

HOW TO ORGANISE A LIFELONG LEARNING FESTIVAL

Top tips and advice



Tina Neylon
Lifelong Learning Festival Co-ordinator,
Cork, Ireland



International Conference
on Learning Cities
Cork - 2017

OVER THE YEARS...

I have been contacted by people from around Ireland and the world, asking for information about how the Cork Lifelong Learning Festival started and advice on how to make such an event a success.

Some have since started their own – the first was Limerick seven years ago, which has been a great success. Others include Wyndham, a suburb of Melbourne, and Burnaby in British Columbia, Canada.

This guide tries to answer any questions anyone may have and, by charting how the Cork festival has developed, offer some advice to anyone considering following in our footsteps.

I must stress that any opinions and memories expressed here are all my own.

Tina Neylon
Cork Lifelong Learning
Festival Co-ordinator
2004- 2017



Start small and build up

Individuals and organisations may have unrealistic expectations – they offer to run a series of events but find attendances are low. It is much better to organise one event the first time they get involved and gradually build on its success, learning on the way how to attract the public.

All participation voluntary

There should be no compulsion to get involved - even if an organisation is in receipt of State funding. All participation in the Cork festival is on a voluntary basis and that contributes to the positive and welcoming atmosphere at events. There is great joy in celebrating achievements, it's fun. People like showing off what they are doing – especially to family, friends & neighbours.

All events free to attend & accessible to all

Although some may have to restrict places or insist on booking, because of space available.



Don't control programming

Ask organisations & individuals what type of event they want to run. We have found that by not dictating or controlling the programme it has encouraged diversity in the range of learning events & increased involvement.



No fee charged for taking part

Many organisations are invited to take part in exhibitions or fairs for which a fee has to be paid, so when approaching them stress that participation in the festival is free.

Inclusive – embracing all ages, backgrounds, abilities

Particular effort needs to be made to encourage those who are often marginalised to take part. Not only to attend events themselves, but also to organise their own. In Cork they include the disabled, people living in disadvantaged areas, Travellers, migrants & asylum seekers. Often they are not used to being included and need encouragement – however, once they get involved, they prove to be hugely committed.



Value all learning equally

Regardless of the type of event or who is organising it, there should be no hierarchy of events – no difference in emphasis in the programme or in publicity about the festival, whether it's the final of a competition for postgraduates, an art workshop for toddlers, a nature walk for all ages – all should be treated equally.



Event organisers must generate their own attendances

While the Co-ordinator & Committee looks after publicity & marketing for the festival as a whole, individual events require their own – so insist that participants generate their own attendances – using local advertising, posters, social media, newsletters, inviting people to attend.

Don't let the festival stagnate



The programme should never be predictable, of course many events are the same each year, but other participants come & go, taking part one year & not the next. Think about new participants or different types of events.

Use what is already happening

Participants don't have to organise an event specially for the festival, though many do so, they can open up a regular class or other event to the public. They can also timetable a particular event so it takes place during the festival eg an anniversary celebration; the opening of a new premises or a garden for instance; the presentation of certificates; the final of a competition.

Adopt a motto



Ours is Investigate, Participate, Celebrate! - shorthand for what it is all about.

Work with the willing

While not always possible, it would be great to pick your organising committee, so you can ensure it is made up of individuals who are not only genuinely committed to the festival, but can also offer events or persuade others to do so. It's also essential that different sectors are represented – eg children, Primary, Secondary & Tertiary Education, disadvantaged groups. Ideally, it should also include people experienced in fundraising, PR, perhaps a background in media.

You need a Co-ordinator

In the end, no matter how wonderful the organising committee is, one person needs to make final decisions. Choose someone who is energetic & enthusiastic, with a range of experiences and contacts; someone capable of using their own initiative who is also a good team player.



GUIDING PRINCIPLES

The festival's guiding principles were agreed with the Organising Committee in 2004, and remain unchanged:

- ✓ all events take place under the Lifelong Learning Festival banner – the focus is not on individual providers
- ✓ the focus is not on recruitment but on demonstrating what can be done
- ✓ all events are free
- ✓ as many events as possible are hands-on, allowing the public to join in as well as watch

I have suggested in the 2017 Festival Report that another guiding principle be added:

- ✓ there is no hierarchy regarding events, all have equal validity, regardless of what sector or level of achievement they showcase eg a crochet workshop receives equal coverage in the programme as postgraduates presenting their research findings.

FESTIVAL AIMS

The festival's aims are twofold:

- ✓ to celebrate those already participating in learning of all kinds;
- ✓ to raise awareness of the huge range of options available all over the city for others to get involved in learning, whatever their age, interest or ability.



PRACTICAL ADVICE

FINDING PARTICIPANTS

Keep seeking out new participants until there is a broad range of events catering for all ages from pre-school to post retirement; do the same for different interests – arts, sports, and so on.

While it's obvious that you contact schools, colleges & other educational organisations, discovering others offering learning opportunities is more of a challenge. What you can do is: pick up leaflets about courses; read noticeboards in shops, libraries, online; attend fairs & exhibitions.

You can also use already existing opportunities – a good example is Cork City Walks. They are self-guided walks around the city, with brochures available, and signs en route. They were established by Cork City Council a few years ago. What we did was find out from the relevant person in the Council who had written the information used for the tours & ask her to contact them & see if they'd be willing to lead a walk during the festival. Ever since, our programme has featured Cork City Walks in South Parish, City Centre & Shandon lead by Ronnie Herlihy, Antoin O'Callaghan & Peter Foyne respectively.

“WHAT'S IN IT FOR ME?”

One of the arguments I make when contacting potential participants is that the festival offers them the opportunity of publicising their activities for free. All they are asked is to give their time & enthusiasm – though involvement may incur some extra costs for them – eg staff diverted, photocopying, providing free refreshments etc. However, that's a lot less than paid advertising or marketing & much more direct & friendly.

They are being given:

- the opportunity to engage directly with the public & potential attendees on courses (eg St John's College) or new members (eg Cork Genealogical Society).
- being part of an event which shows their city in a positive light

Since recognition by UNESCO the festival has raised the profile of Cork overseas – which is a source of great pride.

SPECIAL EVENTS

Encourage participants who have a special event coming up to time it to coincide with the festival. Some examples from the 2017 festival are:

Final of UCC Science for All Communication

Competition – postgraduates from the College of Science, Engineering & Food Science and College of Medicine & Health compete against each other in communicating their research to the public without using scientific jargon.

Cork Anti-Poverty Resource Network celebrates 40 years empowering communities; representatives from projects discuss their work with the public.

Currach Launch & Certificate Presentation

– Men from HSE's City Link group launch the boat they built with Meitheal Mara, and are presented with Quality & Qualifications Ireland certificates.



Open Day & Certificate Presentation – Bruac, the Good Shepherd Education & Development Unit for female early school leavers, hosts an open day. Past learners are presented with certificates.

Some years the huge **Cork Mechanical, Manufacturing & Biomedical Engineering Exhibition** at CIT with 180-200 stands coincides with the festival.

In 2014 **Minister Kathleen Lynch** launched the booklet **Mature Students** – a celebration - at UCC.

