



# BUILDING RESILIENCE: Capturing a Community Response



An Roinn Forbartha  
Tuaithe agus Pobail  
Department of Rural and  
Community Development



Clare  
Volunteer Centre  
Ionad d'Obair Dheonach an Chláir



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# BACKGROUND TO RESEARCH

## Genesis of Research – Clare Volunteer Centre Board Meeting

Clare Volunteer Centre is a county wide volunteer support service funded by the Department of Rural and Community Development. It is managed by a voluntary board, made up of representatives from the local community. During a board meeting in October 2022, where the manager gave an overview of the Ukrainian Community Response Forum, a discussion was held on capturing the learnings from communities where large numbers of people from Ukraine had been re-settled. Board member Dr Helen McQuillan initiated the lead on the project to document and evaluate the impact and outcomes of structured volunteer management and community engagement.

## War in Ukraine and Arrival of Ukrainian People

Russia invaded Ukraine on 24th February 2022 in a major escalation of a war which began in 2014. The Russian attack was on many fronts and instigated a major refugee crisis, Europe's largest since World War 2. The Irish government issued an immediate statement of support for the people of Ukraine, and committed to offering the humanitarian support they would need. On February 25th the Minister for Justice announced immediate lifting of visa requirements between Ireland and Ukraine as an emergency measure for all Ukrainians travelling to Ireland. Both the Taoiseach and Justice Minister stated that Ireland would not be found wanting in their response, and that they were confident that the Irish people would provide welcome and shelter to those in need. There was no way to know how many people would seek refuge here, but by 1st March 2022 another press release from the Department of Justice stated that over 650,000 people were estimated to have fled their country. By mid-March 2022 some of those had arrived to North Clare and by mid-May more than 800 people were accommodated in Lisdoonvarna. CSO records showed the local electoral area as having the highest rate of arrivals from Ukraine in the country and reported an increase of 31.9% in the population of North Clare.

## Research Proposal and Funding

The Department of Rural and Community Development released funding for Volunteer Centres to support the Ukraine Community Response at the end of 2022. The funding was provided to Volunteer Centres for additional work being undertaken in response to the Ukraine crisis, beyond the services the centre usually provides. The Clare Volunteer Centre commissioned a piece of research to explore how a rural community in North Clare responded and map the processes of community support and capacity building, especially in volunteer engagement and management.

Through a qualitative research approach and engagement with Lisdoonvarna Fáilte and other key stakeholders, key outcomes are identified, community development processes are explored and the learnings of a community based organisation in developing sustainable and inclusive communities are highlighted. The Clare Volunteer Centre would like to acknowledge the support of the Department of Rural and Community Development in supporting this initiative.

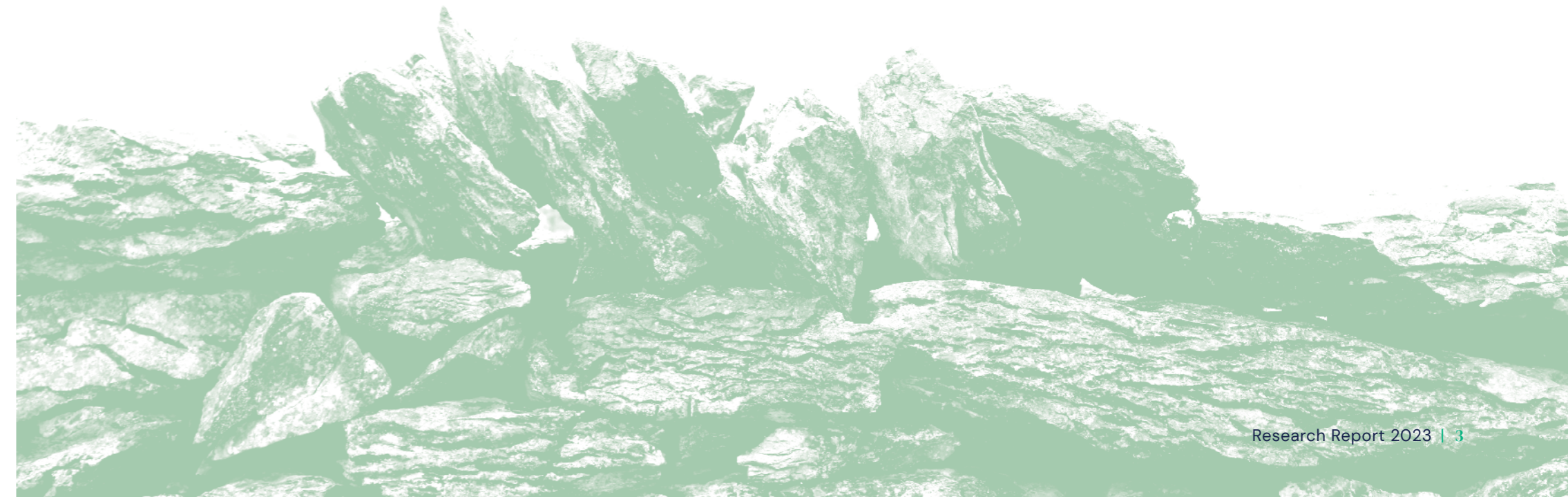
## Lisdoonvarna: A Rural Community in County Clare

Lisdoonvarna is a quiet, rural town in the West of Ireland. Situated in the Burren region of North Clare, and a short drive from the Atlantic coast it has a long tradition of summer tourism and much of the economy is related to tourism needs. The town was founded around the therapeutic benefits of the mineral spa which caused a tourism 'boom' during the late 19th century and resulted in most of the present-day guest houses and hotels being built to accommodate the influx of visitors. In more recent times the annual Lisdoonvarna Matchmaking Festival has become one of the largest matchmaking events in Europe, attracting some 40,000 people to the town during the month of September. While the resident population is relatively small, 829 in Census 2016, the town is accustomed to welcoming large numbers of guests. The community hosted the Ukrainian Special Olympics team in 2003, a memorial plaque provides a poignant reminder of that connection. In 2018 a direct provision centre was opened, bringing 120 new people to live in a local hotel. The outbreak of the Covid pandemic in 2020 brought new challenges for the community, testing the health services and the social and economic fabric of the region. The response was to form the Burren Community Meitheal, a collective formed by volunteers from lead organisations and clubs both in and beyond the town, who worked together to address the needs of the North Clare people at this time.

