

EMPOWER

EMPLOYment Offering Women Economic Return

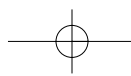
September 2005 – June 2007



‘The Story of
EMPOWER’:

Evaluation Report





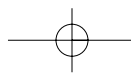
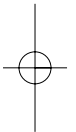
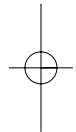
WELCOME!

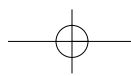
From September 2005, I have had the privilege of coordinating the EMPOWER project on behalf of Longford Women's Link and Longford Community Resources Ltd.

EMPOWER has challenged many of the issues frequently experienced by women in the workplace, as well as those seeking employment. As the project developed, solutions were no sooner identified than additional concerns and questions arose. While some of these have been addressed during the lifetime of the project, other issues and barriers remain and need to be tackled by future initiatives. It is intended that the learning will be applied to other projects in the pursuit of women's equality.

This report tells the story of EMPOWER. It is a tribute to the hard work, support and foresight of everyone involved and without whom the project would not have been possible.

Lee-Anne Thomas
EWM Project Co-Ordinator
June 2007





ALL ABOUT EMPOWER

About EMPOWER

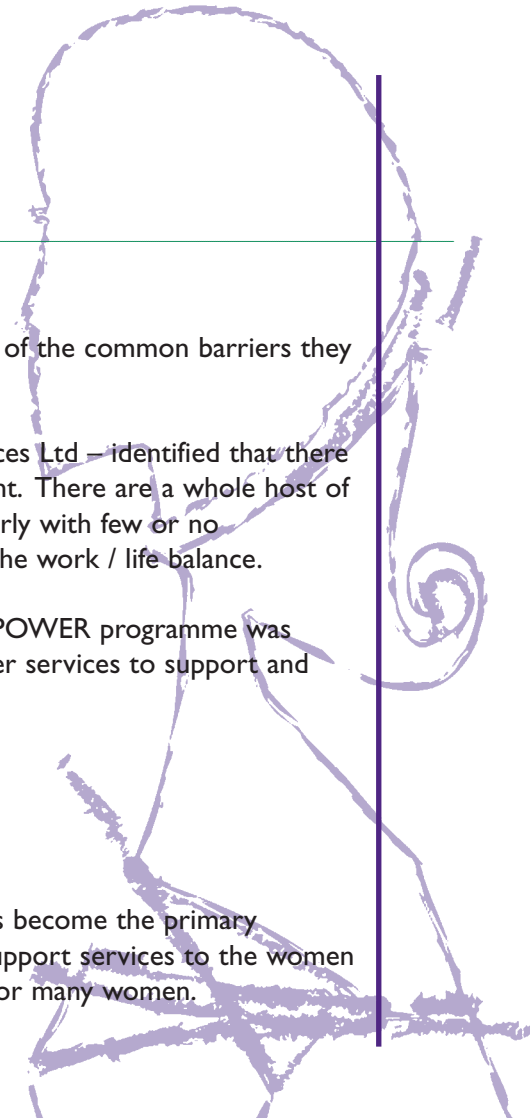
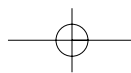
The overall aim of the EMPOWER programme is to help women overcome some of the common barriers they face when trying to access the workplace.

The project partners – Longford Women’s Link and Longford Community Resources Ltd – identified that there were real issues for women being able to access part-time and flexible employment. There are a whole host of reasons for this including returning to work after a career break, leaving school early with few or no qualifications, breaks in employment to stay at home with children, and managing the work / life balance.

As a response to tackle women’s inequality of employment opportunities, the EMPOWER programme was conceived to research and establish a social enterprise which would seek to deliver services to support and enable women to access flexible employment.

About Longford Women’s Link

Longford Women's Link (LWL) was established in January 1996, and since then has become the primary campaigner for the rights of women in Co Longford. The organisation provides support services to the women of Longford Town and county, by recognising the isolation and barriers that exist for many women.



ALL ABOUT EMPOWER

Many Longford women experience poverty and a lack of development opportunities. In addition, their geographical isolation renders them a silent minority when social and economic issues are being discussed at national level.

In response to these needs, LWL provides a safe, accessible and nurturing environment in a welcoming and dynamic women's centre. The organisation seeks to make life-changes by building women's confidence and self-belief, underpinned by a desire that local women should play a more active role in the social, economic, cultural and political life of the community.

LWL seeks to support women of all races and cultures to be part of our community.

Services that the organisation currently provides to women and their families includes childcare at Catkins Day Nursery, counselling, support for immigrant women, training & education, a domestic violence support project, policy & advocacy.

About Longford Community Resources Ltd

Established in 1995, Longford Community Resources Ltd (LCRL) is one of nine Joint LEADER Partnership development companies in Ireland administering the LEADER and Social Inclusion Programmes.

