

EcCoWell Community Recovery Program

Learning Limerick Report

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Learning Limerick covers both the city and county of Limerick following their amalgamation. The focus of the Learning Limerick report is on strengthening community bonds and citizenship in local neighbourhoods and addressing exclusion, including finding ways of keeping older people engaged. Limerick, along with Cork, has been an innovator in exploring the potential of learning neighbourhoods. The two cities collaborated in sharing ideas. Limerick has made good use of technology for learning during the pandemic.

The focus on local communities may also be seen in the Datong report at a district level, and the Harlem New York report at a neighbourhood level.

This report from the Learning Limerick Steering Group discusses developments on the theme of **'Strengthening community bonds and citizenship in learning neighbourhoods and addressing exclusion, including ways of keeping people engaged.'** It outlines a brief introduction to Learning Limerick, and focuses on key initiatives relating to the theme: the Limerick Lifelong Learning Festival; the Learning Ambassadors project and Limerick Learning Neighbourhoods, a pilot initiative in four Learning Neighbourhoods in Limerick City. The report highlights how these initiatives are helping to combat exclusion, including digital exclusion, and engage with older learners. It also shows how they can advance our key objective of reaching out to the broader County Limerick learning region and connect with our rural partners and learners.

The **Learning Limerick Steering Group** is a partnership forum that brings together sectoral networks and partnerships, and is committed to creating a culture of learning in Limerick. Led by the Limerick and Clare Education and Training Board, Limerick City and County Council, and PAUL Partnership, it is made up of statutory, local development, business, and community and voluntary sector partners that have a role in learning in Limerick. The original Limerick City of Learning Steering Group was established as a sub-committee of the Limerick City Development Board in 2003. The expansion of its membership in 2013 to include both City and County partners resulted in the name of the group being rebranded to **'Learning Limerick'**. This followed the amalgamation of Limerick City and County Councils that year.

The Learning Limerick group's Strategic Plan – Helping to Grow Limerick as a Learning Region (2018 – 2022) positions learning at the centre of development planning in the Limerick region, in all communities, sectors and settings.

Limerick Lifelong learning Festival

The annual **Limerick Lifelong Learning Festival** promotes learning in all its forms, formal and informal activities and in all aspects of life. It has become an extremely effective way to connect with learners and event organisers right across Limerick City and County. At the core of the festival are area-based and interest-based networks, which have a particular focus on promoting inclusive learning, e.g. the Limerick Community Education Network (LCEN); Limerick Integration Working Group; Limerick Mental Health Association and Limerick Childcare Committee. The Festival gives these networks a focus for organising learning events, and provides members with networking opportunities to work together in running collaborative events. A key outcome is that links facilitated and made through the festival have continued after the festival, with many new projects commenced as a result of these collaborations. Learning Limerick also continues to work closely with its County Limerick partners in the delivery of the festival each year, including running events with the County Libraries, the two rural Local Development Companies West Limerick Resources and Ballyhoura Development and our County partners in Limerick and Clare Education and Training Board. This ensures festival events and activities specifically target learners in County Limerick. For instance, holding several flagship Festival Launch events in the County has been key to our engagement with rural learners (e.g. launch events were held at the cultural venues of Lough Gur Heritage Centre; Foynes Flying Boat Museum and Adare Heritage Centre in County Limerick.)

The festival turned 10 in 2020, with its first Virtual Lifelong Learning Festival held in September 2020. Despite the challenges posed by COVID-19, the programme of over 80 online events was varied and accessible to all. It even allowed for other Learning Cities from around the world to participate in Limerick events and share their learning! The festival theme this year was '**Celebrating and Building Learning Communities**', celebrating the resilience of our local communities. Indeed, annual festival's themes have always focused on promoting inclusion, such as 'Bridging the Gap' in 2019 and 'Limerick Together for Equitable and Inclusive Learning' in 2018. These themes anchor activities developed by our local partners and allow for promotional materials to be developed to promote essential messages to our communities.