## Research Aim

This research is focused on a small, rural community in Ireland responding to the unexpected and unplanned arrival of Ukrainian people displaced because of war. The research site is Lisdoonvarna, County Clare, a town whose population almost doubled in March 2022 with the accommodation of over 800 people locally.

This research aims to explore the community's response, examine the processes of community capacity building and volunteer management, and distil the enabling factors for developing sustainable and inclusive communities.





## Research Method

The research was conducted over a twelve-week period: January – April 2023. An introductory meeting was held with Sharon Meaney, manager of Clare Volunteer Centre, followed by an initial online scoping meeting with three people from Lisdoonvarna Fáilte – Joe Garrihy, board member, Jacqueline Mc Coy, manager and Marie Uruqhart, volunteer co-ordinator. From the initial meetings a list of community stakeholders and potential interviewees was drafted.

The research was qualitative, using semi structured interviews with local community stakeholders. The short time frame for the research limited the number of research participants. The researcher attended a North Clare Community Response Forum meeting and two community coffee mornings in Lisdoonvarna. Informal conversations, in person and by phone, were had with six other people.

Ten interviews were conducted face to face. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and thematically analysed. Braun and Clarke's (2006)<sup>1</sup> six-phase thematic analysis framework was used to analyse the data and identify predominant themes. Quotes from the interviews are included to ensure people's experiences, reflections and voices are represented in the presentation of research findings.

1. Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). *Using thematic analysis in psychology. Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101

## Acknowledging the Challenges

This research focused on identifying enabling factors and community development processes in the Lisdoonvarna response to the unexpected arrival of hundreds of people of all ages fleeing war in Ukraine.

In doing so the enormous challenges experienced by individuals, community groups and service providers were evident. It is important to acknowledge those challenges in order to provide context to the response and to show respect to the traumatic nature of the experience.

- Arrivals were in shock, lacking basic necessities, disoriented, scared, unsure where to access information and many spoke no English.
- There was immediate pressure on existing services and infrastructure such as health, education, accommodation, transport, post and social services.
- There was an initial lag in communication and co-ordinated government support to the host community.
- The frontline staff and volunteers were overwhelmed providing crisis response and meeting basic needs, with limited translation capacity.
- There was and still is uncertainty about the duration of need which impacts decision making and investment on both a personal and community level.

The following report sets out to show how individuals and groups confronted these enormous challenges and worked together to find solutions and ground the community.

## Presentation of Research Findings

Research findings are presented thematically. Eight predominant themes (community development principles) were identified from the analysis of interview data. These are:

LEADERSHIP

CAPACITY BUILDING

STEWARDSHIP

RESPONSIVENESS

ENGAGEMENT

COMMUNICATION

COLLABORATION

RESOURCES

Each of these main themes is further evidenced by eight sub themes (community development processes) noted by interviewees. These enabling factors are illustrated with quotes from research participants. Notes and observations from informal meetings and discussions were also used to verify themes. From these, the researchers report the outcomes and impact of these community development processes.

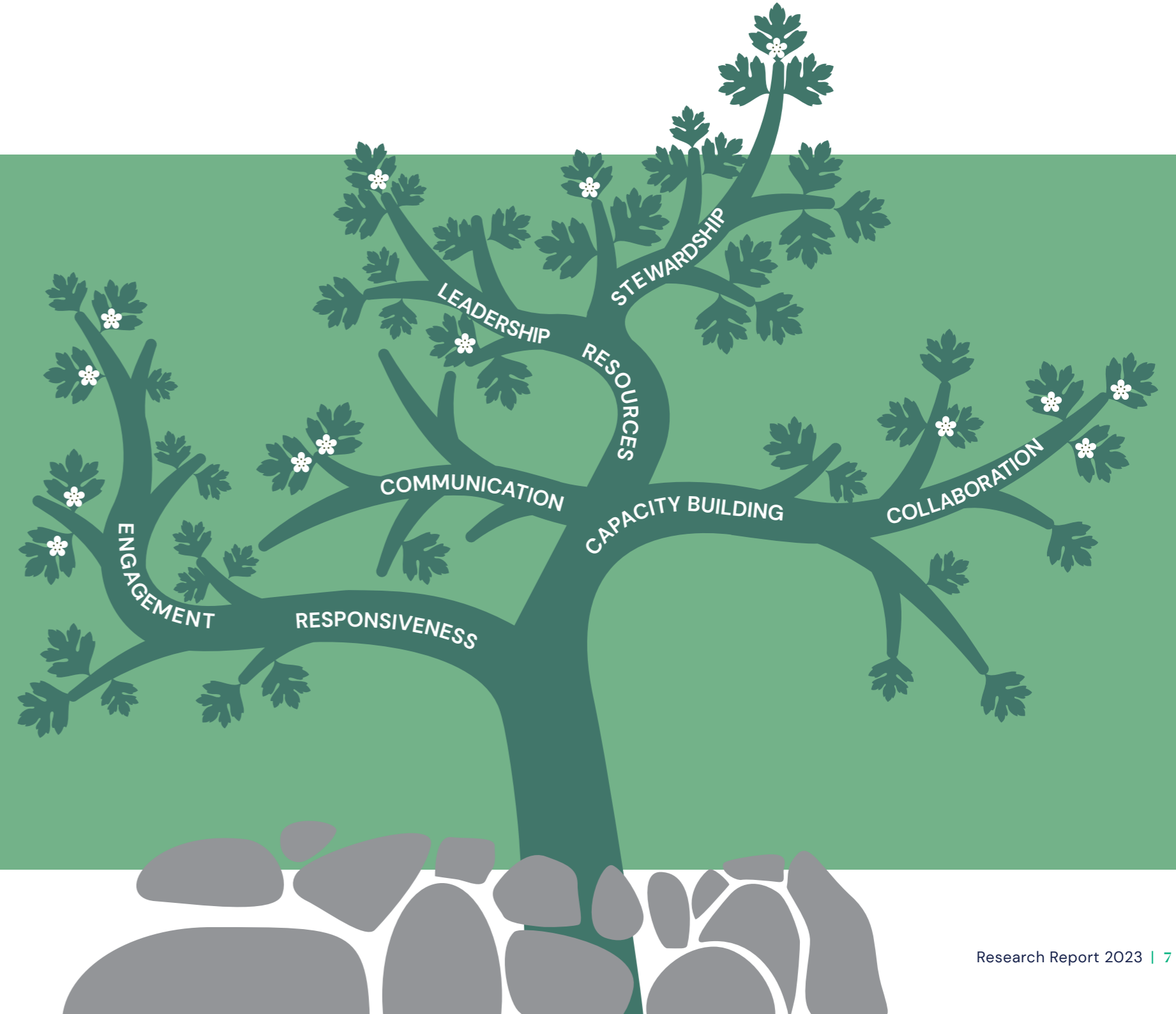
Listening to the interviews and reading the transcripts gave a real sense of the multi-faceted dynamic nature of community that people experienced and were describing. While the research presents findings in a linear, thematic way to identify inputs, processes and outcomes, the interconnectivity, complexity and challenges of community development are inherent.