The purpose of the company is to promote positive change in the areas of social, economic, environmental, community and cultural development throughout Co Longford by empowering the communities and special issue groups to promote the development of their own areas.

The company works cohesively through a partnership of state agencies, community groups, elected

representatives, social partners and the Government Departments of Agriculture & Food and Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, to together confront and tackle problems and bring forward successful local solutions and initiatives.

Current LCRL programmes include:

- LEADER+ Programme
- National Rural Development Programme
- Local Development Social Inclusion Programme

RAPID - Revitalising Areas by Planning Investment & Development – is a government initiative to focus resources in the areas of most concentrated disadvantage in the country. Both LCRL and LWL are members of the RAPID Area Implementation Team and were involved in identifying local needs for the Longford RAPID Strategy.

About the funders

The EMPOWER programme was funded through Strand A of the Equality for Women Measure (EWM), which seeks 'to Improve Women's Access to Education, Training and Employment'. EWM is funded by the Irish Government's Department for Justice, Equality & Law Reform and part-financed by the European Union under the National Development Plan (NDP) 2000 – 2006.

70 projects throughout Ireland were funded through the Equality for Women Measure initiative. Under Strand A, over ?7 million has been earmarked to fund projects which address the needs of women living in designated RAPID areas. EWM is overseen by Pobal, who manage a number of programmes on behalf of the Irish government and the European Union.

About Longford

Longford is part of the Border Midland West (BMW) region. Data from the 2006 Census indicates that the population of the county is 34,391 with around 1/3 of that total living in Longford Town.

Although the population of Co Longford has increased by only 3% since 2002, the population of Longford Town has increased by 6.5%. The increase can largely be explained by the areas expanding minority ethnic communities. There are 18 local authority housing estates (600 units) in the town which cater for around 2,175 people or 30% of the population.

Longford has a high number of settled Travellers, with over 100 families housed in local authority housing. Estate profiles undertaken by Longford County Council highlight that between 60 and 75% of residents are in receipt of Social Welfare payments.

About Social Enterprise

A social enterprise is a business which is primarily run for the benefit of the wider community, rather than for the benefit of shareholder or private individuals. Social enterprises are usually not-for-profit and/or have charitable status and place a high emphasis on seeking long-term benefits for its participants, clients, employees, customers and the community. They are run as competitive businesses, but with social aims. The best known examples of social enterprises are Credit Unions.



*“I’ve realised that **there are lots of different ways** I can become involved in **changing the society** we live in”*

What makes a social enterprise stand out is demonstrated in its ability to create meaningful and lasting change in the community. Social enterprises often provide a solution for market failure in areas of multiple disadvantage. This is important, as they become a source of new job creation in themselves.

About EMPOWER activities

There were 5 areas of activity of the EMPOWER programme:

- Childcare Panel research & development
- Childcare Panel training
- Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) project
- Domestic Violence Panel training
- ‘Beginner’s DIY...for Women’ course



ALL ABOUT EMPOWER

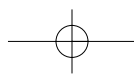
About this booklet

This evaluation report tells the story of EMPOWER. It describes why the project took place, what happened, who took part, the strengths, achievements & benefits, the challenges & the learning and what might happen in the future.

About the EMPOWER DVD

This booklet is supported by a DVD, a film of contributions made inside the Longford Big Sister Diary Room. Participants from the RPL programme and Childcare & Domestic Violence Panel training were invited to participate in the evaluation process through a Big Brother-style diary room.