IDENTIFYING CONTACTS

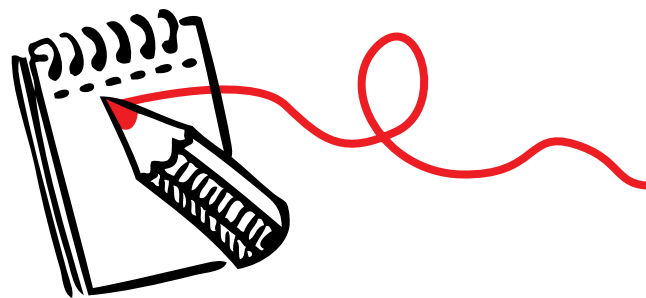
Third Level colleges have many different departments so it can be difficult identifying people interested in taking part in the festival. It takes time & patience, and over the years we have found committed participants, most of them thanks to the involvement of representatives from UCC & CIT on the Organising Committee.

MEETING FACE-TO-FACE

Meeting potential participants face-to-face is very important, particularly at the beginning, when you are trying to establish an annual festival. You should offer to attend meetings of networks and other organisations, first to explain the idea of the festival, and later to discuss the organisation's participation. You need to identify your contact or contacts in an organisation by name, and build up a relationship, even a friendship, with them. The personal approach is best, rather than relying on email or phone. You never know what it can lead to – because I went to a meeting at the National Learning Network's Training Centre I discovered their Mobile Classroom, which they kindly loaned to us for three festivals! Visiting the Cork Traveller Women's Network led to us including Bat Walks in the programme for some years, on hearing about Cork County Bat Group.

DON'T BE DISAPPOINTED

Some organisations & individuals may not take part every year – for a variety of reasons. Most of them will participate again in the future, so keep in touch, include them in your invitations to the festival launch & any other events. You may find that your contact person does not respond to letters, emails or calls – perhaps he or she has changed position, or has left the job? Is out on maternity leave? Don't give up – find a new contact.



ASK PARTICIPANTS TO COMPLETE A FORM FOR EACH EVENT

Keep it simple, but ask for as much information as possible – it's always easier to edit, rather than have to add to the information received.

We use a form asking for the following:

- Organisation(s) offering event
- Venue
- Day & date of event – important, as sometimes confused
- Times – start & finish
- Description of event – can attach extra pages
- Contact details for entry in programme – with the name of a person
- Is booking necessary? If so, what is the MAXIMUM number? – we use a MAX symbol in our programme
- If booking necessary, must give a name & number(s) – email not enough, we want the public to feel welcome making contact
- If venue difficult to find, details needed
- Any other information? eg Refreshments offered, where to park, bus route etc

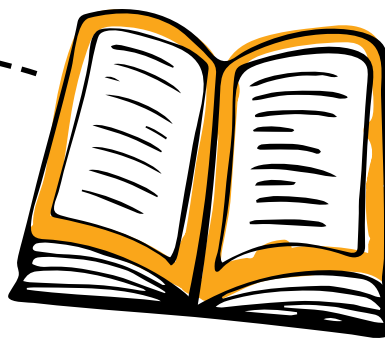
Regarding the description of the event, sometimes participants do not give enough information: eg Pilates class at 10am on Wednesday. That is not sufficient information – What is Pilates? Is this class available on a regular basis? Is it suitable for all ages, levels of fitness etc? What time does the class end? Do participants need to wear particular clothing/footwear? Do they need to book? Who can they call for more information?

A form for each event is also essential so that a 'fresh eye' can check the programme proof one final time before it goes to print and ensure day, date, times, contact details are correct.

Some suggest we use an online form – but please bear in mind that not everyone is confident about using this method; some still complete their forms in writing & post them in.

PRINTED PROGRAMME

A printed programme is vital. While it's handy to read the programme online, it is much easier & better to be able to flick back & forth, show it to others, and so on. It's also useful as a reference – all the events list contact details including a named person, so the Cork public can follow up on learning opportunities at any time of the year. We find that our programme is an invaluable marketing tool for the festival as a whole – it's a much quicker way of getting across what it is than trying to describe it!



CANCELLED OR ALTERED EVENTS

When sending out an event form to a new participant, I also send our Guidelines – which give basic information including what we do – supply programmes & posters, publicise festival with posters on hoardings, etc. – and how we ask participants to help as much as they can. It also includes a request to let us know as soon as possible if an event is cancelled or details changed – eg one event in 2017 moved from Friday to Tuesday, after the programme was printed & online. We use Facebook and Twitter to make changes public; if we hear early enough The Evening Echo is asked to mention them.

INSURANCE

There can be problems about insurance if an individual or organisation's cover is linked to a particular building – eg a yoga class may take place in a hotel or community centre, where insurance is included if a rental fee is charged. If the teacher wants to offer that class in a shopping centre during the festival, s/he will have to take out Public Liability Insurance – which can be expensive for a one-off event.

VENUES

When approached by potential participants I can sometimes link them with organisations which can offer a suitable venue or, if early enough, they may become part of a larger event.

The Library Service in Cork has been the most generous & committed down the years in offering free venues in its 6 branches around the city. It has developed its own strand of activity with the logo 'Libraries for Learning.' In our early years, we had venue signs made by participants on a signwriting course with the State training body, FÁS.

PUBLICITY

As the Cork festival grew, with over 600 events in 2017, it became increasingly difficult to publicise individual events, rather than the week as a whole. From the beginning, we have tried to encourage participants to help get the word out about the festival as a whole, not just their particular event(s). Not only does this have a practical result, it's also part of ensuring they feel that the festival belongs to them – it's not imposed on them, it's not happening by accident – they are what makes it the success it is.

MEDIA SPONSORS

Support from local media has been crucial in making the festival a success. Cork's evening newspaper The Evening Echo has sponsored the festival since 2005 – for a couple of years it even contributed money, before the recession hit. Every year it runs a series of free advertisements and gives lots of editorial and photographic coverage before, during and after festival week. At other times of the year it is always supportive of any associated projects or initiatives, also covering them – eg mural painting project with Féile an Phobail, celebration of receiving UNESCO Learning City Award.



Local commercial radio station 96fm has been a media sponsor since 2009. It runs a series of free adverts, sends representatives to the festival launch, & records interviews with some people involved. It always sends its Fleet Street to a number of events, where they hand out programmes & take part in activities which they Tweet about.

The Evening Echo's Editor always gives a brief speech at the festival launch. 96fm are asked each year if they'd like to do the same but always decline.

In 2017 the combined support from The Evening Echo & 96fm was worth over €15,000 in financial value – but much more than that in terms of actual value as both give lots of coverage before & during festival week.

MEDIA COVERAGE

As well as to our media sponsors, Press Releases are sent to all media outlets, local & national. Community & student radio stations regularly cover the festival. The Cork Independent, free weekly newspaper, gives some coverage.

As well as the huge support from The Evening Echo & 96FM, the festival has received coverage from our national TV service RTE – with appearances on magazine programme Nationwide – and on radio programmes Morning Ireland and Drivetime. There has been some coverage in national newspapers including The Irish Examiner.

