



# Laois Partnership Company

## SICAP Case Study 2024

**Lot: Laois County (8-1)**

**SICAP Annual Plan Goal 1 & Goal 2**

**Primary Target Group:** People living in disadvantaged communities

## Fostering Community and Inclusion in Rathdowney



*The Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP) is co-funded by the Irish Government, through the Department of Rural and Community Development, and the European Union through the European Social Fund Plus under the Employment, Inclusion, Skills, and Training (EIST) Programme 2021 -2027.*

# The Transformative Impact of SICAP

## Introduction:

This case study provided us with the opportunity to examine how the community of Rathdowney came together through collaboration with Laois Partnership SICAP team and other agencies.

Rathdowney is a small-town of attractive, traditional character located in the south-west corner of County Laois. Rathdowney has become a diverse town, with its population having increased by 8.3% in the last census (2022) to 1,368. There is a sizeable older population in Rathdowney with 33% over 50 years of age and 17% over 65 years of age, which is marginally higher than the national average of 13%. The population is also diverse, with 8% of the population made up of New Arrivals from the Brazilian Community, Ukrainian Community, and International Protection applicants. As per Pobal's Deprivation Index, Rathdowney is considered disadvantaged, and some parts are considered very disadvantaged.

Our SICAP team have been supporting communities in Rathdowney since 2012. Some of the recurring themes have been rural isolation, unemployment, lack of facilities for the local communities.

When preparing the SICAP Annual Plan for 2024, Rathdowney was listed as one of SICAP target areas. Our SICAP team renewed their efforts with extra resources and using the bottom-

up approach to community development, through engagement with community groups. We also supported New Arrivals through our New Arrivals Actions in our Annual Plan and assisted them with integration into their new community.



*Rathdowney Polytunnel*

Laois Partnership SICAP Development Officers embarked on a transformative journey to foster community connections. Initially, our Development Officers worked with various groups in isolation, each with their unique skills and interests. Recognising the potential for collaboration, we brought these groups together, creating an environment where members could meet, share, and learn from one another. The theme throughout the year was fostering inclusiveness and collaborations. The Clochar Centre quickly became the hub for activities and all groups and individuals felt extremely comfortable attending the centre. The Clochar Centre was originally a primary school ran by religious orders. In 2012 the community came together, and the building was split into 3 different areas. One area was dedicated to the new Men's Shed in Rathdowney, another area became a Youth Café, and the final area was designated as a Creche.

New relationships were developed and there was a notable increase in engagement and activities organised through SICAP. This created a real desire to bring people together and ensure that no one was left behind.

*Members of the Men's Shed*



**Projects:**

The walled garden at the Clochar Centre became our first collaborative project. The SICAP Development Officers combined the talents of the Men's Shed and the Women's Group, inviting them to work side by side. As they dug into the soil, sowed seeds and planted fruit and vegetables, laughter and stories blossomed, breaking down barriers and weaving new friendships. As activities began to take place, an incredible wave of community engagement followed. People from diverse backgrounds started to participate in a variety of projects and activities.



*Rathdowney walled garden*

The LOETB came in as partners to offer sewing classes, while Music Generation introduced ukulele sessions that filled the air with cheerful melodies.

*Members of the Men's Shed enjoying Ukulele Classes*



The SICAP New Arrivals Development Officer organised English conversational classes through Failte Isteach. This enabled New Arrivals to integrate and provided support for those new to Rathdowney. Failte Isteach is a volunteer-led programme, which supports people to



***Failte Isteach classes***

learn English through informal conversations. This initiative has been co-ordinated by Laois Partnership Company SICAP programme for several years and it allows people from the local community to volunteer as tutors and engage with the migrant population who are seeking to learn English. The volunteer group consisted of members of the Men's

Shed, Women's Shed and other community groups, who took on the role of teaching English to residents of the Commercial Inn and new Ukrainian population living in modular homes. Over 40 modular homes were built in Rathdowney specifically for people from Ukraine. The centre became a vibrant hub where cups of tea were shared, conversations flowed, and friendships were formed with an inviting spirit of inclusivity. The SICAP team engaged with the Women's group, supported the Men's Shed and collaborated with the LOETB to provide accredited and community education courses.

The setting up of the Town Team which our the SICAP Development Officer became a member of, and the publication of the Rathdowney Town Centre First Plan in October 2023 provided a vision for the ongoing development of the town.

The SICAP team also engaged with the local community to organise memorable events such as a Christmas Market and Intercultural Day to celebrate the rich diversity and inclusiveness within Rathdowney. A trip to Ballintubbert Gardens was organised to allow participants to learn from a specialist gardener who has showcased the only organic ornamental garden in Ireland. This event deepened the group's appreciation for nature and its link to the community. This event deepened the group's appreciation for nature and its link to the community and increased awareness of the effects of climate change on society and awareness of best practices in horticulture. Our Development Officer also worked with the Men's Shed on a grant application under the Climate Action Fund. The group were successful and were granted funding for Solar PV Systems.

Throughout the year, it became clear that the people of Rathdowney were eager to participate and make Rathdowney inclusive. This was a key factor that contributed to their change as a community. Their enthusiasm fuelled our commitment to continue engaging with participants and collaborating with local community



**Craft Workshops**

groups and state agencies such as Laois County Council, LOETB, Department of Social Protection, Rathdowney Town Team and Public Representatives. The SICAP team continue to build capacity of individuals and community groups. This will enhance the services SICAP provide in Rathdowney, ensuring that the warmth and welcoming attitude of their community continue to thrive.

**Conclusion:**

Through increased collaboration with community groups, individuals and other state agencies, Rathdowney has become a vibrant and welcoming community. While encountering some challenges initially such as language barriers, the process of engagement has really been positive. They have achieved this with collaboration, creativity, and shared experiences, reinforcing the belief that together, they can cultivate a truly inclusive community. The lessons learned from working in Rathdowney is that collaboration and communication works for the benefit of everyone. The SICAP team plan to continue their work in Rathdowney with our target groups. This will be done by focusing on addressing the needs of the most vulnerable people, looking into employability courses for new arrivals, and continuing to provide a space for people to socialise while promoting their wellbeing through our projects. It was a pleasure to work with the communities of Rathdowney.



*Members of Rathdowney Community coming together*



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