

Roscommon women's project sets the pace to stop waste in EU

BY ALLEN MEAGHER

In two years time, under an EU directive, all textile waste has to be disposed of properly. That puts pressure on all who handle textiles, including charity shops.

Roscommon Women's Network (RWN) now find themselves in a lead position nationally having first looked at this issue three years ago and setting up a social enterprise to tackle clothes waste. The Roscommon women were ahead of the EU. Their CycleUp project reuses clothes that would otherwise end up in landfill.

"The idea came from women themselves," said RWN co-ordinator Nora Fahy. The project does its best to use, rather than dump, unsold textiles generated by their charity shop - by upcycling these textile items into different products for sale.

"This project also meets two of our four main goals - sustainable living and supporting women into flexible paid employment," said Nora.

Specifically, The Waste Framework Directive (WFD) states that Member States shall set up separate collection for textiles by 1 January, 2025. The WFD also requires EU member states to promote repair and re-use of textiles.*

Now, Ireland's Environmental Protection Agency is funding RWN's textile upcycling project and that has allowed them to take on a full-time project manager - Martina Hourigan (see Laoise Neylon's interview with Martina on page 15).

The 'Cycle Up' project presents what opportunities (and challenges) for charity shops and community groups because of this new waste directive and funding for upcycling.

The project won an Aontas award in March. It is hoping to launch as a stand alone project within a couple of years. They are fast off the mark - when masks could not be got at the beginning of the pandemic, the project produced masks for care homes.

"We're needs-driven as an on-the-ground community project and it was the women who saw the need for it. That's why we came to do this work before others did, before there was formal funding for this work," said Nora.

Nora says NWN were "fortunate" to get support from international clothing company Patagonia which part-funded their project in its earliest



• ABOVE: Nora Fahy, co-ordinator of Roscommon Women's Network. BELOW: 'Cycle Up' supporters at work.

stages. Now groups can apply to their local authority for funding.

"Most community development projects don't get to talk about the value of what they do, because we're actually all so busy doing the work," said Nora.

But this time NWN found itself in a lead position on an issue that other groups realised they needed to learn about and they need to show how they've gone about their work. It was in hindsight a pilot project.

"We have women with us who started with no formal education and now becoming trainers of trainers at QQI Level 6," said Nora. Some of the women have faced harsh challenges in life.

Community development often works out of sight, silently changing lives. Its first duty is to the people and communities it empowers.

With this particular project, the educational progress alone is startling - as demonstrated by Philomena (see previous page) who told her story recently when RWN won the Aontas award.

'Cycle Up' is not only for women, but for men too and that is the long-term strategy.

"We've always approached our work with a feminist lens and in an inclusive way in a rural context," said Nora. The project currently has nine



women and one man on its training course.

Suzanne Dempsey, until recently the environment awareness officer with Roscommon County Council, noticed more people than before enquiring about funding for textile upcycling and waste reduction generally. It may be the same across the country as upcycling becomes cool all of a sudden. Suzanne points to RWN's project as an example of best practice because they are doing it for the past three years.

* Several studies have been conducted on the environmental impacts of textiles including by the European Environment Agency. In addition, the EU is conducting a study to better understand the material flows in the textile value chain, to review textile sorting and recycling technologies and to map examples of circular textile business models.

Ref: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/E-9-2020-004882-ASW_EN.html

SURVEY: CHILDCARE LOW-PAY WARNING

Warning of a looming “winter of discontent” in the Community Sector, SIPTU has highlighted the plight of community-based childcare services.

A recent survey of more than 3,000 childcare managers and staff “indicated that many facilities face reducing services or potential closure over the coming months due to an inability to recruit the necessary qualified professionals required to run them,” said SIPTU.

SIPTU Head of Organising, Darragh O’Connor (pictured) said: “Many qualified and skilled educators simply cannot afford to stay in their profession. The survey found that



42% of Early Years educators are actively looking for a job outside the sector with 75% identifying low pay as the reason for leaving their profession.

The Early Years Staffing Survey Report 2021 was launched at a special online briefing for Oireachtas members and reveals a sector “drifting further into crisis due to the impact of low pay and staff leaving the sector”.

Campaigners are calling on the Government to invest an additional €150m in childcare, split between pay and affordability measures.

In February 2020, SIPTU’s childcare facilities campaign saw 30,000 people march in Dublin over low pay and lack of state investment.

FINGAL: REPS MEET MINISTERS

Children’s minister Roderic O’Gorman and Minister of State for Community Development, Joe O’Brien, met online with community representatives from Fingal on Sept. 10 “to discuss early years and childcare” issues in the local area.