In 2020, the flagship event for the festival was a webinar '**Learning in a Changing Business World**'. It brought together speakers from different business sectors to discuss how they have responded to the current challenges presented by COVID-19. As part of the festival, the Digital Inclusion sub-group of SMART Limerick ran an '**Exploring the Meaning and Experience of Digital Exclusion**' event. It included a Presentation of the group's interim research findings, an important Limerick-based research that is being conducted and presented by the Tavistock Institute, London. There was also an event ran by the **PLACE-EE (Platforms for Ageing Community Engagement – Exchange and Enterprise)** project, of which Limerick City and County Council and the University of Ulster are key partners. This is another great example of collaboration between Learning Limerick and Derry Strabane Learning City-Region, and an opportunity to celebrate the Irish Learning Cities Day on 30th September. PLACE-EE has

researched, collated and recorded important cultural heritage across four rural and isolated regions of Europe (Ireland, Northern Ireland, Iceland, and Sweden). In County Limerick, the project engaged with older people in a very meaningful way in the rural Newcastle West town, while also establishing links across rural communities.

Learning Limerick Learning Ambassadors

The Learning Limerick **Learning Ambassadors** project commenced in 2019. The Ambassadors are Limerick people from all walks of life, united by a common interest in promoting, developing and celebrating learning, in all its forms, throughout Limerick City and County. They are welcoming, friendly and proud that Limerick is a Learning Region, are willing to share their experiences of formal and informal learning and happy to help others find opportunities for learning. The Ambassadors can spread the word and promote the idea of lifelong learning in their own communities, workplaces and neighbourhoods. They can help break down all sorts of barriers to learning as they share inspiring learning stories from their own lives or the lives of people in their families and communities. The group has discussed barriers to accessible learning such as the issues of transport and costs of transport for rural communities. The Learning Ambassadors are important as they can help put a friendly face on organisations involved with learning. There may be an opportunity to work on more advocacy and outreach as part of this initiative. In November and December 2019, the Learning Ambassadors participated in a Story Exchange training project with Narrative 4, which developed their skills to 'tell their story'. The Narrative 4 training model develops empathy through sharing your story with your story partner and retelling your partner's story back to the group in their voice. Following this training, the Ambassadors told their own stories of lifelong learning on video interviews. They were interviewed on their stories and why they are passionate about being a Learning Ambassador. This series of recorded interviews are being launched in collaboration with the Lifelong Learning Festival 2020.

Limerick Learning Neighbourhoods

The **Limerick Community Education Network (LCEN)**, in collaboration with Learning Limerick, has established four **Learning Neighbourhoods** in Limerick. LCEN was introduced to the concept of learning neighbourhood following a presentation by Cork Learning City at a Learning Limerick event in 2017. There followed a study visit to Cork in 2018, meeting the community partners involved in Ballyphehane and Mayfield Learning Neighbourhoods, and learning about the approach in Cork of bringing the learning city concept to the neighbourhood level. Following further consultation and workshops, a Limerick Learning Neighbourhoods Steering Group was formed. This representative group agreed to explore the setting up of four Learning Neighbourhoods, in Northside, Southside, City Centre and St. Mary's, mirroring the long-established adult-education networks in Limerick City. Members of the Steering Group agreed to be the 'link/support' person with each of the four neighbourhoods. The design of the Limerick Learning Neighbourhoods logo was also chosen following an art competition held with local primary schools in the four neighbourhoods.

The four '**Limerick Learning Neighbourhoods**' were launched by LCEN during the Limerick Lifelong Learning Festival week in April 2019. The theme for Learning Neighbourhoods in 2019 was 'Who we are is where we are from'. LCEN sees learning neighbourhoods as an extension of its work by including everyone from the neighbourhood, businesses, groups and local people, as all kinds of learning takes place in all neighbourhoods. As well as guests from

the communities and local agencies in Limerick, there were national and international guests in attendance at our launch from Learning Cities from the Irish Network of Learning Cities and Espoo, Finland; and representatives from the UNESCO Institute of Lifelong Learning. Some of the highlights at the launch event included the St. Mary's Men's' Shed Bodhrán players, the Northside 'Living Out Loud' Youth Group singers, and a video giving a snapshot of learning in the communities.