WHAT WE PLANNED TO DO

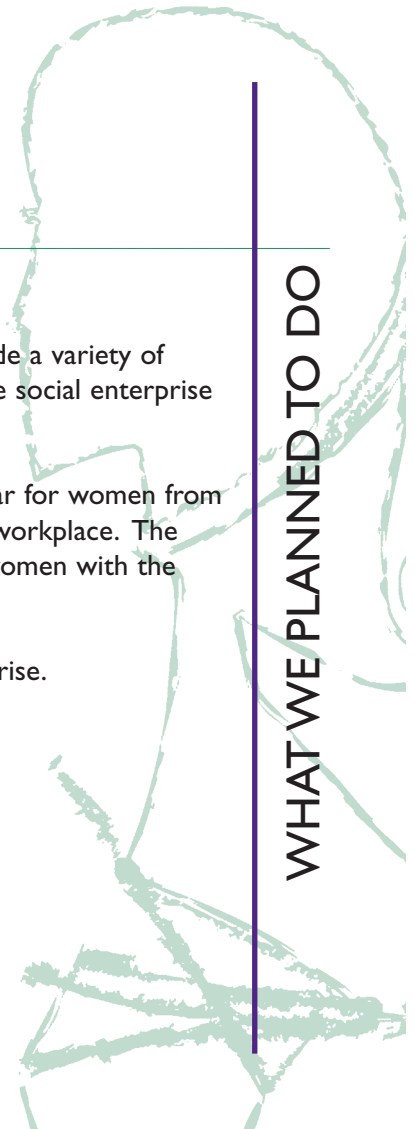
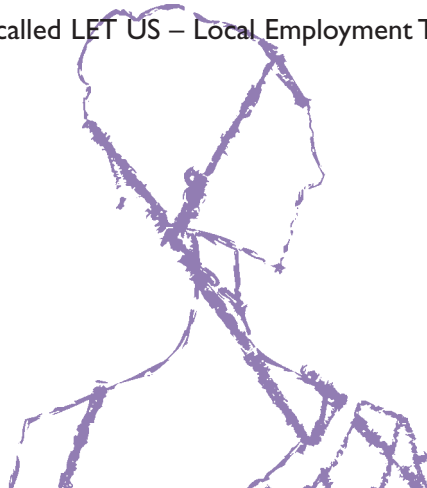
project development & research

The original concept of EMPOWER

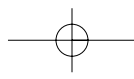
The original intention of EMPOWER was to establish a social enterprise, which would provide a variety of services to businesses and private individuals in the Longford area. The specific nature of the social enterprise would be determined through action research.

Self-employment remains an attractive option not only for women in general, but in particular for women from minority ethnic communities who continue to suffer discrimination and disadvantage in the workplace. The EMPOWER social enterprise business aimed to marry the benefits of self-employment for women with the support and community development advantages of social enterprise.

The project was originally called LET US – Local Employment Training Utilising Social Enterprise.



WHAT WE PLANNED TO DO



LET US research

During Autumn 2005, the Project Co-Ordinator undertook extensive research on social enterprises. Visits were made to seven projects taking part in the FÁS Social Economy Programme. These businesses were based in Counties Longford, Westmeath and Roscommon, and were providing a range of services such as tourist facilities, community centres and home care services.

Meetings were also held with key agencies, local influencers and stakeholders in Longford Town, to raise awareness about the proposed pilot project and to build a picture of how such a project would be received.

Following the initial findings, the research then focused on establishing a social enterprise employment agency, providing temporary staff for office work and childcare. Local organisations and businesses (community & private) were surveyed about their temporary staffing requirements, including information about the criteria they use to select such staff.

The research also investigated the needs of women from the target groups (e.g. long-term unemployed, lone parents, Traveller women) in terms of their needs, work experiences and training to date. The Project Co-Ordinator also talked to community and other organisations involved in supporting the target groups. In particular, interviews were carried out with managers of community crèches around Co Longford, most of which employ women on Community Employment (CE) schemes.

The LET US field research was a crucial part of the EMPOWER programme. It was this research that determined the future direction of the programme and ensured that it was developed based firmly on evidence and the needs of both the women participating and their potential employers.



The seeds of EMPOWER

The Project Co-Ordinator's research identified a range of training and employment-related issues for both the target women and employers.

It was identified that a significant issue affecting many of women is that they often leave training and employment schemes with little more than attendance records, and therefore have no or little recognition of the specific and transferable skills and experience that they have developed.

These issues were resulting in a negative experience for CE participants, in terms of their expectations post-placement, false sense of security whilst on the CE scheme, continuing disadvantage & discrimination despite the CE training and significantly, the number of CE participants moving into permanent or secure employment.

The LET US research also revealed that the original concept of establishing a social enterprise within the lifetime of the project was unfeasible, due to the need to train and prepare the women who would be involved.



“I thoroughly enjoyed the course, meeting new people & getting other peoples views and opinions”

WHAT WE PLANNED TO DO

Armed with this information, the project partners proposed a change in focus to provide the following:

- 1 Recognition of Prior Experience (RPL) programme for women employed on a CE scheme at Longford Women's Link
- 2 Recruitment & training of women for a Childcare Panel
- 3 Recruitment & training of women for Domestic Violence Panel
- 4 Provision of a DIY course for women

Finally, the project was renamed EMPOWER – EMPLOYment Offering Women Economic Return.

WHAT WE ACTUALLY DID

project activities

Establishing a Childcare Panel

The process of researching the Childcare Panel has been documented in the previous section, from the initial wider research on establishing a social enterprise to the narrower focus on the provision of childcare services.

It was envisaged that a Childcare Panel would operate in a similar way to employment agencies, by providing personnel to fill a variety of casual, short-term, long-term and permanent roles. The agency would provide flexible employment for women, who could access opportunities through the panel as and when suited them.