In interpreting how people are describing their experiences and their community we have chosen an iconic Burren image – a windswept whitethorn tree supported by dry stone walls. The trees weather storms and continue to bud and blossom year on year, growing at a very slow pace. The stones and walls are the supporting structures; an inherent part of the Burren landscape. Walls are constructed using an ancient building technique, unique to each geographical area. This technique, still used throughout the Burren, carefully positions stones on top of each other, without using mortar. The way the stones are stacked and interlocked, as well as pressure from the stones on top, ensures the wall is stable and self-supporting.

# RESEARCH FINDINGS

## Summary of Research Findings

- LEADERSHIP enables EMPOWERED COMMUNITIES
- CAPACITY BUILDING enables LEARNING AND INNOVATION
- STEWARDSHIP enables PRIDE AND A STRONG SENSE OF COMMUNITY
- RESPONSIVENESS enables RESILIENT COMMUNITIES
- ENGAGEMENT enables ACTIVE PARTICIPATION AND INCLUSION/INVOLVEMENT
- COMMUNICATION enables COMMUNITIES TO BE INFORMED AND VOICES HEARD
- COLLABORATION enables STRONG AND SUPPORTIVE COMMUNITIES
- RESOURCES enable SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES





# LEADERSHIP

Strong leadership across all sectors of the community enables empowerment.

An empowered community has clear vision, encourages people to take responsibility, and supports individual and collective action for positive change.

## Vision

A vision that is achievable and shared enables a focus on opportunities, goals, actions and ambition. Many stakeholders remained faithful to their own organisation's vision, while adopting a broader community vision of inclusion and sustainability.

## Community Leaders

People interviewed noted how community leaders responded, encouraged and valued the work of their colleagues and partners. Key people spoke with humility and pride, yet acknowledged the work of colleagues and stakeholders, rather than themselves.

“That time, the beginning, we didn't have a core centre where we can shape the things. So then Lisdoonvarna Fáilte, they play the main role and everything. Then I told them if you guys (Ukrainians) directly come to me. I understand and try to help. That is the main intention, and Lisdoonvarna Fáilte coming behind as a foundation, so I move forward”. (Saif)

## Responsibility

People with authority and community leaders responded throughout the community, immediately taking on additional responsibility – school principals; volunteers; staff; rural transport providers; childcare services; accommodation providers.

“We started taking children into school... The school hall – I remember we emptied it and when I say it like this it makes me sound like I did all the work. Nothing could be further from the truth. The staff here were just incredible. And I mean that from cleaners, SNAs, Harry our carpenter, Orla our secretary. They were just amazing”. (Brian)

## Teams and Teamwork

The importance of teamwork was notable in the interviews. People recognised the strength and solidarity of different teams in dealing with challenges and crisis. Working together gave people hope, strength, support and solutions.

“Leadership is important. We can all get dragged off in different ways. People just responded and the hub of it all was Lisdoonvarna Fáilte. They couldn't have done it on a volunteer perspective alone, and we already had a connection with CLDC, and the volunteer centre, through the direct provision centre. So that was a real help” (Joe)

## Experience

The community's response to COVID built a solid foundation for emergency response and collaboration with a focus on meeting the needs of the most vulnerable in the community. North Clare's COVID response had demonstrated what could be achieved by pro-action and pulling together without relying on directives from statutory agencies.

## Openness

People interviewed commented about the openness to new ideas, new ways of working and to people taking on new roles and responsibilities.

## Action Focused

Despite the enormous challenges, people stayed positive, and action focused, and organisations committed and delivered on agreed actions. Maintaining an active presence in the community, continuously delivering activities and events helped dispel negativity.

“I got in contact with Michelle in Doolin NS and John in Kilshanny NS. And I said listen this is what is happening. I'm going to need help and they were brilliant. We had a meeting and we said, right, this is what we'll do. We'll go into every class and see what space we have. We can take six here, we can take two here and then we got together our numbers. I was out of quarantine on Saturday morning so that Saturday afternoon I remember we went to the two hotels here. The three of us, and we introduced ourselves and we said we're the principals. And we're here to help” (Brian)

## Can-do Attitude

People noted the importance of stakeholders being proactive in identifying individual and community needs and responding swiftly and with authority. Solutions sometimes required unconventional approaches allied with confidence.

“I'm updating them what is the needs, for example like in the beginning we don't have any bus service, Joe I think, thanks to Joe that he arranged now daily three bus service, morning and early afternoon and evening. It was great, great for everybody not only for Ukrainian. Because the other bus is charging €8 but here its only €3 and the local people are benefiting, they are shocked” (Saif)



# CAPACITY BUILDING

Capacity building enables learning and innovation.

Community capacity building is a process of continuous learning, tapping into a broad range of skills and knowledge. Developing solutions to problems collectively strengthens skills and structures.

## Learning and Development

There was an openness to learning from others, utilising a wide range of training opportunities and additional learning resources from partner organisations to build local capacity.

“All of the agencies involved in the North Clare Community Response Forum, while each will stay in their lane with regards to what they can offer, are actually very open to crossing over and offering solutions” (Sharon)

## Broad Skillset

The COVID response necessitated looking beyond skillsets traditionally tapped into in the community, and volunteers within the immediate locality. A range of volunteer skillsets emerged and were utilised, notably IT and software skills used to develop volunteer apps and information websites.

## Creativity and Creative Thinking

A focus on people’s and community needs, alongside a vision for what was achievable allowed new ideas to flourish. New challenges encouraged ‘out of the box’ thinking and in many instances, it was volunteers who brought the creative spark and positive energy.

