



An Roinn Leanaí, Comhionannais,
Míchumais, Lánpháirtíochta agus Óige
Department of Children, Equality,
Disability, Integration and Youth

Support Scheme to enhance inclusion of women in communities

NCCAWN Report for 2021

WOMEN'S EQUALITY & DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME

Disadvantaged women are the target group for all NCCWN Projects – in the main, NCCWN Projects recognise disadvantage in relation to women’s socio-economic circumstances. In addition, rural Projects work with women who are often further disadvantaged through social isolation and lack of access to supports and services. Marginalised women are identified through outreach, consultation, local statistics and information.

DCEDIY funding enables the NCCWN Board to employ 48 staff, 4 at national level and 44 locally throughout the 17 project areas. At local level, NCCWN staff outreach and engage women experiencing disadvantage and lever in programme funding to support women’s equality and voice in their communities.

At the beginning of 2021, NCCWN Projects developed and started to deliver local area workplans based on four strategic areas of priority: Engagement, Participation, Policy and Equality and Organisational Development & Sustainability. The objectives and actions within these strategic areas are in line with, and indeed reflected in, the National Women’s Strategy 2017-2020 whose overall goal is *‘to change attitudes and practices preventing women’s and girl’s full participation in education, employment, and public life, at all levels, and to improve services for women and girls, with priority given to the needs of those experiencing, or at risk of experiencing, the poorest outcomes’*.

These plans were developed and delivered taking the Government’s Covid-19 restrictions and guidelines into consideration. NCCWN staff continued to work from home as per Government guidelines and local area workplans were adjusted and amended to enable projects to move online and use technology where at all possible while still following the aims and objectives of the NCCWN.

Actions undertaken by NCCWN Projects in 2021 under the area of Engagement, supported and helped progress the following National Women’s Strategy 2017-2020 high level objectives to:

- *Advance socio-economic equality for women and girls*
- *Advance the physical and mental health and well-being of women and girls*
- *Ensure the visibility in society of women and girls, and their equal and active citizenship*
- *Advance women in leadership at all levels*
- *Combat violence against women*
- *Embed gender equality in decision-making.*

NCCWN Strategic Priority 1: Engagement

Engage with women experiencing disadvantage through outreach and predevelopment work to reduce isolation, increase confidence, build relationships and empower women.

Objectives	Actions
<p><i>To support marginalised women to overcome the barriers that prevent them from reaching their full potential in society</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Develop outreach strategies to engage the most marginalised and isolated women to support their participation.</i> • <i>Carry out needs assessments to identify appropriate services and supports</i> • <i>Provide services and supports where needed to address barriers</i> • <i>Facilitate access through referrals to existing services and supports available.</i>

<p><i>To engage, support and encourage women to participate in all aspects of community life</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Retain and develop our presence in local communities, providing first point of contact including drop-in centres</i>
<p><i>To engage women and promote women's equality</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Organise events and information sessions/opportunities that provide hard to reach women, with information on specific issues that affect them. (E.g. Health screening, education, VAW services) and referring or signposting to existing services.</i> • <i>Support the development of networking and support structures for women in local communities.</i>
<p><i>To raise awareness of women's equality issues</i></p>	<p><i>Use a collective approach to raising awareness by marking key dates and engaging women in a range of campaigns of key dates and events for women i.e. International Women's Day, Rural Women's Day, 16 Days of Action Against Violence Against Women etc.</i></p>

In 2021, NCCWN Projects continued to outreach to the most marginalised women in their areas. Women were supported within the Projects or signposted to other services and supports based on identified needs. Supports to women ranged from counselling, childcare, parenting, domestic abuse, mentoring, to FEAD distribution, mental health and well woman clinics and women's group support etc. Project staff worked with women in groups and individually, supporting and encouraging them to access services and supports available in their communities.

Projects also used a variety of methods to promote and facilitate access to services, including newsletters, media, websites and social media, one-to-one engagements, referrals and word of mouth. Agencies that projects referred to include training centres, VTOS, NALA, Women's Aid, Women's refuges, MABs, Pieta House, Legal Aid, SICAP, Homecare Agencies, Social Workers etc.

With no programme funding available to them, our Projects worked hard to try and source funding from a variety of sources. Money leveraged allowed them to deliver a range of engagement opportunities and capacity building and tailored learning activities, often involving extensive outreach work in hard to reach communities.