In the first instance, a Childcare Panel has been established to provide relief staffing to LWL's own crèche, Catkins Nursery. The future intention is however to offer the same services not only to other private and community crèches, but also to Registered Childminders, daycare centres, nurseries and other providers.

Following initial recruitment and selection, all members of the Childcare Panel had to commit to undertaking training, and were subject to a Garda Clearance Report. Details of the recruitment process are documented in the 'Wonderful Women!' section.

“An
excellent
week –
it really
got me
thinking”

WHAT WE ACTUALLY DID

“The **best course I ever** did”

WHAT WE ACTUALLY DID

Childcare Panel training

This was an intensive one-week training programme, run in March 2007. It ran in parallel with the Domestic Violence Panel training, and all participants shared the opening session.

Over the course of the week, participants undertook training sessions in a wide range of subjects including:

- Child protection
- Health & safety
- Behaviour management
- Roles & responsibilities
- Team work & communications
- Diversity & multi-cultural awareness
- Rights & entitlements

The week finished with a reflection and evaluation session, which was externally facilitated.



Recognition of Prior Learning

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) refers to the process of acknowledging skills, experience, knowledge and competencies of an individual that have already been acquired.

RPL is a relatively recent development in education and training, and is recognised as essential for inclusion and the promotion of lifelong learning. It is an alternative way for adults to gain recognised qualifications and accreditations, rather than undertaking formal training &/or education courses.

RPL is seen as being particularly relevant to those:

- Who have considerable experience of a job but no qualifications in the field
- Who are unable to study full-time
- With few or no school-leaving qualifications
- Who struggle with traditional education & training courses
- With low levels of literacy

The RPL process involves keeping a record of the activities undertaken at work and collect 'evidence' in a portfolio to support this. The evidence might include:

- Photographs
- Emails & memos
- Course certificates
- Diary entry
- Activity report sheet
- Description of action

WHAT WE ACTUALLY DID



WHAT WE ACTUALLY DID

The project partners contracted Empower Training (the name was a total coincidence) to provide a specialist training and mentoring package to support the EMPOWER RPL programme. The original intention was that the participants would leave the RPL process having obtained a childcare qualification.

Through the RPL process, participants met as a group with a tutor once a fortnight over the course of a year. The group sessions included the provision of 'Making Experience Count' training and the identification of already acquired skills and experience, and therefore material for the portfolios. Participants were encouraged to take ownership of their portfolios and to update them on an almost daily basis.

In addition to the group session, they received one-to-one mentoring support.

A mentoring system was set up to support both the RPL participants, as well as those providing the mentoring itself. Originally, there were 8 mentors, all employees of Longford Women's Link. They undertook a 4-day intensive mentoring training programme to prepare them for the demands of supporting the RPL participants. These 8 mentors were themselves supported by a mentor from Empower Training.

As the programme progressed, the mentoring system was streamlined, and there was just one mentor for RPL participants, the Training and Education Co-Ordinator at LWL.

Domestic Violence Panel Training

The setting up and running of a panel of volunteers to support women experiencing domestic violence by LWL was not part of the EMPOWER project. However, the recruitment and training of the panel did form part of the programme activities.

LWL sought to establish a panel of volunteers to give practical support to women experiencing domestic violence. The current domestic violence service offered includes information, support and advocacy to women in crisis situations. Volunteers could receive job related training and mentoring, in addition to gaining valuable work experience. Duties will include court accompaniment, organisation of events, administration, translation & interpretation and the provision of practical support to women experiencing domestic violence.

The all-female team of volunteers attended an intensive one-week training programme, run in March 2007. It was run in parallel with the Childcare Panel training, and all participants shared the opening session.

Over the course of the week, participants undertook training sessions in a wide range of subjects including:

Confidentiality

- Roles & responsibilities
- Gender inequality
- Diversity & multi-cultural awareness
- Court visits
- Child protection
- Self-care
- Lean On Me – Guidelines for personnel who come in contact with women living with domestic abuse.

*“The **real-life** stories
really hit me”*

The week finished with a reflection and evaluation session.



*“This was the **best investment** of my time I’ve made for a course”*

WHAT WE ACTUALLY DID

‘Beginner’s DIY...for Women’

A 6-week pilot course was run in March, April & May 2006, entitled ‘Beginner’s DIY...for Women’. The course, aimed exclusively at women, covered ‘Do It Yourself’ (DIY), health & safety and basic car maintenance skills, and was piloted in partnership with Longford VEC.

‘Beginner’s DIY...for Women’ aimed to provide basic skills for women, in areas which have previously been seen by society as the domain of men. Women have traditionally low or non-existent levels of skills and competencies in these areas. Through the provision of these basic skills, the project aimed to provide women with a sense of independence and empowerment, so in future they did not have to ‘rely upon a man’ (whether a partner, family member or tradesman) to undertake basic DIY or car maintenance tasks.