Since its launch in 2019, some successful initiatives have emerged as part of the Learning Neighbourhoods in Limerick, including a Music Café in Moyross and St. Mary's Learning Neighbourhood participation in their local parish festival and a community networking event. The City Centre Learning Neighbourhood ran a 'Brag & Borrow' event for sharing initiatives and the Southside Learning Neighbourhood ran a Readathon for the local schools together with community groups and an Open MIC event bringing young people and writers together. There are future plans for an intergenerational event, an Art Exhibition, a Local History Project and a Mapping of Learning Opportunities Project. Our Learning Neighbourhoods have also demonstrated tremendous resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic. During the first lockdown, groups worked on providing meals for older people, delivering care packages, producing facemasks, running local neighbourhood bingo, a virtual music café event, connecting with learners through daily phone calls, and using online methods of connecting, e.g. PADLET, Zoom, WhatsApp groups etc.

As part of the Virtual Limerick Lifelong Learning Festival this year, and also to celebrate Irish Learning Cities Day 2020 on September 30th, a collaborative interactive Webinar was held by LCEN with Limerick and Cork Learning Neighbourhoods, entitled '**Learning Neighbourhood Reflections: Positive Local Actions During Challenging Times**'. Examples of good practice and ideas were shared to help with the ongoing development of our Learning Neighbourhoods. Some thoughts and reflections shared during the workshop on learning during COVID-19 included:

- Lockdown showed the strength and power of community spirit. Older and younger volunteers worked alongside each other during lockdown allowing for a greater appreciation for each other.
- While technology definitely does not replace face to face interaction, it has been hugely beneficial in allowing people to connect.
- Access to and the use of technology remains challenging, the digital divide is problematic.
- There can be some challenges and resistance to technology but role models from the older generations within the community proved to younger generations that it can be done.
- One approach was to use technologies with which people were already familiar so as not to exclude people; e.g. WhatsApp.
- Groups meeting on a fine day at the park with a coffee during good weather where possible.

Groups were also asked how they can continue to support Learning Neighbourhoods for the future:

- Face to face contact is key but we also need to use other innovative ways of connecting and getting the message out.
- Acknowledge that maintaining Learning Neighbourhoods needs commitment. It's important to acknowledge that the concept evolves along with the people that are involved and the resources available. Groups shouldn't feel under pressure to be very active at all times.
- Learning Neighbourhoods should review their work/ efforts annually to re-imagine what their Neighbourhood might look like for the following year; and bring people along with that vision.
- The appropriate physical space that allows for social distancing can allow many activities to continue; sharing of spaces between organisations within the community could also be considered
- Whatever technical supports are put in place for older generations should be made available to all. Young people can also experience difficulties, e.g. they can be self-conscious on screen.
- Talking to each other is very important. Connections can be made; resources can be shared as a result.
- Hybrid event involving online remote access along with venue(s) for small groups can facilitate those with limited digital skills or without access to technology.
- Open spaces and walking groups can be used more to bring people together. We cannot leave those who do not have the digital access/ skills behind.

The future is bright because of the connections we have made through Learning Neighbourhoods. We hope to continue the strong connection with our Cork Learning Neighbourhoods friends. We also hope in the future to expand our Learning Neighbourhoods initiative to involve our County Limerick partners by piloting the approach in one of our rural towns/villages. Our own reflections from Limerick Learning Neighbourhoods progress to date include the need to include all groups; *'you can start by working with whoever shows interest – others will follow!'*. It is important to ensure groups have a clear understanding of the concept, as many of our partners found it difficult in our initial stages to grasp the concept. It is worth putting time and effort into communicating the rationale and concept at the start to get buy in. There is a need to stress to groups that this is about collaboration and not competition. All ideas for the neighbourhood can be brainstormed and a check-in done with local people to gauge interest in a project. It is also advisable to start with small projects and encourage collaboration between groups.

This report from Limerick has explored how these Learning Limerick and Learning Neighbourhood initiatives are helping to combat exclusion, engage with older learners and how they help progress our key objective of reaching out to the broader learning region in County Limerick. The Lifelong Learning Festival has helped build up awareness and understanding of the value and benefits of learning throughout life in many contexts, both for individuals and communities in urban and rural Limerick. The links already formed through the festival and the related initiatives of the Learning Ambassadors and Learning Neighbourhoods are forming the basis of new opportunities for partnership development across the Learning Region. These partnerships undertake a range of lifelong learning initiatives during the year and are not solely connected with the annual Festival. These new

and existing initiatives are contributing to the ongoing development of an inclusive and sustainable learning region for Limerick.