Such activities included the provision of events, information and training aimed at women. These events are also used to disseminate information and create awareness regarding their project, or issues of relevance to women in their areas; and to consult with them on issues that may be of concern or affecting them.

International Women's Day (8th March) events were hosted by all 17 NCCWN Women's Projects which provided opportunities to outreach, highlight women's equality issues and raise the profile of the NCCWN work at local level and celebrate women's achievements. The IWD theme for 2021 was **#ChooseToChallenge**

In 2021, 226 events involving 2,891 women took place, including information days/sessions, enrolment days, coffee mornings, open days, fundraisers, awareness-raising events, and celebration days were held. When restrictions allowed, events took place in person, in smaller numbers and socially distanced. However, most events moved to online platforms and included mental health and wellbeing, at-home exercise, and craft/ cooking activities along with awareness raising campaigns on issues such as Cervical and Breast Cancer Awareness, 16 Days of Action Opposing Violence Against Women, Gender Equality Awareness, Mental Health, Human Trafficking, and various local campaigns.

In the context of the National Women's Strategy, these events help advance the physical and mental health and wellbeing of women and girls while ongoing work on highlighting violence against women and girls and support services available to them, support NWS actions to combat violence against women.

The Covid-19 Pandemic

Staff of NCCWN local projects have been working from home since 12th March 2020, in line with Government guidelines and Covid-19 restrictions. Staff for whom the normal way of working is meeting with women as individuals and more often in groups, were presented with the challenge of how to keep engaged with the women in their communities when the normal rules no longer applied.

Technology has played a major part in reaching out and remaining engaged with community women. Staff had to assess not only what technologies were available to themselves at home, to the women in their communities but also what technologies women were comfortable with.

The telephone was a vital tool of engagement, both landline and mobile. Staff working from home and using their own phones, reached out and called women individually, giving them the space to listen to concerns, feedback, myths, and rumours about Covid-19 as well as communicating information about the virus and supports available locally. People understand information in relation to themselves, and this personal call could be tailored to suit, as many of the women we work with are known to us personally. The calls could at times be lengthy especially to older women who were self-isolating and missing social contact with friends, neighbours, and family members.

We estimate that NCCWN staff made at least **12,174** telephone calls to women in 2021.

Many women quickly became comfortable with smartphones, social media in the new 'virtual world'. Staff were able to text and send WhatsApp messages to individuals and groups on updated guidance, supports available and positive messages for their wellbeing. Thousands of messages were sent by text or WhatsApp to keep women in touch with us and our projects.