The course also aimed to give women an insight into non-traditional sectors of employment. The EMPOWER project’s long-term objective through delivering this pilot was the development of an accredited course in conjunction with Longford VEC, as a way of opening up opportunities for employment / self employment within these sectors.

WONDERFUL WOMEN!

about the participants

Target group

Some aspects of the EMPOWER programme, e.g. the Domestic Violence Panel training, were open to all women regardless of status, where as others, e.g. RPL, specifically targeted women currently on CE placements.

Overall the project aimed to target the following groups of women, considered to be particularly disadvantaged in terms of accessing suitable employment opportunities:

- Women aged 50+ years
- Long-term unemployed
- Lone parents
- Carers
- Traveller women
- Women from minority ethnic communities



WONDERFUL WOMEN!

Childcare Panel

The recruitment for the Childcare Panel was carried out as an open process, with the programme being advertised in local papers. To ensure that the application process was as accessible as possible, the application forms and recruitment process was designed to be as straightforward as possible, with short forms and a holistic approach to skills and experience, rather than just qualifications.

There was a huge demand for places, with 59 women applying for just 20 places. Participants were allocated places based strictly on merit.

Profile of Childcare Panel applicants

	Age Profile	Long-term unemployed	Lone parents	Carers	Traveller women	Women from minority ethnic communities
	Under 25	11				
	25-50	35	10	33	3	1
	50+	13				
Total	59	31	10	33	3	1

Women from all six priority target groups applied to the Childcare Panel; however no women from either the Traveller or minority ethnic communities took part. Three women from the Travelling community were fast-tracked onto other schemes which specifically targeted them, and provided support through other programmes which some other women recruited onto the panel could not access.

Disappointingly, there were very few applications to the Childcare Panel from either eastern European or African communities, both living in Longford in significant numbers. The evaluation has not been able to identify

any reason for this. None of the applications received were successful, and this was due to the lack of skills and experience of the particular applicants.

23 of the women applying were from Longford Town, 30 were living elsewhere in the county and 6 were from elsewhere. No women applying for the Childcare Panel described themselves as having any kind of disability.

When they applied to the panel, applicants were asked about their motivations for wanting to join the panel. Their responses were as follows:

Reason for applying	No. of women citing this as one of their motivations *
Work experience	36
Additional income	41
Meet new people	49
Independence	28
Own children at school	26
Developing new skills	48

* Applicants could select as many different motivations as they liked

Further exploration of motivations to become involved with the Childcare Panel were explored at an evaluation workshop at the end of the training week. The women recruited to the panel, expressed many motivations for becoming involved, although these largely fell into one of three categories:

- Economic
- Skills / career development
- Personal development

RPL Participants

In practice, EMPOWER activities have attracted a wide range of women. All women who took part in the RPL programme were currently on Community Employment (CE) placements. To qualify for a CE placement, women have to be long-term unemployed. Therefore, all RPL participants fell into at least one of the target groups.

Profile of RPL participants

	Age 50+	Long-term unemployed	Lone parents	Carers	Traveller women	Women from minority ethnic communities
	1	16	10	15	2	1
Total	1	16	10	15	2	1

Domestic Violence Panel training

Like the Childcare Panel, the process to recruit women to the Domestic Violence Panel was carried out as an open process, with the programme being advertised in local papers. To ensure that the application process was as accessible as possible, the application forms and recruitment process was designed to be as straightforward as possible.

Again, demand exceeded the number of places available and there were 28 applicants for 20 places. As some people were unsure as to whether or not they could commit to the full weeks training and the nature of the panel meant that it would have been extremely difficult to prioritise places, all 28 applicants were invited to the training week.

Profile of Domestic Violence Panel applicants

	Age Profile	Long-term unemployed	Lone parents	Carers	Traveller women	Women from minority ethnic communities
	Under 25 3					
	25-50 19	6	8	14	0	1
	50+ 26					
Total	28	6	8	14	0	1

7 of the women applying were from Longford Town, 18 were living elsewhere in the county and 3 were from elsewhere. No women applying for the Domestic Violence Panel described themselves as having any kind of disability.

When they applied to the panel, applicants were asked about their motivations for volunteering. Their responses were as follows:

Reason for volunteering	No. of women citing this as one of their motivations *
Work experience	14
Meet new people	16
Independence	3
Own children at school	5
Developing new skills	23
Giving back to the community	19

* Applicants could select as many different motivations as they liked

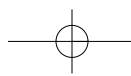
'Beginner's DIY...for Women'

The DIY course was piloted with women from local support organisations and Longford Women's Link staff, including a number of CE staff members.