FEEDBACK

Feedback is crucial – every year I write a letter to all festival participants, thanking them for their involvement. Use the opportunity to not only ask how their event(s) went, but also to request ideas, suggestions for improvements & other potential participants.

RECOGNITION

All participants and the organising committee give their time and commitment on a voluntary basis, so it is important that their contribution is acknowledged. We invite everyone to the launch of the festival, where they are thanked, and to other appropriate events during the year. Sponsors are acknowledged in the printed programme & on press releases & in speeches.

New participants receive a sticker reading 'We take part in the Cork Lifelong Learning Festival' suitable for use on glass doors or cars.



COMMUNICATION

On-going communication with participants is important. Since 2011 I have written an annual newsletter, sponsored by Raven Design & Watermans Printers, which is widely distributed.

DOCUMENTING THE FESTIVAL

Every year we engage a photographer & Frameworks Films so we have a visual record. With so many events, we attempt to cover as wide a range as possible. If one organisation is filmed or photographed one year, it may not be for another couple of years, so we can get as wide a representation as possible.

SPONSORSHIP

As the festival is supported by the City Council & Cork ETB, and by the HSE, UCC & CIT, NAPD, it is sometimes assumed, erroneously, that financial help is not needed.

Despite that, we have managed to get some sponsorship from private companies O'Callaghan Properties, Blacknight Solutions, from credit unions, mainly Ballyphehane which has supported us every year since the beginning. The River Lee Hotel supports us by providing free accommodation for festival guests from overseas.

Every year I write to the 31 Cork City Councillors with a request to provide some sponsorship from their Ward Funds to support the festival, in particular their local Community Education Network events. We have had some success. Some councillors have taken part in events, or even organised some. Approaching councillors in this way is also important in raising awareness of the festival and its aims.

We take part in
the Cork Lifelong
Learning Festival



HIGHLIGHTS

It would be impossible to cover all the festivals adequately in the limited space of this booklet, so I am mentioning just a few of the roughly 3, 800 events which have taken place between 2004-2017.

Perhaps you may see something you would like to organise in your city?

TRAVELLERS

In 2005 Cork was the European Capital of Culture and one of the supported projects was the building of a barrel topped wagon by members of the Traveller Community. During the festival the wagon toured three venues around the city. By the time of the 2006 festival the wagon had been installed as the centrepiece of a new permanent exhibit in Cork Public Museum, the first devoted to Traveller Culture in Ireland. Since then the Traveller exhibit has featured in most festivals, and the Traveller community has been involved in a variety of events every year. Sadly we lost one of those most closely associated with building the traditional wagon, Mary O'Sullivan, RIP.



MOBILE CLASSROOM

In 2006, the first time the festival ran for a week, we borrowed a Mobile Classroom from the National Learning Network. The classes on board were organised by Catherine Kelly of Connect Cork, a Cork City Council initiative aimed at raising awareness, understanding & increasing the use of computers. The public could book or just come on board. The Mobile Classroom visited the Central Library; Mayfield Library; Sam Allen Soccer Ground; QDS Cope Foundation; Blackpool, Mahon Point & Douglas Village Shopping Centres. Anyone who had a session on board received a voucher for three free internet sessions at their local library. We used the Mobile Classroom again in 2007 & 2008.

ONE BOOK

The 6th festival in 2009 featured a new Family Reading Initiative called One Book, One Shandon, supported by Home School Community Liaison teachers in schools on the northside of the city.

The book chosen was Tom Crean, Ice Man: the Adventures of an Irish Antarctic Hero by Michael Smith & published by Collins Press, a Cork based company. Copies of it were distributed free to pupils who were encouraged to read it at home with their families. Activities associated with the book included making igloos & penguins using recycled milk containers with Cork Community Artlink in the lead up to the festival, when there were other events, among them a workshop with the author. The artwork toured library branches after the festival.

In the years since One Book One Shandon has become One Book, One Community with each area choosing its own book – some have two, one for primary pupils, the other for pre-schoolers. Associated activities include family quizzes, performances & displays of artwork.

DEBATES & DISCUSSIONS

Since early on, the festival has offered the public the opportunity to hear about & discuss issues.

The following are just some examples:

- **2004** - the Disability Education Network organised a seminar on the educational aspects of the Disability Bill;
- **2004** - the National Office for Equity of Access to Higher Education launched its report at a seminar.
- **2005** - AONTAS, the national adult learning organisation, had a seminar called Merging Politics & Adult Education.
- **2006** - Further Education Opportunities in Cork, seminar aimed at guidance counsellors but open to all.
- **2008** – Work-based Learning Seminar, organised by the Learning Forum.
- **2008** – Access All Areas – CIT Cork School of Music – showcasing Social Inclusion Initiatives in Music & Education.
- **2008** – Values in Education – what matters? Keynote speaker Dr Kathleen Lynch, Professor of Equality Studies, UCD
- **2012** – Inaugural International Seminar at Triskel Christchurch- Lifelong Learning: from Austerity to Prosperity with George Osborne from Hume, Martin Power from UL & Minister of State Seán Sherlock
- **2013** – Cities of the Future – International Seminar at Triskel, special guest Peter Kearns from Australia introduces EcCoWell.
- **2013** – National Seminar on Traveller Horse Ownership
- **2014** – Ballyphehane/Togher CDP (Community Development Project) - series of discussions/ workshops in preparation for Local & European elections taking place following month called Learning for Democracy
- **2015** – International Seminar & Discussion Forum at Triskel – Growing Lifelong Learning in Cork with Raul Valdes Cotera of UNESCO, Michael Osborne of PASCAL, Judith James from Swansea & Norman Longworth, consultant to UNESCO
- **2015** – Conference on Homelessness & Social Exclusion at UCC with speakers from Denmark, Scotland, England & Ireland
- **2016** – Council Chamber, City Hall – International Seminar - UNESCO Learning City Award for Cork – What next? Speakers include representatives from fellow award winners Espoo & Swansea & from UNESCO.

FAMILY FUN

The festival runs from Monday to Sunday, ending with events for families in Fitzgerald's Park and the Cork Foyer. The park event offers activities including musical performances, bug hunts & nature trails for children, clowns & acrobats, face-painting, trips on traditional currach boats on the river. The Cork Foyer showcases its City Farm, its gardens with tips from its horticulturist, its toddler playground and its greenhouse café.

Both events always attract huge crowds & are an enjoyable way to bring the week to a close. Somehow, we have always had good weather on our final day too!