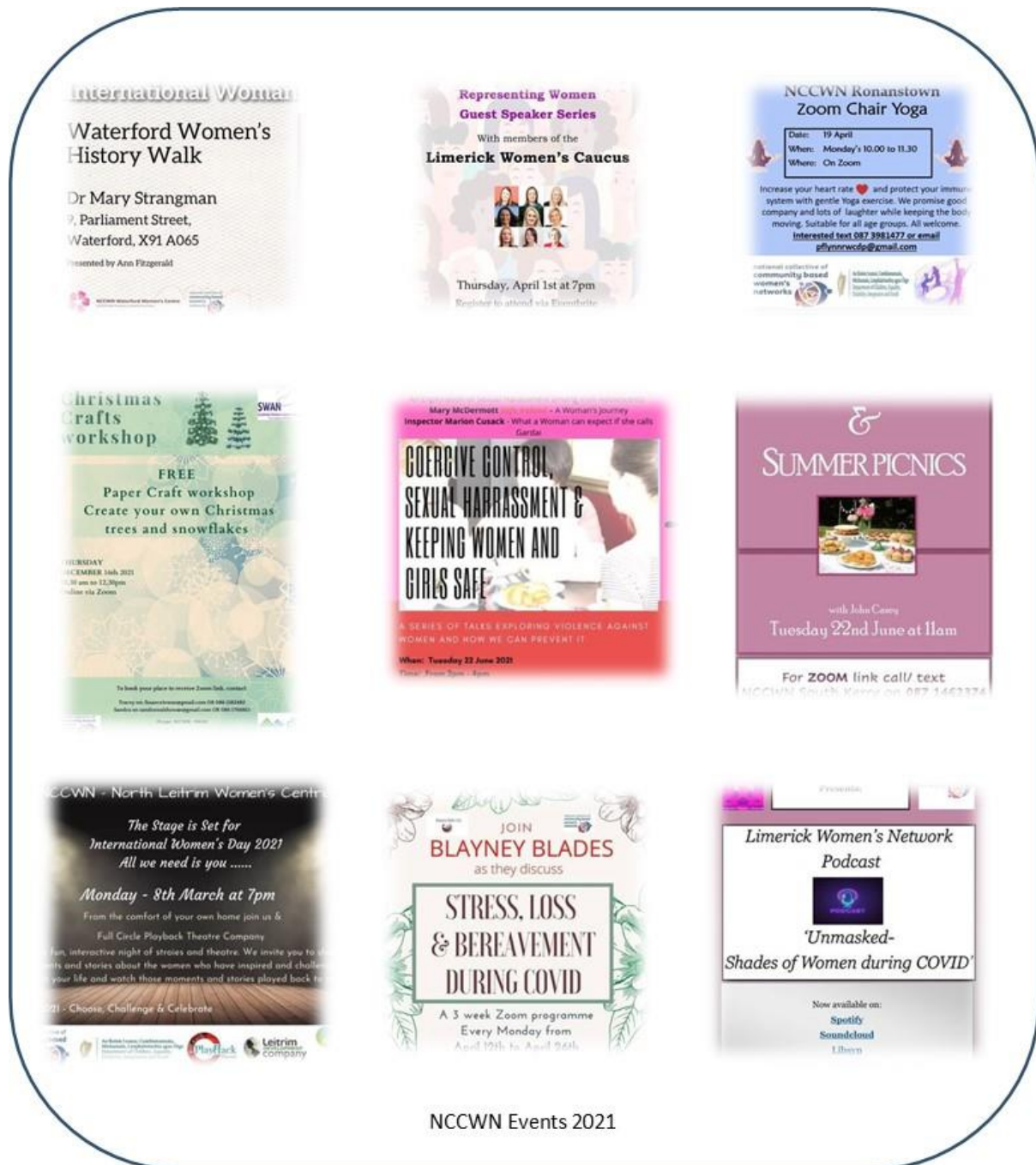
Women's Health & Well-being – Local NCCWN Projects provided updates, advice, and links through website/social media to support women's mental health. This included mediation and well-being tips and strategies. NCCWN Projects received positive feedback from women saying that they found this supportive and a good method for interaction and participation.

Social media also played a huge part in engaging with women who had access to the internet and were connected and comfortable in the virtual world. In the evolving weeks of the pandemic, staff kept up to date on guidelines, relevant services, and referral pathways in our project areas. Social media was used to share and promote public health information and advice, positive mental health awareness and supports/services available locally and remotely.

Our social media reach was 272,553.

Where there was capacity and technology available, Zoom was used for 'virtual meet-ups'. When the restrictions eased a little as summer progressed, some projects had small group meetups in cafes or parks, adhering to social distance guidelines. In some rural projects with poor broadband and mobile phone infrastructure, letters and postcards were sent to women to connect and reassure them during these difficult times.

NCCWN projects made a total estimated 191,725 engagements with women in 2021.



NCCWN Events 2021



NCCWN Events 2021

Most NCCWN Projects operate a 'Drop In' service to women in their communities while all operate an 'Open Door' policy which means they welcome women into the project at any time during its open hours. While this was not always possible in 2021, Projects tried as much as possible to let women know they were still available to them at the other end of the phone if not in person.

Referrals

NCCWN projects refer women to other statutory agencies and services and community organisations and in turn also receive referrals from agencies. In 2021 as throughout the pandemic, Projects continued to get and make referrals to other community and statutory agencies around different needs and are signposting and raising awareness of resources available to women and their families during this time. Agencies referred to and from included: Tusla, PHNs, CDPs, FRCs, ETBs, Covid-19 Helpline, St. Vincent de Paul, refuges, addiction services and MABs.

NCCWN Strategic Priority 2: Participation

Facilitate progression of women experiencing disadvantage from engagement to active participation.