15 women started the course, with 12 successfully completing it. 3 of the participants were LWL CE staff members.

Total number of women participating in EMPOWER

Activity area	No. of women involved
Childcare Panel & training	15
Domestic Violence Panel training	18
Recognition of Prior Learning	16
'Beginners DIY...for Women'	15
Total no. of women involved	64



EVALUATING THE EMPOWER PROJECT

what we did to review it

Evaluation activities for the EMPOWER project were undertaken both internally and externally.

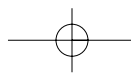
Internal evaluation activities

Substantial monitoring and evaluation activities were undertaken on EMPOWER following the appointment of the Project Co-Ordinator.

A Steering Group was established to oversee the EMPOWER programme. This group consisted of the Project Co-Ordinator, LWL Manager, LCRL Manager and the Project Co-Ordinator for Longford EQUAL, a related programme providing support and activities encouraging women to go into business. The Steering Group met on a regular basis throughout the duration of the project.

Feedback forms from participants from the Childcare and Domestic Violence Panel training weeks, RPL activities and 'Beginners DIY...for Women' were collected and collated. Informal feedback discussions with participants across the range of activities took place on a regular basis, with the information being fed back into the Steering Group.

All activities delivered were documented, and comprehensive reports including this documentation, information on achieving specific project targets, budget monitoring and other information was sent to the programme manager – Pobal – on a regular basis.



External evaluation activities

In January 2007, the project partners appointed an external consultancy to undertake an evaluation of the programme. Green Hat was appointed through a competitive tendering process, and met with the Steering Group in February.

The approach taken for the external evaluation was a range of evaluation techniques designed to encourage maximum participation from the women involved with EMPOWER in order that their stories and experiences of the project came through strongly.

A mixed methodology was employed to try to ensure that there was an opportunity for all stakeholders to engage with and actively contribute to the evaluation process.

Evaluation activities undertaken by Green Hat included:

- Longford Big Sister Diary Room DVD
- Visioning & development workshop (Steering Group)
- Phone & email interviews (RPL mentors & trainers)
- Evaluation workshop (Childcare Panel)
- In-depth one-to-one interviews (Steering Group)
- Analysis of internal evaluation
- Analysis of project documentation
- Informal discussions with RPL participants
- Ongoing meetings & discussions with Project Co-Ordinator

The Longford Big Sister Diary Room film was a Big-Brother style diary room activity. A diary room was available for one day in April 2007 in the LWL centre for any RPL, Childcare or Domestic Violence Panel member. The resulting DVD, which accompanies this booklet, articulates the experiences, learning, benefits and challenges of the women involved in EMPOWER, in their own words.



greenhat

DIDN'T WE DO WELL? (benefits, strengths & achievements)



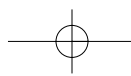
DEVELOPMENT OF A CHILDCARE PANEL & TRAINING

The research into developing and establishing a social enterprise was new territory for the project partners, and for Longford Women's Link in particular. It was a key achievement to have undertaken such a huge piece of research and to be able to determine an appropriate direction from the results.

The research findings themselves are a valuable community resource, and the potential of the Childcare Panel is extremely significant.

For the childcare panel participants

- Updating & refreshing childcare skills & knowledge
- Future opportunities for flexible employment
- Increased confidence – both personal & work-related
- Improved awareness of existing skills, knowledge & experience
- Strong sense of team support – panel members now meet regularly as a group to undertake further training, exchange information & ideas and provide support & social networking opportunities to each other
- Increase motivation to become self-employed
- Development of other skills e.g. communication, public speaking, team-working & time management
- Reducing the sense of isolation – 'I had no idea so many other women were looking for the same kind of flexible employment as me'



*“There is a **real future** for the
childcare panel. We need them
ourselves and other crèches must do too”*

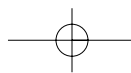
EVALUATING THE EMPOWER PROJECT

For the project partners

- Action research identified a clear & high demand for flexible employment for women
- Built improved awareness of issues around & barriers to women accessing flexible employment
- Development of knowledge on social enterprises & their potential to help deliver project partners' strategic objectives
- Research itself raised the profile of LWL & its wider work
- Solution of staffing issues for Catkins Nursery
- Development of a social enterprise project with not for women
- Made contact with women in the Longford area not previously engaged with
- Huge potential to be developed as a national model & best practice example

For the wider childcare market

- Potential future 'bank' of qualified, experienced & vetted carers for other crèches, day nurseries, playschools & Registered Childminders across Co Longford
- Demand for & availability of relief staff has been established through research – EMPOWER took the risk
- Significant potential for the expansion & replication of a Childcare Panel
- Possible central co-ordinating point for community childcare across the county



RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING

The RPL programme was an enormous learning curve for everyone involved! That everyone – project partners & participants alike - ‘survived’ this new, complex and at times intense process, was in itself a great achievement!

