospective clients commenting on our posts or contacting us through Facebook Messenger we maintained a culture of high responsiveness where we worked to guarantee our notifications were checked on a consistent basis and any communications replied to as soon as possible.

10. Feedback from Clients

WCD consistently and actively invites feedback from all participants in any of our services. We are very conscious that feedback, either positive or negative, is a wonderful gauge in how to measure the success of our service delivery. Participant experiences empower us to shape and tailor any new planned interventions while maintaining the high standards of our ongoing services.

We received very positive feedback regarding our laptop rental scheme from trainees with many people commenting that they would not have been able to access or complete their training without this assistance.

The academic writing and referencing classes helped a group of trainees who had expressed fears over the requirement successfully complete their final assignments for their course. Comments from trainees praised the initiative and stated that not only did it help them complete their assignments but gave them the confidence to use these skills in the future with regard to further training courses. They stated that these skills will stand to them long after their training has been completed and managed to demystify computers for them. 2021 was a modernised age and as time passes it is unquestionable that the world will only get more and more computerised. We therefore consider our

IT interventions a colossal and overwhelming success as it has empowered our clients not just to complete training but to better navigate an increasingly digitalised society.

11. Impact on Project Core Theme

Community Development
This case study reflects on the efforts by WCD to identify and remove any barriers as a result of the increased digitisation of services, in particular where it impacts education, employment, enterprise and training, all of which are supported under SICAP.

Equality

Ensuring that all cohorts of the community have access to and a knowledge to engaged with recent changes and digitalisation of many education and training courses.

- 20 clients rented laptops from us throughout the year.
- We successfully converted the SICAP My Journey: Distance Travelled Tool to a digital format, delivering it to our clients via Microsoft Forms.
- 150 attended our academic writing classes.
- Approximately 200 benefitted from our mentoring in IT skills.
- Following the mass migration of the social sphere online spearheaded by the pandemic we increased our social media presence. To date our Facebook page has 3200 likes and 3800 followers.

12. Conclusion

This case study reflects on the changing nature of the delivery of training and education programmes where online delivery is ever increasing.

It has identified the barriers faced by certain cohorts in equal access to this method of training and has tested interventions with a view to removing these barriers.

The findings of the case study, while confirming that there are barriers presented by online training and educational courses, also indicate that adopting a more personalised approach to a person's needs and access can greatly diminish the impact of these barriers.

13. References

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