MILESTONES



2002

Cork City Development Board publishes its Integrated Strategy
– Imagine Our Future includes aim to develop Cork as a Learning City

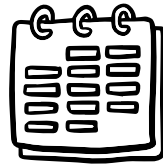


2004

First Lifelong Learning Festival
– a pilot with 65 events over 4 days

2006

Festival became a week-long annual event – since then has grown to over 600 different events for all ages, interests & abilities – all free



2011

Cork invited to become a founder member of PASCAL International Exchanges (PIE), global online link with academics, policymakers, other cities interested in developing as Learning Cities

2011

Cork Lifelong Learning Festival twins with Feile an Phobail (Festival of the People) in West Belfast – starts cross border/cross community projects in mural painting & currach building, copies Scribes

Invited to attend UNESCO's first International Conference on Learning Cities in Beijing – festival co-ordinator invited to participate in editing Beijing Declaration & Deputy Lord Mayor of Cork Lorraine Kingston to speak for all the mayors present at Closing Ceremony



EcCoWell Cork launched & International EcCoWell Conference attracts 260 delegates from Ireland & overseas

2013

2013

2011

President of Ireland, Mary McAleese, officially opens 8th festival, describing it as 'a kaleidoscope'

2014

Cork City Council adopts Beijing Declaration on Building a Learning City – first local authority in Ireland to do so



2014

Growing Lifelong Learning in Cork or GLLiC set up as Working Group



2015

MOU signed by Cork City Council, Cork Education & Training Board, University College Cork and Cork Institute of Technology – to advance aims of Beijing Declaration



2015

Cork presented with one of 12 inaugural Learning City Awards by UNESCO at its 2nd International Conference in Mexico City, one of only 3 in Europe – plus festival co-ordinator invited to make a presentation



2016

Cork successfully bids to host 3rd UNESCO International Conference on Building Learning Cities

2017

September – Cork welcomes delegates from all over the world to 3rd UNESCO International Conference on Learning Cities.



In 2011, then President of Ireland Mary McAleese opened the 8th festival. Her speech included the following:

"When you look at the brochure for the festival, it's a kaleidoscope, it's remarkable ... How do you even think of half the things?"



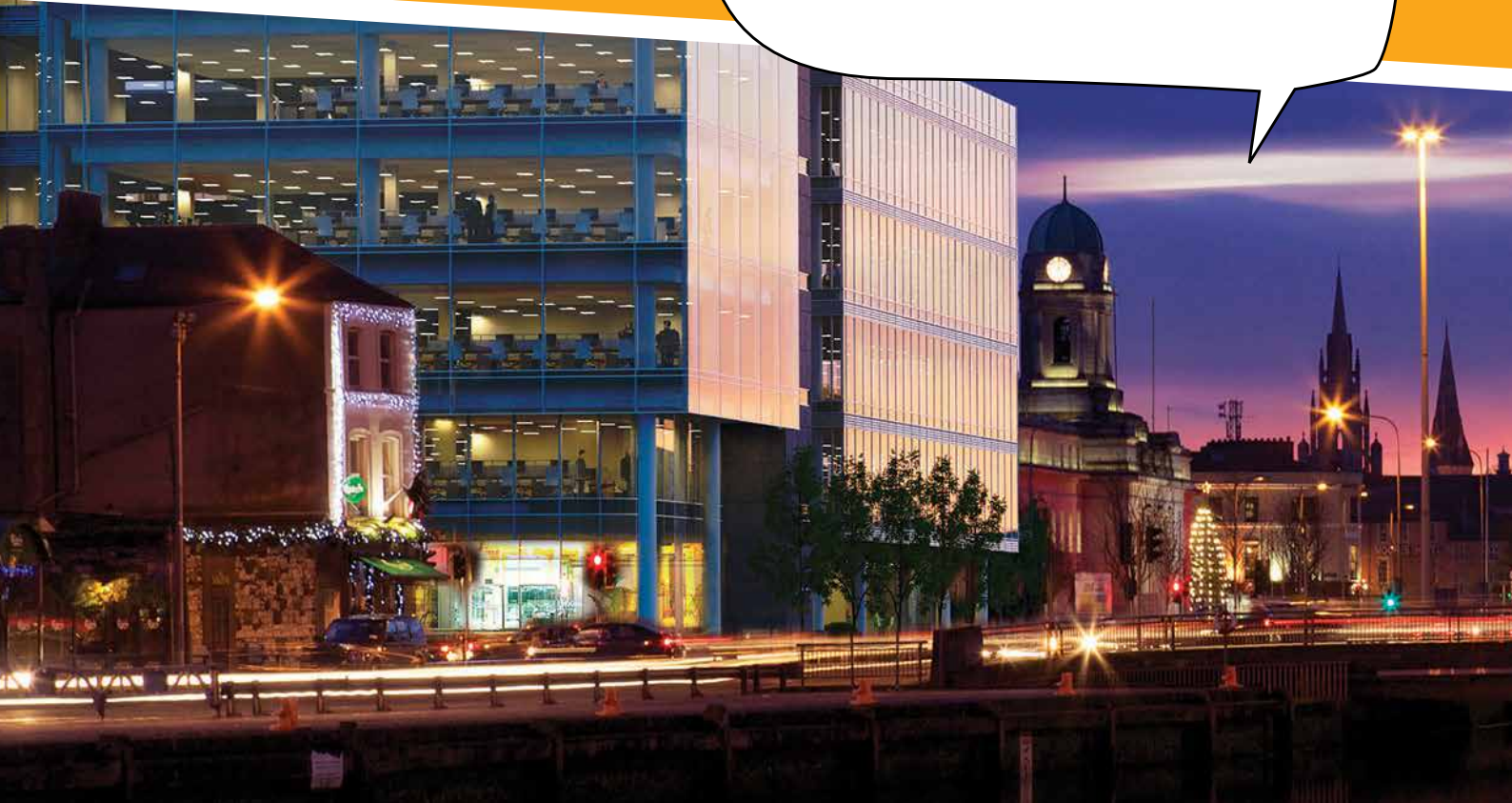
"There's no boundary to the freedom that comes from education, from knowledge, from being curious; there's no boundary to the desires once you get involved, particularly in relearning, and there are so many people who are re-schoolers as well as pre-schoolers..."

"one of the lovely things you're offering is the chance to understand that education doesn't stop when school stops; that education is about opening yourself up to life, to adventure, to the skills, knowledge, curiosity, the things you could become, by opening up yourself – this stronger person – to the world."



"I want to thank you – all the people who have created these opportunities."

"Yeats said that education isn't about filling a bucket, but it's about lighting a fire and that's what this festival is all about, lighting a fire inside people's hearts. It's a joy to see so many links opening up, links with Féile an Phobail, with Co-operation Ireland, and these things in turn open up new avenues of communication."



Every year I receive messages from the public who have attended festival events, but this one stands out – I haven't given her full name, as I don't have her permission:

To Tina Neylon & all the Team of Lifelong Learning Festival,

I would like to take this opportunity to Thank You all so very much for all your efforts in putting forward this amazing successful event.

I heard about this festival on Lifefm 93.1 radio approx a week prior to the event and thought it sounded like a wonderful opportunity for me to finally experience some activities that I've always been curious to explore. I firstly attended the inauguration of your event at the beautiful Triskel Christchurch, I really enjoyed listening to your speakers, it gave me great hope & inspiration. Having found myself unemployed due to the economic climate, I had been feeling quite deflated so I can tell you that this event came at the perfect time and offering the perfect antidote.