For the RPL participants

The evaluation identified a number of strengths, benefits and achievements of the RPL programme for the participating women. They can be largely categorised as either economic, related to the development of knowledge, skills &/or experience, or to personal development. Here is a summary of them.....

Economic

- Increased general employability
- Immediate progression into employment – 5 participants have gone directly on to employment
- Portfolios are providing a qualification substitute & helping secure employment opportunities (in some cases)
- Contribution to moving forward & on from typical experience of CE which is to return to unemployment or informal economy after a placement

Knowledge, skills & experience

- Team-building - brought CE staff together who previously had had little dealings with each other
- Created in-house support network
- Development of self-assessment skills (abilities, skills, experience, qualities etc.)
- New & improved general employment skills e.g. interview skills
- Production of standard & extended CV
- Improved communication skills
- Contributions to the research by RPL participants tackled issues around the stigma of being a CE worker

“The
more
you put
into
your
portfolio,
the more
you’ll
get out”

- Raised awareness of on-the-job training & both current and future learning opportunities
- Increased awareness & understanding of multi-culturalism – working & learning with women from other communities and cultures has been a very positive experience
- ‘Making Experience Count’ sessions were seen as invaluable
- Great sense of achievement when portfolios were completed

Personal development

- Increased self confidence (at work, home & elsewhere in life) - cited by all participants
- Opportunity to take time out of work, to reflect & take stock
- Creation of positive role models for children & other family members
- Increased self-esteem & self-belief
- Facilitated a sense of what was achieved already & therefore reinforced the concept of RPL
- Anecdotal evidence suggests a positive impact on participants’ families due to improved economic status, better employment opportunities & more confident mothers / partners

For the project partners

- Huge contribution of ‘soft’ benefits to participating women (e.g. confidence, self-esteem) – underpins the broader work of the project partners
- RPL needs a very flexible & adaptable organisation – LWL rose to the challenge!
- Raised profile of both project partners & their portfolio of activities
- Continues to give LWL a growing reputation for delivering innovative community education work
- Two-tiered mentoring system (i.e. participant mentors & mentors’ mentors) worked well
- Delivering project partners’ wider strategic objectives on having a positive impact on local women
- Team-building of LWL staff – the steep learning curve of RPL was a shared journey
- Contributed towards the range of responses by project partners for the target women in tackling social exclusion – the ‘multiplier effect’
- Built up organisational learning & knowledge of barriers & challenges faced by women trying to access employment

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE PANEL TRAINING

The wider benefits, achievements and strengths of the Domestic Violence Panel are not included here, as only the training week formed part of the EMPOWER project.

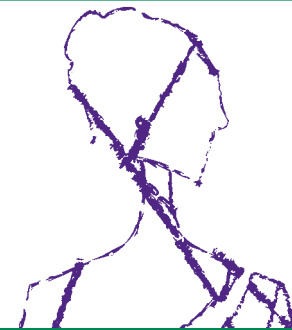
For the participants

- Increased awareness & understanding of the issues around domestic violence
- New knowledge of specific areas related to domestic violence e.g. local support organisations, court system, gender equality
- Future opportunities for volunteering
- Creating a sense of shared interest & cause
- Improved awareness of existing skills, knowledge & experience
- Developing team building skills
- Creation of social group & networking opportunities
- Opportunities for work experience
- Development & enhancement of CV's
- Preparing them for volunteering roles

For the project partners

- Creation of a new pool of volunteers
- Existing volunteers more highly skilled
- Stronger resource base with which to develop domestic violence related projects, activities & services
- Raised profile of project partners' wider work
- Improved volunteer base for other activities
- Made contact with women in the Longford area not previously engaged with

“It has
changed
my views on
survivors”



“I hope
to make a
difference”

**“I learnt how to
change a tyre!”**

‘BEGINNER’S DIY...FOR WOMEN’

For the participants

- Opportunity to undertake a taster course of what is traditionally perceived as ‘male skills’
- Increased confidence & self-esteem
- ‘Safe’ environment in which to experiment
- Raised awareness of health & safety issues for the home and workplace
- Development of new DIY, car maintenance & health and safety skills
- Experience of skills & knowledge involved in non-traditional careers for women (e.g. carpentry, electrical)
- Sense of increased independence & empowerment

For the project partners

- Successful pilot course for Longford VEC
- Tested model of training in non-traditional areas for VEC & other providers to deliver
- Raised awareness amongst participants of self-employment opportunities in non-traditional sectors of employment for women
- Creation of another possible service stream for the social enterprise agency
- Identification & profile raising of alternative employment options for women