“Nadine, she’s been involved in so many different events, she was events manager in Ukraine, said we really want to do a thank you to Clare for the welcome. And the Thank You piece was the Ukrainian culture event, which was just superb. That transcendence or being able to transform to creative arts was so important at that time because it just gave a different type of a focus, and especially for children that were involved.” (Jacqueline)

## Strategic Planning

Lisdoonvarna Fáilte built capacity through its strategic planning, robust governance structures, management of community assets and leverage of financial and human resources and skills. It was evident in the research that many activities and actions were continuously aligned with these longer-term plans and vision.

“Keeping that high priority list going and making sure the needs are met here, we’re providing enough opportunity. We’re looking at the new business model and adapting to where the strategic plan was to 2023. So that needs to change a little. And then just making the most of it and just working with really brilliant people as well. And having a really good team here, you’ve met them, they’re great and they’re really adaptable.” (Jacqueline)

## Space and Support

Responding to immediate needs and the chaotic nature of dealing with the unexpected, as well as delivering normal services led to depletion of energy. That didn’t stop people looking for help and support to ‘recharge’. In a safe space people could express their frustrations and vulnerability.

“I wasn’t only organising trips. I also provided supports to families that had some problems with health. I supported them driving to the hospitals and translating there and back. I had to be silent and not share this information. I know its personal. People need their individual dignity”. (Anastasiia)

## Openness and Invite

Many interviewees noted that the tone set at initial community meetings was one of openness. Invites were sent to all community stakeholders to attend.

“Maybe there is one word for this: A place, full of hopes for the future. Opportunities, happiness and helpful. People in this environment, they differ from others. Here in this area in Clare, they’re so helpful. They are so nice and so open”. (Anastasia)

## Robust Structures

The importance of robust governance, communication and support structures and processes featured prominently in interviews.

“We’d look at the needs of their social enterprise. So, we do a lot of work in regards to governance, supporting with mentoring and providing training. It’s ongoing, developmental work.” (Michelle)

## Information and Knowledge

The ability to link with service providers in Clare who had experience and knowledge of supporting vulnerable groups and refugees and asylum seekers was invaluable to ensure a two way flow of information and sharing of knowledge.





# STEWARDSHIP

Stewardship enables a strong sense of community.

People interviewed described the careful, respectful and responsible management of community assets entrusted to people and organisations to care for.

## Pride in Community

Reflecting on Lisdoonvarna's response allowed interviewees to express pride of their own role, their team's effort and the response of multiple stakeholders in making people feel welcome and safe.

“I not only believe, I am sure that we will make our plan a reality, especially concerning the Pavilion, and there are other places that I adore here that need reconstruction. I hope it also will be someday. The village has huge potential.” (Anastasia B)

## Ethos

An ethos of rolling sleeves up, working hard under enormous pressure for the common good was evident.

“We want to learn to deal with and learn to cope better. And the main thing was getting to know people and just normalising it. And that really is our role I think we're good at doing that. We kind of normalise extreme situations and are able to ground it. That's a strength of the team here.” (Jacqueline)

## Values

There was a sense that all interviewees considered their contribution was respected and valued. It was clear from interviews that there was a strong community effort to respect diverse cultures and values, as well as value placed on extending a welcome to share in the local culture.

## Community Hub

The Pavilion became the community hub for the Ukrainian response. Having an adaptable, accessible, physical focal point in the town was invaluable in co-ordinating the initial emergency responses, and in providing a social space in the subsequent months.

## Welcome and Safety

Interviewees had a strong sense of pride in place and community and wanted to make people feel welcome. The Ukrainian people interviewed noted how the Lisdoonvarna community made them feel welcome, focusing on addressing their immediate, basic needs to help them feel safe.

“So then the first person they invite me. Why not join bingo. The first week. Where is the bingo? I never heard of it. she said It's really fun. It's kind of family games and it's for charity, it's not a business. Those monies go to improve our local community, whatever their needs. So then I went there, to bingo. And a lot of people look at me, then they announced that hey this is the first time one Ukrainian has joined with us. Then they introduced me and welcomed me. Yeah they waved and declared this welcome. You guys, here is the word I like so much, the first word, you are safe. The word I never heard before, since I've been through 4 countries on the way. They said you are safe, don't worry, you are safe. And in the meantime, the best part is that I won €100!” (Saif)

## Connection

Interviewees spoke about their physical connection to Lisdoonvarna and its natural environment. Mostly connection to place was not limited, but extended to North Clare and Burren Meitheal connections, recognising the necessity that rural communities benefit from working with and supporting neighbouring villages and towns.

## Generosity

The generosity of local people was noted and appreciated.

“We went to the hotel with balloons and flags. We went online one night and ordered Ukrainian flags and blue and yellow balloons and went up and got a few people up there that could speak English, that we could engage with and said come to the Pavilion this day, St. Patrick's Day. This is what we do, that it was a parade. It'll forever be a lifelong memory.” (Marie)

## Rural Identity

Interviewees emphasised the importance of not being insular, of seeing community as multidimensional and resilient, encompassing the broader geography and people of North Clare.

“After those community events people became more normal, by normal I mean in the beginning there was uncertainty there. What kind of people the Irish are, what is their culture. But one thing I got from Irish culture is they have a very nice gesture. Some people are shocked, even myself. Once we are walking, this one guy he stops his car and said hey, do you need help? People are walking through the street and they say hey, hi, how are you? Come on, this is not happening in Ukraine, honestly. Then I was wow, nice community, they are welcoming us.” (Saif)



# Lisdoonvarna Pavilion: Community Hub

Lisdoonvarna Fáilte CLG is a non-profit social enterprise established in 1978 with the responsibility for managing one of the largest holdings of community owned assets, land and facilities, exceeding 80 acres, in rural Ireland. Lisdoonvarna Fáilte manages these on behalf of Lisdoonvarna and the surrounding region, for the enhancement of the local community and economy. Since 2006 the company has developed the Cois Céim Community Childcare Centre, (funded by Pobal, CORE Community Childcare scheme and fees), Pavilion Theatre, Community Sports Field and Astro Turf facility, Community Playground, and North Clare Community Park with amphitheatre, picnic area and a 1.4km lit loop park walk. They also have responsibility for the Spa Wells and Twin Wells heritage complex with 50 acres of adjacent land and Maiville House.