The Fingal Children and Young People’s Services Committee welcomed the meeting, saying: “Community-based, not-for-profit childcare services provide such essential services to communities.”

Grainne McKenna, who lectures in early childhood education at DCU, also welcomed the engagement.

Minister O’Brien remarked afterwards, “Good first meeting. Having affordable childcare for disadvantaged and marginalised communities is particularly important in facilitating community engagement and ultimately community development.”

Empower Fingal organised the meeting.

FAST FASHION ACTIVISM

TESTIMONY: Philomena left school aged 11, yet now has a degree from Sligo IT



• Philomena left school at 11 years of age. Now a degree holder, she is involved in Roscommon Women’s Network’s CycleUp project which recently won an Aontas Award. She is pictured with up-cycled Christmas decorations produced for sale in the network’s charity shop and via their new online store.

Philomena first called into Roscommon Women’s Network while going through “a bad period in my life” over ten years ago.

She is one of many to receive support from the project, one of 17 women’s groups that belong to the National Collective of Community-based Women’s Networks.

“They gave me the help

that I needed and following this I joined the women’s group. I had left school when I was 11 years old to look after my sick mother. Leaving school at such a young age, I felt that it had held me back my whole life, both mentally and physically,” she said.

“I was asked if I was interested in taking part in some training,” she recalled. She completed a

confidence building course and then went onto a Level 2 FETAC studies in art and maths and, over five years, Philomena continued to study, leading her onto an Institute of Technology Sligo degree course in fine art.

“Three years later I got my level 7 degree and I believe that this changed my life and has saved my life,” she said.

She is now involved in the CycleUp project where she has learned “so much about climate change and the environment”.

For more about CycleUp see following pages.

national collective of community based women’s networks



MARTINA HOURIGAN: We hope this can be a model for other community groups around the country

BY LAOISE NEYLON

Roscommon Women's Network runs a charity shop so they receive lots of donations of clothes. In 2019 they received donations of around 931kg of textiles, says Martina.

Many of the garments are snapped up by new owners but like all charity shops they end up with a lot of items that can't be easily re-homed, she says.

So in 2018, a group of volunteers from RWN went on a fact-finding mission to the Rediscovery Centre in Ballymun, which specialises in upcycling clothing and textiles.

They were inspired by that work and so they established the Women's Environmental Community Activation Network (WECAN) project and started to roll out training programmes for mending clothes and upcycling textiles.

WECAN established the Cycle Up store to sell the upcycled products, including bags, cushions, clothes and toys.

"There was so much interest from women who were accomplished sewers to those who had never threaded a needle," says project manager Martina Hourigan.

WECAN now runs training in upcycling to community groups, schools and other organisations



and currently has a waiting list of participants, she says.

The older generation was great at fixing things, but we have lost some of the skills and with them part of our heritage, says Martina.

Some garments that are donated to the charity shop are of such poor quality they are not worth mending and those are often made from non-recyclable material, she says.

"It is the dirty word, it's the fast

fashion," says Martina.

But it is empowering to be able to tackle a global problem at a local level, she says. "Our mission is to develop a social and environmental training enterprise," she says.

She hopes other community groups around Ireland will replicate their model.

"Our values are rooted in community development, the principles of inclusion, social justice,

empowerment and collective action," says Martina. "We are hoping this initiative can provide a model of best practice for other community groups around the country."

Not every charity shop or community organisation needs to establish its own upcycling store, but perhaps they could set up repair cafes and train people to mend their own clothes, she says.

Roscommon Women's Network runs a successful social enterprise

Social enterprises are organisations whose mission is to have a positive effect on society by generating revenue through the sale of products or provision of services and by reinvesting the profits back into achieving the mission.

Roscommon Women's Network (RWN) following cuts a decade ago, opened a now highly successful charity shop which is completely self financing and fully volunteer run.

The proceeds go towards running RWN Resource Centre and giving support to women and families around the county and beyond.

The shop also tackles loneliness and isolation, providing a space for participation, rehabilitation, learning new skills and

progressing into training, education and employment.

Among the items for sale are Cycle Up products which have proven to be great sellers. Call in and browse at The Old Mill, Castlereagh (open Monday to Friday 10am to 5pm and Saturdays 11am to 4pm). T: 094 9621 690.

Very soon the project hopes to have its own online shop.

To view samples of upcycled products, visit: <https://rwn.ie/textile-upcycling-pilot-project/>