Objectives	Actions
To mobilise women, raising their consciousness of the issues affecting them	Promote and support the engagement of women experiencing disadvantage to participate in women centred capacity building programmes.
To build women's capacity to represent the collective concerns of women especially those from marginalised communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Design and carry out actions that support and provide opportunities that enable women to develop their potential and make informed choices about their future. Actions to include consciousness raising, empowerment, feminism and equality. • Provide women's community education programmes. Support and organise the delivery of a range of accessible formal and non-formal community education and training programmes, that are tailored to meet the needs of women in our communities
To represent and support women's representation and participation in a range of relevant structures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify relevant local structures for women's participation including PPNs, local school's committees, LCDCs, partnerships, ETBs where women's participation • Support participation of new and existing women's groups and build capacity by supporting volunteers with skills to participate on community policy and decision-making fora.
To challenge barriers to women's participation locally, regionally and nationally	Support women to name barriers to their participation and work with relevant organisations to identify needs and reduce barriers to women's participation

Community education is a way of working for many Projects in the NCCWN. Often our projects are the only provider of education and training specifically designed to cater for disadvantaged women in an area. In recognition of women in their role as primary carers, our Projects plan, promote and deliver a range of accredited and non-accredited education programmes in response to the identified needs in a local area.

These are funded by monies leveraged in locally by the projects themselves with certain funds being ringfenced for certain activities. Government restrictions and guidelines meant that much of this work was put on hold during 2021. Some projects were able to deliver in person where space for social distancing allowed, while other projects were able to deliver a whole range of activities online such as creative writing, meditation, chair yoga, Pilates, exercise to music etc. Sometimes simple videos were shared with women via WhatsApp encouraging them to take part and look after themselves.

When restrictions eased during the summer/early autumn, Projects who had the physical space, were able to bring small groups of socially distanced people together such as the Textile Upcycling Group in NCCWN Roscommon who took to making and distributing facemasks made from waste cotton.

The summer months are normally quieter for the women's projects in terms of activities and participation and this year projects spent a lot of time loosely planning for activities for the autumn and the 'new normal' that faced us all. This involved revising and adapting workplans and trying to adjust programmes, so that not only was delivery possible but was compliant with the everchanging guidelines.

Time was spent supporting NCCWN project staff working from home with limited resources while often having children or other adults sharing the same space. Projects held weekly staff zoom meetings to support each other and plan the week's work. As restrictions eased, staff participated on return-to-work training and carried out risk assessments on workplaces ensuring they were deep cleaned and social distance compliant.

Throughout 2021, ten NCCWN projects also continued to deliver and conclude local STEPS courses for women under PEIL (Programme for Employability, Inclusion & Learning 2014-2020) a series of training opportunities on self-development and work-related skills, to assist a return to the labour market and entrepreneurship. As with most other courses, this program moved online to the virtual world, with participants learning new technology skills to allow this to happen. The first PEIL programme round completed and the second PEIL programme round commenced in 2021 through blended learning sessions in line with guidelines.

STEPS supports National Women's Strategy actions to improve the position of women on low pay and/or in precarious or low work hours. Furthermore, socially excluded women, particularly those living in poverty, are supported to access education, training and employment opportunities. During the current crisis, this has never been more important as the pandemic has had a greater negative effect on women not just in Ireland but the world over.

NCCWN Projects identify and actively participate in local social inclusion and education and training networks to highlight the needs of local disadvantaged women and promote the activities and services that local education and training organisations have to offer. In 2021, committees/interagency groups with NCCWN members included family support networks, community education networks, training networks, mental health and domestic violence networks to public participation networks, childcare networks and committees, feminist networks, women in business, social inclusion, and other

interagency groups. While most employees continued to work from home, these groups/networks were able to continue with work and meet online.

Such participation of women helps put a greater focus on gender issues and not only women’s participation in general, but on the voices of socially excluded women at a community level and in policy and decision-making fora. The participation of women at a community level supports the progression of the NWS objective of ensuring the visibility in society of women and girls, and their Equal and Active Citizenship in Irish society.

NCCWN local, regional and national structures also further provide an effective framework for challenging barriers by building capacity and enabling women not usually heard to have a voice.

Projects have identified that one of the main barriers to women’s participation is childcare. Projects support women to access affordable childcare through provision of places at childcare facilities attached to our Projects, or by signposting women to community childcare in their areas thereby improving access to these opportunities for many disadvantaged women. Some of our Projects offer crèche, preschool and afterschool services. In 2021, we had four childcare centres with 206 childcare places. As per restrictions, these centres operated when allowed, with all relevant Covid-19 precautions in place.