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*“I suppose if you look at where we are here, it was a good place for people to come. And because of what we can provide, it was great to offer this straight away.” (Jacqueline)*

The Pavilion is an adaptable, mixed-purpose community space. It is a focal point for events in the community, a funding stream for the company, and a shared community space for hire. It has a kitchen, the Foyer meeting space, and the 450 seat multi-function Pavilion Hall. There is a community notice-board at the entrance. It is utilised in multiple ways from school musicals to bingo nights, parent and toddler groups, interagency meetings and Zumba classes. During the Covid pandemic the car-park space was adapted to become an outdoor cinema. In the early days of the Ukrainian crisis it was a hub for donations being collected and sent to Ukraine, then flipped to becoming a ‘pop-up’ shop for refugees to access their essentials on arrival. The kitchen was hired to Ukrainian families who wanted space to cook for themselves, and the LCETB run classes there. It was noted that access to the park, playground and big hall helped refugees not feel claustrophobic or overwhelmed.

*“You can see in other communities where they don’t have that community hub, where it can be a little bit of a struggle. Whereas Lisdoonvarna has that with the Pavilion. They’ve done English classes, coffee mornings, skills sharing. They do Bingo, they did outdoor cinema in the carpark, there’s the Astro turf next door. And I know there is much more to Lisdoonvarna than just the Pavilion but I just think it’s great that it’s for locals, it’s somewhere that people can gather, you can have meetings there, put notices up and let people know what’s happening. I don’t think that can be underestimated.” (Sharon)*

*“Jaqueline and Lisdoonvarna Fáilte – they realised that we come over here without anything. Like we have only one jacket, you know, barely one jacket. Like we just run. So then slowly people know where the Pavilion is, and then they say whenever we want, we can come here and have a tea or coffee, because the starting was very smooth, their approach” (Saif)*

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*“I will be honest. There is some difficulties because. We do not have easy access to, you know, to go shopping, to go like, cinema, for example. But we trying to do something here in Pavilion, cinema, theatre, it would be so wonderful because people will get basically what they miss in the cities. This place we have enough space for all of that, and we technically have a lot of things that are necessary for it to do so” (Anastasia B)*



# RESPONSIVENESS

The ability to respond to changing needs and situations in a flexible, creative yet structured, empathetic way enables resilient communities.

## Needs Focused

Interviewees noted the community's ability to identify the supports that were needed, respond quickly and adapt as people's needs and community needs changed. Recognising and responding to real needs brought out the best in people, who wanted to respond quickly.

“The other thing we opened up was a clinic, the HSE hired the place out as well for a kind of a triage clinic for a couple of days. When I think back, it was very traumatic. But we just had to get on with it, and it was like that. Very little government engagement or interaction but you just had to roll your sleeves up and just do it.” (Marie)

## Speed

Within two to three days of Ukrainian people arriving at Lisdoonvarna hotels, representatives of statutory and community organisations started assessing and responding to people's immediate needs – basic needs, medical supplies, school places, crèche, language supports, social welfare supports.

## Flexible and Creative

As well as responding to immediate needs and maintaining an active presence, people were conscious of balancing priorities, maintaining day to day business and activities and being adaptable, tweaking their plans to adapt to emerging and changing needs and priorities

“It was a scramble. It was chaos. Until people get their social welfare payments, and kids at school, and emergency medical needs met – there's all those things in the first two weeks. Then it's like bedlam. Just the changing in needs and how you respond to them because in the beginning it's slippers and emergency medication. And now its information, dealing with the media, or far right rhetoric... You constantly have to be checking what's relevant”. (Michelle)

## Trauma and Safeguarding

There was an awareness of the impact on people of the trauma of war and displacement and people's vulnerability and impact on mental health. Safeguarding training had been delivered during COVID by CLDC to protect vulnerable people and volunteers. Trauma informed training was also delivered to people in the community delivering services and supports to Ukrainian people.

“The volunteering I did the first time I came across Ukrainians would be Fáilte Isteach (volunteer run English classes)... I was very worried because we watched the safeguarding videos that psychiatrists in Cork delivered and I was just wary that if we say something they'd be in floods of tears. It was to do with people who'd been through PTSD and it was about how we all go through trauma in life and how we deal with it... We had a little bit more coaching before we started” (Gary)

## Ad Hoc to Structured

Responses initially were spontaneous, resourceful and opportunistic. Recognising that uncoordinated community responses can cause frustration and negativity, structures were put in place to improve communication, mobilise extra resources and plan for next phases.

“The funding for a manager, the connection to Clare Volunteer Centre and CLDC, which really was enabled by the staff... Because I could be a board member, and have a meeting and engage with people, but you don't have continual delivery on what has been decided at a meeting. That can't happen at a real community development level, and volunteers can't be resourced and supported unless there's some body behind them with the policies and the insurance and making sure that everything is right. My experience has been that that's just not possible in a volunteer only piece. So that's what enabled Lisdoonvarna to respond.” (Joe)

## Two Way Empathy

Empathy was implicit and explicit in how people spoke about what they experienced, what they felt, what they heard and what they observed. And it was two way – Ukrainian people started to understand what it must feel like for people in Lisdoonvarna managing an unforeseen situation.

“The biggest positive has been the children, brought fun and new ideas, like chess club. And empathy from the local children who were aware of what was happening from the news and fifth and sixth class students were ready to take on responsibilities for the new students”. (Brian)

## Experience

There was a wealth of professional experience across all partners, as well as experience of collaboration, asking for help and supporting each other in times of pressure or crisis.

## Everyone Doing their Best

A number of people very active in the community described the response as 'imperfect' despite everyone collectively doing their best to deal with the unexpected. This reflects realism, humility and ambition.



# ENGAGEMENT

A range of activities offered opportunities for active participation and involvement for everyone in the community. There was a focus on inclusive cultural, physical, fun and social activities, many of which were organised by Ukrainian people or collaboratively with different community groups.

## Deliverables

Throughout interviews the people whose work was funded through different government schemes stressed the importance of having tangibles, deliverables and visible evidence of how money was spent. Being action focused and delivering what had been promised in plans was paramount, not only for funders, but for residents and visitors.

## Diversion

Activities offered respite and diversion for Ukrainian people of all ages, and helped to manage stress and distract people from constant media and messaging about war.

## Targeted

As well as activities and community supports targeted at Ukrainian people, there was a belief that activities and services in the community should be available to everyone, encouraging community participation and integration.

