



County Kildare LEADER Partnership

is the designated programme implementer for the national Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP) in Co. Kildare. SICAP aims to tackle poverty, social exclusion and long-term unemployment through local engagement and partnership between disadvantaged individuals, community organisations and public sector agencies. In Co. Kildare, SICAP is funded by Kildare Local Community Development Committee. The programme was rolled out on 1st April 2015 and will run until December 2017. SICAP focuses on the most marginalised in Irish society. The three goals of SICAP are focused on: community development; education and training; and, employment.

Better Basics

Background/Context

Better Basics is a reading enhancement programme designed to support and advance reading skills amongst primary school age pupils. It is aimed at children who require some additional assistance to improve their reading, but are not in receipt of mainstream learning supports. The programme supports improvement in children's reading ability through one to one paired learning with a reading volunteer.

The programme had previously been implemented by Tolka Area Partnership who adapted it from a UK model. From the beginning, a community development approach called "Asset Based Community Development" (ABCD) was used to develop relationships and generate social capital to implement the project. The benefit of this approach is that local actors come together to build on their strengths rather than relying on external aids.

Asset Based Community Development

ABCD is a strategy for sustainable community driven development. ABCD builds on the assets already found in the community and mobilizes individuals, associations and institutions to come together to build on their assets, not concentrate on their needs. (www.abcdinstitute.org)



Aine Byrne, CKLP at the presentation of certificates, Kildare Town Library 21st May 2015

In Co. Kildare, the assets available included the presence of CKLP as a local partnership with a community development ethos and the ability to lead and act as a champion for the project which was consistent with the objectives of its social inclusion strategy. A key difference in the approach adopted in Co. Kildare was the involvement of Kildare Library and Arts Service as a stakeholder, which was an additional resource in terms of materials, knowledge and support. Other stakeholders include local schools (staff, pupils and parents), and volunteers. The primary assets brought by the various actors were time, open mindedness, knowledge, commitment and a willingness to see the project succeed.



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Programme Activity

Having researched the programme learning from the experience of our colleagues in Tolka Area Partnership, the next stage was to spread the word to local schools and engage volunteers for a seven week pilot programme in Co. Kildare starting in March 2014. Two schools were involved in the pilot, namely Scoil Náisiúnta Naomh Pádraig and Curragh Girls National School. For the first complete programme, a third school, Kilberry National School became involved. The schools assisted by identifying pupils who would benefit from the programme, seeking the support of parents, and managing class time to accommodate the reading sessions. CKLP recruited and trained a panel of volunteers, carried out Garda vetting, and coordinated the matching of volunteers to schools at mutually suitable times and days. Kildare Library and Arts Service funded and provided books which were then graded by one of the teachers to the appropriate reading levels.

The first complete fifteen week programme ran until May 2015 with three schools involved. Upon completion, participating pupils, teachers, volunteers and parents were invited to a presentation day at Kildare Town library where they received certificates of completion and recognition of their achievements. Participating children were also given a gift of a children's dictionary courtesy of the library service to support them in their ongoing reading development. The event was also an introduction for children and parents to the local library as a friendly and open space for them to enjoy and avail of, with the help of Rua, the library squirrel mascot.

Better Basics Objectives:

Greater involvement and interest in school life

Increased confidence in reading ability

Future school retention

Library membership and introduction to free library services

Impact

The impact of the programme were evident on the presentation day, where children read out notes of thanks to all who had helped them, especially the volunteers they had come to trust and enjoy spending time with. Speaking in front of a large gathering of parents, teachers and other adults and children, it was apparent that the

children had gained the confidence to read aloud clearly and articulately – a task that many adults would find daunting.

The relationships that had developed with the working partners, such as schools, volunteers, the library service and CKLP were also evident, with a sense of pride in what the children and volunteers had achieved as a result of the opportunity that was created and championed by the various stakeholders. The success to date has laid a foundations for the programme to be continued into the academic year 2015/2016 with the possibility of extending it to additional schools and benefiting a greater number of children.

Finally, agreed templates designed to act as an indication of reading ability of participating children were completed by volunteers. A comparison of records from the beginning and end of the programme indicated that the majority of children demonstrated a significant improvement in their reading ability.

Challenges

One of the ongoing challenges in developing and introducing new and innovative programmes is the lead in time required to get it running. In addition to researching the programme, the pilot stage involved many first time activities. This resulted in the pilot stage running for seven weeks, rather than the full fifteen weeks. Presenting the idea to possible participants and securing their support is dependent on their time and resources, as well as the activities being a good fit with their objectives. For example, a common challenge when working with schools is reconciling the difference between the calendar year on which SICAP funding and reporting mechanisms are based, and the academic year which the schools work to. In addition, CKLP moved from concluding the Local Community Development Programme and commencing its successor; the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme during the term of the 2015 programme. Fortunately, the programme is eligible to continue under the new programme objectives set at national and local level.