NCCWN Strategic Priority 3: Policy & Equality

Develop strategies to promote women’s equality and inclusion and highlight policy issues

Objectives	Actions
To promote disadvantaged women’s equality and inclusion locally and nationally	Research, identify and articulate the needs of disadvantaged women at decision making arenas locally, regionally and nationally, to influence the development of policies and decisions that affect their lives.
To highlight the needs and perspectives of disadvantaged women by challenging inequalities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop relevant awareness raising events and campaigns • Engage with all Government Departments on issues in relation to women
To collaborate and work in partnership on relevant representational structures in relation to women’s equality issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strategically collaborate and work in partnership with local, regional and national organisations on relevant and agreed objectives to benefit disadvantaged women • Feed into policy development in relation to women experiencing disadvantage through representations, submissions and contributions to policy documents • Join and become active in the Community Platform

To build capacity of NCCWN Projects to outreach, engage and support participation of women experiencing disadvantage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build and strengthen the capacity of local women to identify and voice their concerns and participate in society.
To highlight women’s equality issues	Develop and effectively implement local area work plans and results framework, based on local needs and in line with agreed national equality priorities.

NCCWN Women’s Projects continue to play a critical role in raising awareness of gender equality through engagement with local development companies, rural development agencies and other local, regional and national bodies tasked with community and local development.

The Women’s Equality & Development Programme provides an opportunity for greater visibility for women in poverty and living in disadvantaged communities.

NCCWN Projects have the capacity and the experience to act as a link between national policy actions and what happens on the ground. The local workplans of our projects respond to locally identified needs but are also informed by national policies such as: *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures: the national policy framework for children and young people*, *National Physical Activity Plan for Ireland*, *LGBTI Inclusion Strategy*, *Connecting for Life: Ireland’s National Strategy to Reduce Suicide 2015-2020*, *National Disability Inclusion Strategy*, *Our Communities: A framework policy for local and community development in Ireland*, *Second National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual and Gender-based Violence 2016-2021*

NCCWN Projects work collaboratively in their area to ensure that they resource individuals and communities that are most socially excluded to access participate and become involved with policy, practice and decision-making processes on matters affecting them and their local community.

The NCCWN Women’s Projects provide opportunities for greater influence and synergies with local government structures, and particularly in ensuring that gender equality is mainstreamed across local government and through the work of local community and development organisations.

Projects have actively participated in planning and consultation workshops feeding into Local Community Development Plan, ensuring that the voice of women was heard at local planning and decision-making tables.

Alignment and the restructuring of local government in recent years has meant changes in many of the areas in which NCCWN works, however some project staff have been elected on to the new Local Community Development Committee in their area while others are members of local community development and social inclusion working groups.

A major strength of NCCWN is the way in which it effectively connects women at the local level to a strategic role at the national level, and in turn links national priorities to the local level. NCCWN staff represented women’s affairs at local level and participated in decision making structures. NCCWN staff and advisory committee members sat on boards and committees including LDC Boards, RAPID AITs, PPNs, Youth Forum, local education networks.

In most areas, interagency work continued as community organisations adapted to new working conditions, mobilised, and responded to Covid-19 on the ground. Sometimes this involved Zoom or other virtual meetings to put plans in place, but more often it was telephone calls and emails between NCCWN staff and the wider network of community and interagency workers who have built up great working relationships over the years and were able to respond to the crisis and issues as they arose. Some projects such as NCCWN Clare were part of the Clare Covid-19 Response Forum while others such as NCCWN Dochas (Monaghan) put over 200 ‘care-kits’ together for vulnerable women living in Direct Provision centres in their area.

Nationally, the NCCWN are represented on the NWCI Board, NSWG Implementation Committee and NGO sub-group, Aontas, Abortion Working Group, Irish Observatory on Violence against Women, Policy Advisory Group on Women in Local Government and Development, Irish Network Against Racism (INAR), Women’s Support Network of Northern Ireland, Community Work Ireland (CWI), Community Platform. NCCWN are a member of the NGO Covid 19 Sub-Group looking at and calling for responses in relation to Covid 19 needed for the groups and communities, that the NGOs involved, work with and represent. NCCWN have been also involved in Our Maternity Hospital campaign and have been supporting the campaign through sharing information.