Of course, the weather complemented the event perfectly and allowed me to picnic outdoors between events & therefore allowed me to attend as many of the workshops as possible. I packed a lunch each day & on my bike peddled my way to my desired workshops which included: alexander technique, feel the music, guitar, creative writing, acting, multicultural choir, sacred harp singing, face painting, social media & smartphones, tango dancing, Unfortunately I didn't reserve a place in time for the one day Genealogy Conference which I would have loved to have attended but all in all I think I made the most of this extremely educative & most enjoyable event. I only wish it could have gone on for longer. It was the first time during the course of my unemployment that I felt fortunate enough to have been available to attend such a worthwhile event and this was echoed by fellow participators that I had the pleasure to encounter.

So once again congratulations to all involved in making Cork Lifelong Learning Festival such a Wonderfully Enjoyable Event!!!!

*Yours gratefully
Orla*



FESTIVAL ORGANISING COMMITTEES

2017

Chair: Willie McAuliffe, *National Association of Principals & Deputy Principals (NAPD)*

Denis Barrett, *Learning City Co-ordinator*

Peggy Barrett, *Executive Librarian, Cork City Libraries*

Sandra Brett, *Traveller Adult & Community Education, Cork ETB*

Deirdre Creedon, *Access Officer, Cork Institute of Technology (CIT)*

Brendan Goggin, *Former Registrar, CIT*

Patricia O'Hare, *Primary Education sector*

Ann O'Sullivan, *Former CEO, Cork City Partnership*

Seamus O'Tuama, *Director, Adult Continuing Education (ACE), University College, Cork*

Niamh Sheehan, *Administrative Officer, Community & Enterprise Section, Cork City Council*

Marcela Whelan Kelly, *Development Worker, Community & Enterprise Section, Cork City Council*

The following previously served on the committee:

Chair 2004-2007: Ciaran Lynch, *Cork ETB*

Mary Barrett, *Cork City Council*

Evelyn Grant, *CIT Cork School of Music*

Trish Harrington, *Principal, School for the Disabled/Irish Primary Principals Network*

Tina Healy, *Cork City Libraries*

Eamonn Kirwan, *Cork City Libraries*

Elmarie McCarthy, *Cork City Council*

Rosalie Moloney, *Principal, Secondary School*

Sarah Morey, *Arts Officer, CIT*

Con O'Donnell, *Cork City Council*

Mary O'Sullivan, *Mature Student Officer, UCC*



A PERSONAL HISTORY OF THE CORK LIFELONG LEARNING FESTIVAL

By Tina Neylon

When I was appointed as Festival Co-ordinator in 2004, my contract was for 6 weeks & my brief was to organise a festival about learning over 2 days, reporting to the Festival Organising Committee.

From the beginning I understood that the festival is primarily about encouraging a culture of lifelong learning in Cork – in particular among those who may have had negative experiences of the education system, are early school leavers, experience literacy challenges, suffer long term unemployment.

My background is mainly in heritage, the arts and journalism so, while that experience proved invaluable, the idea of a learning city was something new to me. I had never heard of Community Education Networks, the School Completion Programme, Home School Community Liaison teachers, or other initiatives which target the educationally disadvantaged. So being involved with the festival has been a learning experience for me, and it's been a hugely rewarding one.

One of the challenges in organising the festival is to encourage participation by those who are often alienated from education & to do so without patronising them.

One of the answers in Cork is the involvement of the Community Education Networks, which are supported by the Cork Education & Training Board (Cork ETB). There

are 10 networks in Cork – one of organisations operating in the city centre & citywide; one representing organisations offering education & training to people with disabilities; the other eight are dotted around the disadvantaged areas of the city.



Each network brings together organisations operating locally, offering learning opportunities & particular to that area; they include family & resource centres, schools, community development projects, adult basic education, health action zones (run by the State's Health Services Executive).

In the first festival in 2004, networks in Mayfield, Ballyphehane/Togher, Knocknaheeny, and Farranree took part - joined by the others in the following years. Their events usually take place in their local area.

Another way of encouraging participation by those usually alienated from education is to take learning out of classrooms & lecture theatres & out where the public is, so they come across it by accident, without having to make an effort – eg in shopping centres, on the streets, in parks & so on.

In the festival's early years, we had many events in shopping centres. When the recession hit Ireland from



2008 on, that was a challenge for a number of reasons. Colleges & other organisations suffering from cuts in their finances could not spare the staff to serve on an information stand or be involved in other ways outside their own building. Also the shopping centres became very quiet with a drastic reduction in footfall, so even those who did continue their involvement outside college walls found their efforts were not rewarded.

While we have continued to include festival events in shopping centres, their number is much reduced. Now the Irish economy is on its way to recovery it would be worth considering increasing the number of events in shopping centres in future festivals.

Events take place in all kinds of venues, on the streets, in parks, and some organisations take their activities into library branches.

Challenges

A challenge in the early years, and occasionally still today, is confusion of the festival with the annual Adult Education & Training Exhibition, organised by the Adult Education Council & held in City Hall every September since the 1960s. I need to explain that the festival has not replaced the exhibition, which continues, but is very different – with events taking place across the city and, while it may encourage the take-up of classes & courses, is not primarily about that – rather it is about celebration.

The main challenge we have faced until very recently has been dependable funding. While the festival is organised on a limited budget it does not have an income, as all events are free & no fees are charged to participate. It costs roughly €60,000 to organise; after the pay for the Co-ordinator, the main costs are for printing & limited marketing, including posters & adverts on two buses crisscrossing the city.

The Festival Organising Committee

The Festival Organising Committee was set up as a Working Group of the Cork City Learning Forum, itself founded by the Cork City Development Board (CDB) which was established by Cork City Council. (The Development Boards were a government initiative). In 2002 the CDB published an Integrated Strategy for the Economic, Social & Cultural Development of the city called *Imagine Our Future* which, among other aspirations, sought to promote Cork as a City of Learning. www.corkcitydb.ie/ImagineOurFuture/

Note: the Cork City Learning Forum no longer exists. Neither does the Cork City Development Board (CDB) – the last government abolished CDBs around the country, they were replaced with Public Participation Networks (PPNs) and Local Community Development Committees.

The latter published the Cork City Local Economic & Community Plan (LECP) called *Pure Cork* – an action plan for the city 2016-2021, which includes Education. The LECP was developed over two years, involving business, community and voluntary organisations, public agencies and social partners operating in Cork. See www.corkcity.ie/localeconomicandcommunityplan; and www.corkcity.ie for more information.

The Festival Organising Committee is made up of volunteers drawn from different educational sectors. It was chaired from 2004-2007 by Ciaran Lynch working as an Adult Literacy Organiser with Cork Education & Training Board – (then Cork City VEC or Voluntary Education Committee) – who was elected a TD (Member of Parliament) in 2007.

Other members included Willie McAuliffe, then Deputy Principal of a Further Education college & member of NAPD (National Association of Principals & Deputy Principals). Willie took over as Chair in 2007 & continues in that position today.

Other members in 2004:

- Elmarie McCarthy, Community & Enterprise Directorate, Cork City Council – the festival's 'home.'
- Denis Barrett, Community Education Facilitator, Cork ETB;
- Eamonn Kirwan, Cork City Libraries;
- Evelyn Grant, Cork Institute of Technology constituent college Cork School of Music;
- Rosalie Moloney, Principal, Secondary School;
- Trish Harrington, Principal, School for the Disabled/Irish Primary Principals Network.