On a practical level, the ordering and grading of books for example, was a learning curve for those involved. It was important for these preparations to be in place before the programme could start to ensure that the appropriate reading materials were given to children for their level of comprehension and ability. From a schools perspective in the pilot phase, the reading appointments sometimes



ran over time and their feedback recommended that the time slots keep to the agreed time of fifteen minutes. This was taken on board for the second phase and adhered to. Other day to day management issues included the matching of volunteers to schools at times, dates and locations that were suitable to all parties, and monitoring volunteer availability and attendance to ensure that no child was without reading support once they had commenced.

Stakeholder Perspectives

Improved collaboration in the community, harnessing assets for the benefit of children who might otherwise not have access to supports was of benefit to CKLP in achieving its social inclusion aims. Educational supports for children that are based on early intervention have consistently proven to lead to an increased likelihood of school retention and completion of education. In addition, the project was designed to aid children's personal development. This approach is also in line with national educational policy and best practice as outlined in Better Outcomes Brighter Futures (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2014) At adult level in non-accredited education and labour market training, common barriers for SICAP participants are a lack of clarity in speaking and writing and/or poor literacy.

The Library service were keen to develop links with children and parents in the community. In the past, courses for adults were delivered in Kildare town library as part of a national pilot for lifelong learning with CKLP and other partners, but this was the first joint initiative with CKLP for school age children. Better basics was therefore a good fit with the library's outreach and community engagement objectives. The Library Development Plan "Ideas Realised: Spreading the word: Kildare County Council Library Services Development Plan 2015-2019" emphasises a commitment to literacy, a collaborative approach to partnerships and sharing of resources. Children were delighted to discover that membership allowed them to use any library in the network, and any who were not already members had an opportunity to meet library staff and join on the presentation day.

Feedback from participating schools indicated that the children were more positive and confident about reading. It was important that the programme assisted in improving children's reading ability without adding pressure to scarce school resources, which was achieved through a collaborative approach.

"Having seen pupils in my class go in and out to the reading club over the last few weeks, I can't help but marvel at the positive attitude which some of them did not possess before, but now demonstrate when it comes to reading. Boys which, before the reading club took place, were nervous and anxious to read in class, now do so with a new found confidence. It's really great from a teacher's viewpoint to see." Fiona Maher, Class teacher, Curragh Boys School.

Children benefited from the attention on a one to one basis from a trained volunteer to support their learning. Participating children demonstrated improved confidence, fun and enjoyment as well as improved reading ability. 10 of the 11 children in the 2014 pilot programme reported feeling better about school after the better basics reading club, with one child recording no change in how they felt about school. 10 also described the club as "fun" with one describing it as "OK".

Children's Feedback:

"I liked learning stuff. Mostly stuff about Antarctica. I never want to go there it's too cold."

"He's [the volunteer] really fun, he really helped me with my reading by being able to practice."

I like the reading club because reading is fun.

Volunteers reported that they felt well supported in their role. From the initial recruits, those who were available returned the following year. They enjoyed their time and some felt that it was a challenge to stay within the 15 minute slot at times.

Volunteer feedback:

"I felt privileged to have the opportunity to help improve the children's reading ability and to help instil a sense of confidence in themselves."

"I enjoyed the relationship I built between myself and the children. It was a pleasure to see improvements and how they began to see reading as a fun pastime."

"It is a great programme to be involved with, and it is great satisfaction to see the children improve."

Finally, parents of the children involved were appreciative of the community based support for their child's learning. They experienced pride at their child's considerable achievement, and enjoyed more fun when reading at home with their child.

Learning

The Better Basics programme is proof that small interventions can have a large impact. The fact that the reading sessions were enjoyable for children and volunteers alike builds goodwill towards the programme and generates a positive experience. The Asset Based Community Development model was found to be a positive model for local society, particularly with the involvement of volunteers who have a lot to contribute.

The concept of better basics is simple but effective. This helps to secure buy in, and to continue the programme when transitioning between funding programmes.

Summary:

Year	No. Schools	No. Weeks	No. Children	No. Volunteers	No. Books
2014	2	7	12	5	303
2015	3	15	18	9	525

Otherwise, uncertainty about whether programmes can continue to be supported, causing a weakening of trust and cooperation between stakeholders. Although the programme was adapted to the local context, there was no dilution of its core principles and values.

Some of the conditions required to make the programme a success include sufficient lead in time, a large pool of volunteers, budget resource allocations, and substantial commitment and ongoing support from all stakeholders. The process of interagency collaboration works best when all parties come together in good faith. The results is that the better basics programme is more than the sum of its parts.