“Those type any of those community activities are brilliant. You know, to just get people to even see each other and say hello or be in this company of another, even if they can't talk to each other, that they're breaking the ice.” (Michelle)

## Participation

Activities were offered to encourage participation and involvement. Not everything was successful but slowly more and more people got involved.

“Then also we are thinking how we can improve. We don't sit down like, ok this is the finish. No. Day by day we are thinking how to involve the local community and the Ukrainians. You know in a way this is our role, like which way we break the boundary, which way we can help. So slowly, we start to involve everyone with community. Then my job is that the main part is that I told them like not only for Ukraine. Why don't you then do integration? We don't know, even though its one year, maybe two years. Why not this one year we can get to know each other?” (Saif)

## Cultural Understanding and Exchange

There was an emphasis on activities where different cultures could be expressed and celebrated. A number of large scale events such as St Patrick's Day parade, Thank You Clare and cultural celebration in Glór encouraged this.

“It's important to know the culture, the people, the places you're living near – it's really interesting” (Anastasiia M)

## Activities Organised by Ukrainians

Responsiveness was not one-sided. It was evident that Ukrainian people were also proactive in responding to needs. Involvement, as well as participation was a very important element.

“I also organised a lot of trips. Through the whole of Ireland, I've called the coaches company and proposed them an agreement. That I would collect all the people, Ukrainians and they will provide buses for us. And I think people were happier because they were not sitting in the hotel and thinking about their homes, their troubles and their worries about the war and everything that happened in Ukraine. And moreover, they had so much fun.” (Anastasiia M)

## Landscape and Environment

For people used to city life, the landscape and countryside offered a balm to help deal with trauma and stress. People appreciated the forests, landscape and access to the coast.

“We did brainstorming and Jacqueline talked to them in the Cliffs of Moher, so we take down 200 or maybe 250 people from hotels, because people are, you know they are not feeling that much good that they still like they're staying in the hotel.” (Saif)

## Range of Activities and Creativity

Alongside regular local activities, other ideas germinated and were tried. The opportunities for physical, social, cultural and creative activities expanded.

## Community Events and Activities 2022

- St. Patrick's Day Parade
- Heritage Weekend
- Annual Spring Clean
- Kids & Teens Movie Club
- Ukrainian Ambassador Visit
- Minister Heather Humphries Visit
- Burren Slow Food Festival
- Outdoor Cinema
- Thank You County Clare Event
- Summer Camps
- Parent & Toddler Group
- Rogus Show
- Singing Group
- Los Paddys Concert
- The Matchmaker Play
- Coffee Mornings
- Zumba Classes
- Youth Club
- Community Cinema & Community Fun Day
- Halloween Party
- Arts & Crafts Workshop
- Burren Family Christmas Fair



# COMMUNICATION

Clear communication became a key enabler to action, ensuring that everyone was informed, every voice heard and response was focused on changing needs within the community.

## Community Meetings

Having regular, well organised community meetings and conversations, being welcoming and transparent was really important.

“We needed to get a group together to have a chat because nobody was told anything about anything and they’re still not getting told much about anything, which is a big issue. So I called the meeting of the leaders and the chairs and the Secretary of the GAA Club, The parish priests, the schools, the youth club. All community leaders that I could muster and came up here and just had a chat. And said this is happening. What are we going to do? And I said, well, we’re going to say that Lisdoonvarna Fáilte will be the link hub organisation here. Everybody that wants to communicate, we try to communicate through this. We find out what we can and disseminate the information that way” (Joe)

## Two-way Communication

Two way communication involved intentionally reaching out to everyone in the community, having representatives of different groups at community fora and listening to everyone’s concerns.

“Of course meetings were effective. I think it was helpful even for me because I see only one side from the Ukrainians and now I can see what you’re feeling, what you’re worrying about, what fears would you like to get answers to. I need to see both sides and to know to collect all the information. Then I will know how to help both. I’m support to both sides” (Anastasiia)

## Accessibility: Understanding Changing Needs and Language Supports

FAQ’s were gathered and information was added and changed as people’s needs changed.

“There is a nurse and I think Jacqueline and Joe came to Hydro Hotel and they directly come to me, they want to make a platform, like a site. They’re to put in maybe at least one questionnaire, like FAQ. People don’t know anything. Yeah. Where to go buy in Ennis. And even they don’t know where Ennis is. Me and another person Oleg, we collect around like 100 or 200 questions. And Jacqueline was quite surprised, impressed what we did. We put in English. We put in Ukrainian. Even we put in answer as well, because we check in a website, we check with Jaqueline how we can do that”. (Saif)

## Networks and Relationships

Networking was integral to building relationships and finding out about people and organisations’ remit, resources and capacity.

“Networking – that’s something that’s very strong in Clare, in my experience. You’d be dead from going to meetings sometimes but those agencies are really important. And I’m proud to host that one in North Clare – it’s been really good and I’m delighted to be part of it. I have really good relationships and can pick up the phone and chat even after hours”. (Michelle)

## Person to Person

Informal, person to person communication and passing on contacts and offers of help was very evident.

“I remember looking at my phone one day and I think I’d made over 130 phone calls because it was just constant. People constantly coming to the door saying when can we start and where”. (Brian)

## Good Information and Management of Misinformation

Lessons had been learned in 2018 from the initial response to the arrival of asylum seekers in Lisdoonvarna. There is recognition of the importance of ensuring misinformation is managed and accurate information is available and communicated.

“People didn’t know what to expect (from direct provision) but because Sarah Clancy and Teresa from Clare PPN and Orla from CISC, you know people that had worked with refugees and asylum seekers for years, came and went through the queries and the concerns and the general questions of how things work when you open a Direct Provision Centre and what to expect. I think when the questions were answered, people were a lot more understanding, a lot more sympathetic and empathetic with the situation. Engagement is key. Engagement and consultation is key” (Marie)

## Variety of Media

Television, Websites, Radio, Social Media, Telegram groups, Parish Newsletter – all these media forms were mentioned in interviews as ways in which information was shared. There was also local and national newspaper coverage of the Lisdoonvarna response. This sharing helped to keep people informed, generate awareness and increased offers of help to the area.

“My first job was to shape the information, because a lot of information was here and there... there was a lot of uncertainty, a lot of concern. So in this situation I take over like all the Telegram groups, not ‘take over’ but like try to provide some good information.” (Saif)

## Learnings from COVID

North Clare’s COVID coordinated response and management of information and communication was based on the development of a communications infrastructure which was modelled again in the community’s 2022 response.