In the years since 2004 some members have left & the committee has been expanded; there have been a number of changes of personnel – eg The Library Service was represented first by Eamon Kirwan, then Tina Healy, and in recent years by Peggy Barrett. The expansion of the committee has added representatives from UCC, CIT, Traveller Education, Cork City Partnership (whose remit includes Education).

Committee meetings were held frequently in the run up to the first festival in 2004 & in the early years. Since then meetings are usually held monthly from September to June, with a break in July & August, although there is frequent contact between the committee and myself year round.

In 2005 my contract was for 12 weeks, in 2006 for 16 weeks. After that I was given a year-round contract employed on a half-time basis for 42 weeks, full-time for 10 weeks. From the beginning I was employed by Cork Education & Training Board, its sponsorship of the festival.

After each festival, I write to all the participants thanking them for their involvement, asking them for feedback – how their event(s) went, any suggestions they have for other participants, improvements. All that feedback is included in the Festival Report which I write after each festival & has helped develop the festival over the years.

All welcome

From its foundation, the festival has been inclusive, welcoming the disabled, the disadvantaged – including Travellers & the 'new Irish' – not only to attend events but to fully take part by also organising their own events.

The festival includes not only State funded organisations but also private colleges & individuals, cultural, heritage, voluntary & community organisations. Among them over the years: Alliance Francaise, Cork Spanish Circle, Rising Sun School of Karate, Cork Nature Network, Griffith College Cork, Cork School of Shiatsu, Young at Heart, plus individuals offering classes in Yoga, Pilates, Tai Chi etc.

Festival motto

Our motto sums up what the festival is about: **Investigate** – find out what learning opportunities are available;

Participate – take part yourself, try something new, a taster session, a hands-on workshop, join in a choir rehearsal;

Celebrate – it is a festival, it's fun, it's also a way of celebrating those who are already involved – family, friends, neighbours – giving them a rare chance to show off what they are learning with displays, performances and so on.



The First Festival

The Committee had already decided the dates – Friday 7 & Saturday 8 May 2004 – when I was appointed. But, because participants offered events on Thursday 6 & Sunday 9, it eventually spread out over four days with over 60 different events.

A look at that first programme is worthwhile, as it represents what the festival does – showcase learning opportunities for all ages, interests & abilities. In 2004 it may not have reflected all sectors, but it was a good start. Gradually gaps have been closed, and the festival today includes events for all ages & in all sectors. That's not to suggest that there isn't room for more – in particular sports & events for young children.

The programme for the first festival in 2004 included:

- Sign language for beginners with Cork Association for the Deaf;
- Tour of the permanent collection at Crawford Municipal Gallery;
- Performance by a school band in Blackpool Shopping Centre;
- Rowing in currachs – Secondary students rowing traditional boats they built with Meitheal Mara;
- Students of Beauty & Hairdressing courses at St John's College gave demonstrations in Douglas Shopping Centre;
- Learn about full & part-time courses for adults at UCC, exhibition & meet tutors – in Crawford Gallery;
- See how computers help students with disabilities;
- Outdoor arts & crafts trail in Ballyphehane;
- Open top bus tour of murals in Mayfield;
- Print-making workshop with students from Colaiste Stiofain Naofa in Douglas Shopping Centre;
- Wheelchair Hurling match;
- Coaching for youngsters aged 4-10 at Blackrock Hurling & Football Club;
- Public talks on author Frank O'Connor & on Cork's Industrial Past;
- Drama workshop with primary school students in a library.



Friday & Saturday

- Strand called Open Doors to Learning
- Open Days at CIT, Cork College of Commerce, Cork Academy of Music, Centre for the Unemployed, Togher Family Centre, FÁS Training Centre.
- Strand called Switch on to Computers
- Learn how to use a computer, with tutors available at:
- Colaiste Stiofain Naofa, College of Further Education; Cork College of Commerce, FE College; St John's College; Community Resource Centre, Mayfield; Ballyphehane/Togher Community Development Project; Secondary School, Ballyphehane; Community Computer Access Centre, Togher Primary School; Togher Family Centre; Secondary School, Farranree; Deerpark Primary School; Central Library.

The first festival ended with an evening Concert in City Hall called Music and Movement. It featured performances by

- a Secondary School choir,
- students of Dance Course at Coláiste Stiofáin Naofa (CSN) college of Further Education;
- students & graduates of Music Management & Sound at CSN;
- students from CIT Cork School of Music: 7 year old violinist, Primary School Music Project; flute player; collaboration with children from Primary School for Disabled;
- Lecturer from CIT Cork School of Music playing cello accompanied by dancer from CSN;
- The Montfort Singers – private performing arts school;
- CADA (Cork Academy of Dramatic Art) – private drama school.

While all other events during first festival were free, we had to charge a token fee of €5 for the concert to cover the costs of staging it; the venue City Hall was free, but we had to hire sound equipment & pay a couple of staff.



The years since

Gradually the number of events increased – from 90 in its second year (2005) to 150 & lasting for a week in 2006. It continued to grow – 200 events in 2008 to 500 by 2015; in 2017 during the 14th festival there were over 600. The increase is due not only to new participants but also to those already involved increasing the number of events they offer.

In 2004, when the festival began, Ireland was going through an economic boom, known as the Celtic Tiger, with almost full employment – yet even then some people were being left behind, so the festival was started to target specifically those who would not usually continue their education, or had not completed second level. Often they have unhappy memories of their time at school, and older members of the community come from a time when autism and other challenging conditions were not recognised.

It was visionary at that time to act to counter educational disadvantage, to consider how some people were not prepared if there was a downturn in the economy – which sadly happened in 2008. In times of full employment, people can cope without skills or qualifications, even with a lack of literacy, as so many are employed in the services & construction industries.

Looking through 14 festival programmes you can chart the changes Ireland has experienced over that period. In the first few years, for instance, there is a concentration on encouraging all ages to learn how to use a computer. In later years, that continues to a lesser extent with some classes still offered: eg for older people Computers for the Petrified at Bishopstown Senior Social Centre; how to use iPads, mobile phones with Cork City Partnership. In 2017 the Cork Academy of Music showcased its involvement in the government's Digital Skills Training initiative – still necessary for people seeking work. At the same time we feature Coderdojo events, the coding clubs for young people founded in Cork which have spread worldwide.

The recession caused by the economic crash was reflected in events offering advice for the unemployed & in the City Centre Community Education Network hosting an information stand in the Social Protection office, where the unemployed collect benefits. The Network has for the last two years highlighted its activities with a stand in the Central Library – a small sign of Ireland's recovery.

The festival is often used to inform the public – for instance, when the VECs (Voluntary Education Committees) were transformed into Education & Training Boards, we organised a seminar & discussion. The move to make Cork an Age Friendly City, Cork becoming a WHO Healthy City, the founding of the Cork Food Policy Council – they are just some examples of how the festival helps spread information & encourages discussion among the people of the city.