NCCWN Strategic Priority Area 4: Organisational Development & Sustainability

Develop the NCCWN to be able to fulfil its objectives and to ensure the sustainability of the organisation

Objectives	Actions
To build capacity of NCCWN management to support the NCCWN locally and nationally to develop and enhance operational capacity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengthen the NCCWN Board by ongoing capacity building and upskilling • Ensure highest levels of governance and accountability • Ensure the NCCWN Board are complying with employment responsibilities and obligations
To ensure the sustainability of NCCWN	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide staff development and training • Ensure feedback mechanisms are in place to support communications between local and national structures • Ensure Advisory Groups locally are supported to participate in governance structures at local and national level. • Identify organisational needs and develop strategies to ensure adequate resources to support the sustainability of the organisation
To develop and consolidate the collective approach of the NCCWN	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop new organisational strategic plan reflective of the organisations vision & mission and of changing structures • Continue to maintain and develop robust planning and reporting processes and procedures

<p>To develop a national profile</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue to develop and strengthen NCCWN national profile under the new Department • Further strengthen and develop a collective NCCWN brand
<p>To build capacity of NCCWN management and staff to inform and input to organisational and policy development</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish and agree a format for projects to promote the mission and vision of NCCWN • Coordinate local actions and promote and brand these actions under the banner of NCCWN

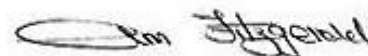
- Strategic Plan– NCCWN Board contracted external consultants to carry out strategic planning process to develop NCCWN Strategic Plan 2022-20226. Processes included external stakeholder interview, appreciative inquiry and grassroots gatherings sessions. Strategic Plan launch was planned for early 2022/
- Digital Transformation and Rebranding – NCCWN digital transformation was sponsored by Microsoft and throughout 2021 national staff worked with Microsoft, Enclude and Techsoup to carry out pilots and implement processes, including shared systems. Following internal and external feedback, Board and staff were consulted on a name change for the organisation and rebranding processes were put in place to launch new name – Women’s Collective Ireland (WCI) – at Strategic Plan launch in early 2022.
- New policies issued by the NCCWN Board in 2021 included Working from Home Policy, Right to Disconnect Policy and Menopause Policy.
- Shared Island Initiative – Throughout 2021, NCCWN participated in a number of Shared Island Initiative dialogues and became a member of the All-island Women’s Forum, hosted by NWCI, including membership of the Business Committee of the Forum. NCCWN staff presented at a number of Forum webinars throughout 2021. NCCWN also participated in the Encounters Programme and were paired with the Northern Ireland Rural Women’s Network.
- Mapping Multiple Perspectives on Constitutional Change following Brexit – Researchers from UCD and University of Aberdeen carried out research with NCCWN staff through focus groups held in 2021.
- As part of the Women’s Community Sector Working Group, NCCWN attended a meeting with DRCD Minister Joe O’Brien to discuss the need for cross-departments initiatives/communication to support women’s community development.
- NCCWN were part of the Community Platform Sub-Group which developed and launched Principles for delivering a high quality, inclusive and accessible Public Childcare Model’. Launch took place in November.
- Submissions made by NCCWN in 2021 included on the Equality Legislation Review.
- Board induction and training – Board individual and group sessions took place throughout 2021.
- National team were expanded in 2021 to include a part-time Communications Officer and a part-time Programme Coordinator.
- NCCWN Patron – NCCWN were delighted to welcome Ailbhe Smyth as our Patron and has been supportive in raising the NCCWN profile and hosting conversations with Board and staff.

STAFF ENGAGEMENT AND SUPPORT

Throughout this pandemic and aftermath, NCCWN's priority is staff well-being and that of their families. The NCCWN Board has put in place procedures to support staff well-being by providing 40 minutes each working day for staff to take time out e.g., outdoors/walks etc, to support their mental health and wellbeing. The National Coordinator held regular meetings with local Coordinators and local Coordinators held regular team meetings through zoom. The NCCWN Board also provided support for staff to enable them to develop protocols for return to work, including drawing up templates risk assessment and return to work planning. This work included:

- Reflective Sessions with 17 local Project Coordinators to explore their Project's needs and plan phased next steps.
- Support with revised work, reactivation, and operational plans for each NCCWN Project.
- Support for local Coordinators, as the responsible person, to carry out Covid-19 risk assessments.
- Circulation of draft checklists and templates (based on HSE guidelines) to local Projects for adaptation for local needs and sign off by NCCWN Board.
- Circulation of Return to Work Safely Induction and local Coordinators were supported to ensure:
 - that all staff had completed Covid 19 induction processes and procedures
 - that return-to-work forms were up to date
 - that all staff are aware and kept updated on advice and guidance in relation to return to work.
- Continued circulation of government and HSE Covid 19 and return to work guidelines

The Board also provided an Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) through VHI and provided online health and well-being sessions for all staff.



NCCWN Chair