# COLLABORATION

Good partnerships, networks and relationships enable strong communities where people support, trust, respect and listen to each other.

## Interagency Working

Everybody interviewed noted the importance of interagency working.

“Everything kind of flowed in the timing that it was needed. Basic needs requests coming in all the time and then we’re looking a little beyond us and is this our scope, but that question doesn’t arise when you’re in it. It only starts to filter when things start to settle a little, and then you’re going OK what’s needed and where can we reach the need and then where we just go out of our territory altogether. Then we just need to really form strong relationships with all those inter agencies that have the people and the skill set and the talent to do. So you kind of become a conduit of that.” (Jacqueline)

## Relationships

Strong relationships allowed for expression and acknowledgement of the mixed emotions and challenges experienced by people working under continuous pressure, and for support, advice or a listening ear to be offered.

## Representation

Hotel residents wanted to organise things for themselves. Residents committees were set up and representatives participated in community fora and response groups.

## Clear Roles

Each organisation had a clear role and remit and ‘stayed in lane’. Each partner was aware of each other’s role and responsibility. There was confidence in organisations’ ability to deliver on agreed actions and be accountable and knowing not to ‘reinvent the wheel’.

“But then it did settle down. and CLDC and CISC and everybody, The training board, Katie Lewis, the LCETB. TUSLA, everybody kind of came and said, OK, you know, then the North Clare Forum was established. And you kind of got your lane.” (Marie)

## Structures

People spoke about the importance of well facilitated, organised and structured interagency meetings.

“When the direct provision opened up in Lisdoonvarna there was quite a lot of demands on the community and very little services in place, particularly for that cohort of people. We felt that there was a need to host a separate interagency just for Lisdoonvarna, so we host that meeting and continue to do so. Lisdoonvarna Fáilte has always been a member of that group as well. We all work together, supporting the needs of the residents in direct provision there and obviously since last year, we made the call to expand that group to also look at the needs of the Ukrainian refugees as well.” (Michelle)

## Supports

The ability to telephone someone ‘up’ or ‘down’ the road showed that support was accessible and reliable. Community response networks provided support mechanisms, especially for community leaders on the ground who were exhausted and overwhelmed.

## Learning from COVID Response and Partnerships

The North Clare COVID community response demonstrated the power of collaboration to respond effectively, pro-actively and thoughtfully.

“The Ukrainian community response teams were set up. I’m part of that Clare Interagency support, again working with Lisdoonvarna about how we can offer support. Those structures were already in place when the Ukrainian war started and the local authority just re-ignited that. They have had a large influx of people in a short period of time.” (Sharon)

## Asking for Help

Every interviewee talked about how asking for help was normalised. Trust and confidence in the networks and experience of the community encouraged people to look for support.

## STAKEHOLDERS include:

### North Clare Community Response

- Clare County Council
- Lisdoonvarna Fáilte
- LCETB (Limerick Clare Education and Training Board)
- Ballyvaughan Development Group
- CISC (Clare Immigrant Support Centre)
- CLDC (Clare Local Development Company)
- Clare County Childcare Committee
- Tusla
- Clare Volunteer Centre
- Clare Youth Service
- Clare Sports Partnership
- Clare PPN
- HSE
- Local Link
- An Garda Síochána
- North West Clare Family Resource Centre

### Schools

- St Enda’s National School Lisdoonvarna
- Mary Immaculate Secondary School

### Voluntary Organisations

- St Breckans GAA Club
- Lisdoonvarna Tidy Towns
- Fáilte Isteach
- Burren United Soccer Club
- LINKS



# RESOURCES

Resources: Attracting, respecting and managing resources (human, financial and natural) enables community growth and sustainability.

## Human Resources – Paid Staff

The demands on all services, support organisations and volunteers intensified. Being able to bring in additional staff resources – Ukrainian liaison workers, and having a volunteer coordinator was invaluable.

“The Department really helped us because we wouldn't have survived it otherwise. We needed to have people hands-on that could connect and communicate because as soon as we hired people we were in there doing research. What do you need? and being able to carry out all those pieces. It just became a focal point for everyone. And the CSP position being turned around so quickly as well. This is all new and they were acting very quickly too.” (Jacqueline)

## Human Resources – Volunteers, Partners and Networks

Volunteer numbers increased significantly with the North Clare COVID response and their contribution was invaluable. Conscious of the importance of attracting new volunteers and working towards a thriving volunteer culture with solid volunteer management processes, Lisdoonvarna Fáilte sought help from Clare Volunteer Centre.

“We've helped Lisdoonvarna Fáilte in lots of different ways, looking at volunteer roles, going out and having meetings with the committee around engaging volunteers and getting them to look at different ways they can engage people in their local community” (Sharon)

## Financial Resources

Strategically leveraging funding from different sources to support community development work enables adequate programme resourcing, progress and tangible delivery of activities and new programmes. As a social enterprise, Lisdoonvarna Fáilte has responsibility for this area.

## Natural Resources

A focus on the environment, including the landscape; the Burren's natural beauty; the development of parks; outdoor opportunities are all acknowledged as important for people's recreational needs and wellbeing.

“It's difficult because you miss the city life but on the other hand how lucky we are that we are in the place where there's a lot of forest, beautiful landscape and you can go cycling, walking... It's a really nice place to do a lot of activities”. (Anastasia)

## Key Organisation and Structures

Lisdoonvarna Fáilte, established in 1978 has a specific remit as a social enterprise. It plans for and manages community assets and resources, for the benefit of local communities, residents of North Clare and visitors.

## Investment

The importance of investing in community infrastructure was stressed.

“The organisation is relatively unique in its scale. The community group owns over 80 acres of land and as a result was in a position to develop all these facilities when opportunities came along. Back when I was involved as the chair back in that 2006 - 2010 period, the community had control of strategically located lands. Then when opportunities came and need was identified, we were able to develop the community childcare centre, the community playground, the community sports field and regenerate this hall”. (Joe)

## Community Assets – Community Hub

Over €12 million has been invested in community facilities and infrastructure in Lisdoonvarna. All of these facilities – sports fields, parks, playgrounds and Pavilion are available to everyone in the community and are extensively used by people of all ages – preschool to older people.

## Evidence and Impact

The importance of having community assets and facilities that were visible, accessible and used by everyone in the community was stressed in the interviews.