Learning in the Workplace

In 2017, thanks to Matt Cotterell, Head of Engineering at CIT, we introduced a new strand – the Learning Factory – with four companies opening their doors to the public. Also, the 2017 festival included a small eco-friendly business & tours & information about supports available for social enterprises, with a visit to Northside for Business, both events thanks to Bernie Connolly of the Cork Environmental Forum.

We have always tried to include events taking place in business & work settings, and have featured Supported Learning in the Workplace thanks to the National Learning Network in the past, so this year's developments are very welcome. Already we have been approached by other companies interested in participating in the future.



Partnership with Féile an Phobail



Some may wonder why we developed strong links with a festival in West Belfast – the largest community festival on these islands (the 'festival of the people.'). The main reason is so people from different communities at either end of the island of Ireland will learn a little about each other, by working on projects together. I have long been aware that many Cork people have never visited the North and that it is probably more alien to them than Spain or Portugal, the USA or even Australia!

Our partnership built up gradually, much as the festival itself has grown. It started after a successful three year Co-operation Ireland project which brought together Mayfield Arts Centre in Cork with Southcity in Belfast, culminating with the unveiling of a mural the groups painted during the 2008 festival. The following year that mural was used as a backdrop for an event in Triskel Art Centre, introduced by Barry Fennell of Co-operation Ireland & myself, where Danny Morrison, Chair of Féile an Phobail & Declan Hassett, formerly Arts Editor at the Irish Examiner, read from their recent writings.

In 2010 we formally announced the partnership between our two festivals. The following year the President of Ireland welcomed that relationship when opening the festival. In 2012 we invited the Lord Mayor of Belfast to jointly launch the festival with the Lord Mayor of Cork.



Over the years a number of exchanges & projects have taken place – including mural painting by Mahon Community Development Project's Men's Art Group under instruction from Belfast mural artists & young people from both Belfast communities learning to build currachs & row the traditional boats with Meitheal Mara. Relationships have built up between the individuals & organisations involved. They continue on a year-round basis & have extended beyond the festivals, including participation by Cork in the Belfast City Marathon & vice versa.

In areas where there is or has been conflict it is vital that barriers are broken down between different communities & enjoyable events including festivals can have a huge role to play. Bringing even just a few individuals together to work on projects can forge new understanding & co-operation. I hope that the twinning of our two festivals is copied in other places in the world which are experiencing or emerging from conflict.

I'm delighted that, since it was first suggested, the partnership between the Cork Lifelong Learning Festival & Féile an Phobail has been encouraged & supported by the Festival Organising Committee, and by others, among them: Barry Fennell of Co-operation Ireland in Belfast; Ted Owens, CE of Cork ETB; Jim O'Donovan of Cork City Council, now retired & on the committee of Co-operation Ireland's Cork branch; Tom Daly of Cork ETB (retired); Pádraig Ó Duinnín & Meitheal Mara, Viv Sadd of Mahon CDP, Bernard Twomey of HSE.

I want to thank my friend Danny Morrison, Chair of Féile an Phobail until recently, and John Paul O'Hare, Kevin Gamble & Kevin Morrison of Féile for their support & encouragement.



International connections

In 2011 the festival first gained international attention, after a presentation by me at the Hume Global Learning Village in Victoria, Australia. I was visiting Melbourne as my daughter was living there, and decided to see if there were any similar festivals happening in Australia. When I discovered Hume, a suburb of Melbourne, organised four annual festivals, one for each season, I made contact & was invited to speak to Hume City Council.

As a result the festival, representing Cork, was invited to join PASCAL, the Observatory for Place Management, Social Capital & Learning Regions, as the then only Irish member of its global network of academics & practitioners in lifelong learning, called PIE (PASCAL International Exchanges).

That was the beginning. In 2012 we invited George Osborne from Hume to speak at the first festival seminar & while in Cork he introduced us to the idea of EcCoWell – the concept developed by Peter Kearns of PASCAL. You can read an account of how EcCoWell has developed in Cork in this booklet.

As a direct result, the UNESCO Institute of Lifelong Learning invited the Lord Mayor of Cork & myself to attend the 1st International Conference on Learning Cities in Beijing, China, in September 2013. As the Lord Mayor had other commitments, the Deputy Lord Mayor Lorraine Kingston represented Cork in her place.

In 2014 Cork City Council formally adopted the Beijing Declaration on Learning Cities, the only local authority in Ireland to do so. In order to progress its recommendations a MOU was signed in 2015 between Cork City Council, Cork ETB, CIT & UCC. A Working Group was set up called GLLiC – Growing Lifelong Learning in Cork – to implement the Beijing Declaration.

We were invited to be one of the first members of UNESCO's Global Network of Learning Cities, and to write one of the Case Studies for the UNESCO publication Unlocking the Potential of Urban Communities.

In 2015 it was a thrill to be informed that UNESCO was going to present Cork with one of its inaugural Learning City Awards at its 2nd International Conference on Learning Cities in Mexico City, one of only 12 in the world & three in Europe. I was also invited to give a presentation at the conference.

GLLiC decided to appoint a Learning City Co-ordinator & I am delighted that my friend & close colleague Denis Barrett, formerly Community Education Facilitator, Cork ETB, took up the position in November 2016.

Hosting the 3rd UNESCO Conference on Learning Cities is a huge honour, and reflects Cork's track record in organising our festival devoted to lifelong learning for 14 years. The festival's success is due to the enthusiasm & commitment of hundreds of people all over the city, who look forward to it every year.





by Denise Cahill,
Co-ordinator Cork
Healthy Cities, HSE

EcCoWell has captured my imagination like no other initiative that I have engaged with since taking on the role of Healthy Cities Co-ordinator. I was captivated when George Osborne from Hume, a suburb of Melbourne, Australia, came to Cork in 2012 & presented the concept to myself, Anne Fitzpatrick from UCC, Bernie Connolly from Cork Environmental Forum & Tina Neylon from the Lifelong Learning Festival. Peter Kearns of PASCAL had developed the concept.

Engaged in public health & health promotion for 20 years, I was becoming more curious & stimulated by the global shift (thanks to the Marmot Review) to address the key issues impacting on equality in terms of health such as education, employment, our environment & our economy. The financial crisis of 2007/2008 hit Ireland (as everywhere else) hard & it presented an opportunity to reflect on what really affects our health. There was a marked shift in health promotion away from lifestyle (which I call 'low hanging fruit') interventions towards the root causes of ill health. We had entered an era of large scale migration, escalating urbanisation, growing diversity in populations, demographic change & aging populations, global warming, poverty & growing inequality - all of which impact hugely on our health. Peter Kearns stated that 'traditional responses' are 'no longer adequate'. So EcCoWell as a concept captivated my imagination & challenged me & my colleagues to figure out how to translate the theory into a practical application in our work. This non-traditional approach to work drew me in immediately.

The benefits of the EcCoWell approach are enormous. The upstream & salutogenic (as opposed to pathogenic) approach to health has been lost for a long time in overstretched & crisis-driven 'health' services that treat illness (the net result of poor health). The EcCoWell approach offered a collaborative way to address the social determinants of health, to effectively aspire to work upstream where the problems begin & seek solutions.