“Having that level of focus is something that I would have used to leverage the ask (for funding) – having positive things happen and having, I feel like a hope for everybody through this. The focus that's been on the area has enabled me to have another piece of persuasive evidence to say, well, that stuff that I was telling you was really important, is actually really, really, important now”. (Joe)



# Volunteering: Community Connectors

There is a long history of volunteerism, both formal and informal, in Lisdoonvarna. Voluntary organisations operating in Lisdoonvarna include: Lisdoonvarna Fáilte CLG, Tidy Towns, GAA, LINKS & Fáilte Isteach. During the pandemic many new volunteers came forward to respond to the crisis and support their communities. Additional resources, skills and strengths were identified and harnessed, developing into a network called Burren Community Meitheal. Initially this was co-ordinated by Lisdoonvarna Fáilte and supported by Clare Volunteer Centre. This responsibility placed Lisdoonvarna Fáilte at the very heart of the North Clare Community Response. The Clare Volunteer Centre was one of the key agencies in the Clare Community Response Team, providing expert guidance, resources and information as well as assistance with Garda Vetting and temporary insurance. The strength of working together in this way was acknowledged, and many groups and volunteers remain connected by the networks that were created during this time.

Alongside the volunteer provision of practical supports in the community, the pandemic led to some creative responses to maintaining social connections and addressing social isolation. The Lisdoonvarna Fáilte Bingo moved online and became much more. Hosted by dedicated volunteers in a small room in North West Clare, it reached across the country and the sea. Inviting the online community to join in, the hosts facilitated singing, music, chatting and entertainment over the course of the lockdowns. Volunteers also came together to “Light up Lisdoon”, by creating a safe, socially-distanced wonderland of lights to explore along the paths of the North Clare Community Park.

*“Lisdoonvarna Fáilte put their faith in themselves, they were very open to listening to advice, very open to following advice. There’s more we can do to build on the management structure but they have just been amazing, They get that it’s about human contact, that it’s about making the connection.” (Sharon)*

*“I’d say I’ve been volunteering over 5 years. Certainly with bingo fairly early on, because it was something where you could get to know people a bit. As an outsider, and at my age its not easy to make friends, it’s very difficult as you get older, particularly if you are from a different nationality, a different colour. It’s harder without doubt. And they may not want to make their lives here, so it holds you back. And in a way it’s the same for the Ukrainians.” (Gary)*

The can-do attitude of volunteers continued into the Ukrainian response, however there was inevitable fatigue. The Board of Management of Lisdoonvarna Fáilte employed a volunteer co-ordinator and reached out to Clare Volunteer Centre for assistance at this time. With the guidance and advice provided by Clare Volunteer Centre their volunteer co-ordinator was able to establish structures and processes, develop volunteer roles, establish systems of communication and access additional resources for support. The Volunteer Centre also helped them explore different methods of volunteer engagement and recruitment. This led to a database of volunteers with specific areas of interest eg: events, bingo, movies or arts & crafts. Volunteers now have clear roles, with specific times and defined tasks. There is a regular weekly schedule of events posted and a weekly thank you, while one-off or emergency call-outs are sent to the parish newsletter, social media pages and local community and sports groups.

Volunteering has enabled individuals to make friends, pursue interests and learn about the community around them. Structured volunteer management ensures that the stewardship of the environment and community facilities, and continuation of events and activities is secured.

*“It was a scary as hell for me, living here speaking the language and who’s volunteered to do this, what must it have been like for them. I’ve never taught anybody in my life before but I was lucky that fellow volunteers who are tutors with my group are two lovely ladies and the group we got were really just lovely. Martin Vernon had experience setting up groups learning English in Ennis. So he set up Fáilte Isteach here and once we had enough tutors we had to find a premises and I have to say The Royal Spa Hotel have been brilliant. They are on holiday at the moment and we still go in, Ann is so good.” (Gary)*

*“Facebook, Instagram. I built up a database of volunteers, so I’ll send out some messages that way. And Anastasia, she translates it and puts it into the Ukrainian telegram group. And the parish newsletter. But the key is chatting. And trying to be specific in what you’re asking for.” (Marie)*



## ALIGNMENT OF RESEARCH FINDINGS WITH GOVERNMENT POLICY

Research findings demonstrate government policies are being put into practice in Lisdoonvarna and North Clare communities:

### Ireland's National Volunteering Strategy (2021 – 2025)

This policy emphasises the importance of volunteering supports and infrastructure:

*“As we look to the future we must ensure that we put the best possible supports and infrastructure in place so that volunteers and volunteer bodies continue to prosper and that the volunteering needs of present and future generations will be met.”*

### Sustainable, Inclusive and Empowered Communities: A five-year strategy to support the community and voluntary sector in Ireland (2019–2024)

The vision for communities in this strategy is:

*“To create vibrant, sustainable, inclusive, empowered and self-determining communities that support the social, cultural and economic well-being of all members”*

### Our Rural Future: Rural Development Policy (2021–2025)

This policy pledges supports to enable communities to build capacity, leadership and resilience:

*“The Government will provide support for community capacity-building, leadership and resilience initiatives and will place a continued focus on enabling community organisations to deal with the challenges they face more effectively”*

# CONCLUSION

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## Strong Community Roots: Good Practice, Processes and Governance

Lisdoonvarna attracted national attention in 2022 for swift, effective community response. However, this didn't happen because it was planned. Evident in all the interviews were people's recollection of moving from the initial spontaneous, slightly chaotic, uncoordinated responses focused on people's immediate needs to a more measured, co-ordinated, collaborative response. This change took months of inter-agency meetings, planning, accessing additional resources, maintaining open communication, encouraging community participation and utilising the energy, skills and experience around them. Lisdoonvarna embraced their new responsibilities by responding with empathy, generosity, respect and creativity whilst acknowledging the challenges.

The importance of good community development practice, robust processes and structures and good governance cannot be overemphasised. However 'imperfect' communities' responses are, these provide strong roots and supports to enable community connections, learning, growth and resilience. Equally important are empathic, confident community leaders, and the openness and can-do attitude of local people.

We noted during the interview process that this was the first opportunity for some people to reflect on the impact of their contribution, and the emotional toll it placed upon them. Responding to unexpected and unplanned events involving people experiencing trauma, displacement and loss impacts emotionally on the people providing frontline supports. Having a space for reflection is an important aspect of community response that needs to be considered. This also encourages people and communities to identify their strengths, evaluate what worked well and plan for the future.