EcCoWell Cork has created a space for new ideas through informal connections. The spaces we choose to host events are often unconventional, including; Triskel Arts Centre, Vertigo at County Hall, Lifetime Lab, Haulbowline Naval Base, a former bank.



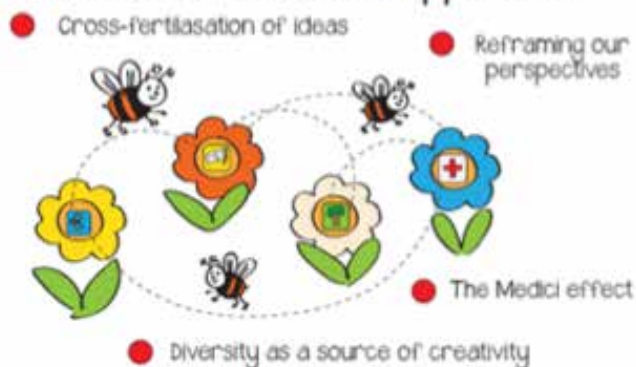
Ec = Ecology & Economy
Co = Community & Culture
Well = Well-being & Lifelong Learning

We have endeavoured to be creative in all our activities:

- **March 2013** Lifelong Learning Festival Seminar – Cities of the Future, special guest Peter Kearns - EcCoWell Think Tank in Triskel Arts Theatre
- **June 2013** First Open Network meeting - Cork County Hall.
- **September 2013** – Launch of EcCoWell Cork - Cities of the Future International EcCoWell Conference Cork City Hall – attended by 260 delegates from overseas & Ireland
- **April 2014** – Lifelong Learning Festival event - Open Network meeting on plans for the Health Campus in St Mary's Orthopaedic Hospital
- **June 2014** – Open Networking Consultation on City Development Plan – City Hall
- **March 2015** – Lifelong Learning Festival Seminar - Growing Lifelong Learning in Cork – special guest Raul Valdez Cotera from UNESCO Triskel Arts Centre
- **July 2015** - Cork Harbour Summer School - Haulbowline Naval Base
- **June 2016** – Open Networking session on plans for Cork Docklands in former Cork Savings Bank
- **October 2016** – Urban October event – Working towards a Sustainable City – organisations supporting quality of life & wellbeing - St John's Central College
- **January 2017** – Green Breakfast on the Sustainable Development Goals - Lifetime Lab

The approach has been lucrative & exciting & has spawned a number of city-wide partnerships & projects such as Cork Food Policy Council. The key has been the openness to new learning & new ways of doing things with new people. EcCoWeLL has been a vehicle for us to begin conversations & initiate projects with sectors that traditionally struggled to meet. The cross-fertilisation of ideas & ways of working in different sectors has been refreshing & stimulating.

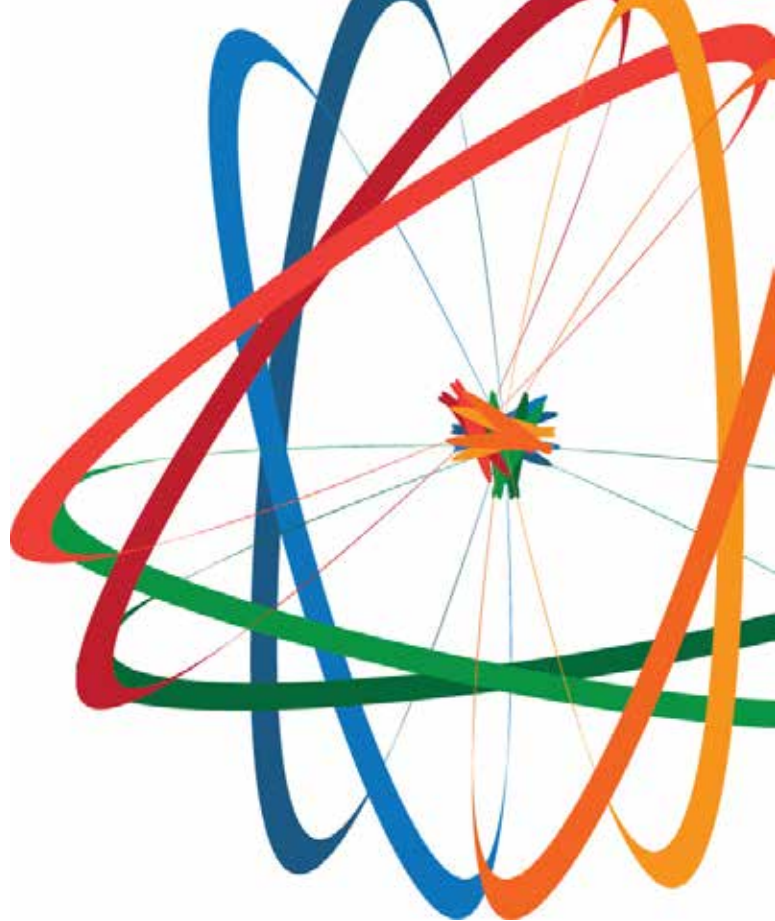
Benefits of EcCoWell Approach



Cork had the foundations for much of this way of working already in place. The spirit & culture of our small city has been integral to the aspiration of a good quality of life which is attractive to all residents & to industry. At a time of restricted budgets & a greater need for collaboration, the collaboration was easy & effective. Everyone was hungry for something new & EcCoWeLL nourished this need with opportunities for engagement, discussion & progress.

Our core belief is that working in silos has limited capacity & impact. We have a simple aim - we continually support integration. Integration maximises the health potential & educational opportunities of all our citizens as well as developing the environmental & economic sustainability of our city for greater equality, social inclusion & ultimately quality of life. Our little group has no lead; everyone is equal. The key ingredient in a worthwhile partnership is parity of esteem & EcCoWeLL Cork has established & evolved this ethos of collaboration from the start.

Developed by Martin O'Donoghue our logo summarises our vision – the individual sectors are represented by the coloured rings that interact & collide to develop sparks of creativity. Our task has been to establish the framework for discussion, a space for creativity & community involvement & to let initiatives evolve.



In a practical sense the approach provides a platform for integrating strategies for Cork as a Healthy City, a Green City and a Learning City, supported by economic development. This is the blueprint to foster quality of life & wellbeing for people in Cork that Peter Kearns kindly shared with us.

EcCoWell group:

Denis Barrett,
Cork Learning City Co-ordinator

Denise Cahill,
Cork Healthy Cities Co-ordinator, HSE

Bernadette Connolly,
Cork Environmental Forum

Deirdre Creedon,
Access Officer, CIT

Elmarie McCarthy,
*Strategic Planning & Economic Development,
Cork City Council*

Stephen Murphy,
Community Health Worker, HSE

Tina Neylon,
Co-ordinator, Cork Lifelong Learning Festival

Martin O'Donoghue,
Business Development, Cork Opera House

CORK LIFELONG LEARNING FESTIVAL

Féile Foghlama Feadh an tSaoil Chorcaí

Media partners:



Partner



Friends



Cork City Council



www.corklearningcity.ie