“I already **feel** very **enthused & excited** about **where this is all going** to lead”

CROSS-CUTTING ISSUES

The following are strengths, benefits and achievements that were experienced across most or all areas of the EMPOWER project:

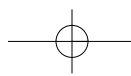
- Pobal were flexible about changes to the project that evolved through the research phase
- Groundbreaking & innovative project in many respects
- Many benefits cited by participants supported the project partners' approach to tackling the barriers to women accessing employment
- Project took a community development approach with a strong emphasis on process
- EMPOWER complemented the EQUAL project & helped inform its development
- Significant personal development opportunities for staff – new skills developed (e.g. project management) & new knowledge bases acquired (e.g. gender equality)
- Very organic project - it unfolded & developed in ways that could not have been foreseen (this was also a challenge!)
- Has provided lots of individual learning (staff & participants) & organisational learning
- This was a pilot so it was highly appropriate there was lots of learning & challenges – this was the right place to experience these things



“The session on **child protection** –
[very disturbing] – but **informative**
& **enlightening**”



“The **commitment** & **drive**
of the **support workers** and **staff**
is truly **infectious!**”



LEARNING & CHALLENGES

things that we found difficult

The learning and challenges of the EMPOWER project were many!

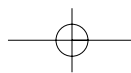
CHILDCARE & DOMESTIC VIOLENCE PANELS

Although the Childcare and Domestic Violence Panel training sessions were run in parallel, there was little interaction between the two groups, apart from receiving similar training sessions in core areas. One group of women were there in a voluntary capacity; the other, to access flexible employment. Despite these differences, the feedback from each group of participants raised exactly the same issues.

The learning and challenges for the participants for their respective training weeks has therefore been combined into one response.

For trainees

- Managing expectations of level of expertise after one weeks training
- Training week needed periods of reflection to facilitate & share learning, provoke debate & discussion and allow for absorption
- Some participants felt that the training should have been over two weeks; there were practical issues of availability & commitment however
- Pre-course briefing on emotional & psychological depth of course would have been useful – e.g. child protection
- Opportunity to link in with other more in-depth training for some participants
- Participants identified a need for follow up training at an early stage





“The **child protection
[session] **affected me**
*more than I thought it would”***

LEARNING & CHALLENGES

For project partners

The learning and challenges for the project partners focus on the Childcare Panel only. Learning and challenges from the Domestic Violence Panel training for the project partners was very minimal.

- Difficulty in building meaningful relationships with local businesses & other organisations
- Need to find mechanism to recruit new participants as current panel members get permanent work
- Issues around maintaining commitment of participants, particularly in ‘slack’ periods including current period between EMPOWER & what may follow
- Sustainability of panel – it needs a dedicated project co-ordinator to support panel
- Need to develop links to business start-up & management training

For other stakeholders

- Statutory agencies have their own designated trainers whose approach may not fully embrace the community education ethos of LWL. This was manifested by one trainer who made a range of assumptions about participants, demonstrated a lack of flexibility in delivery, had poor communication & resulted in participants feeling frustrated, upset and angry
- Some support organisations did not engage with the EMPOWER programme in a meaningful or constructive way
- Need to track trainees who have undertaken childcare training in Co Longford (e.g. courses through LCRL)

RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING

Learning and challenges for the RPL programme can be grouped into the following categories:

- Communication & understanding
- External Relationships
- Accessibility
- Planning
- Accreditation
- Resources

The RPL programme proved to be the most challenging of the EMPOWER project, and was a steep learning curve for all involved.

Communication & understanding

- Participants & project partners did not know enough about RPL & what it involved at the outset
- Poor understanding of what RPL actually is (participants, mentors, employers)
- Difficult to convey benefits of RPL without good understanding & experience of process
- Some participants only undertook RPL because they thought they had to as part of their CE placement – indicates that they originally saw few or no benefits
- Even towards the end of the RPL programme, participants still attributed their work to others ('I'm doing this for you')
- Motivation of participants was difficult at times, particularly when some of the mentors were struggling to understand the RPL process & its benefits



LEARNING & CHALLENGES

External Relationships

- Sense of snobbery from some parts of the education sector, employers & general public about vocational qualifications
- While FETAC accepted the project onto the pilot at a later stage, LWL would have welcomed greater input, direct support and a clearer sense of direction from FETAC
- Employers still do not recognise RPL as a valid process in some cases & feel it lacks credibility
- Confusion regarding the information that participants would receive a Childcare qualification based solely on their portfolio. This proved not to be the case

Accessibility

- RPL is a massive undertaking – not for the feint hearted!
- Participants were expected to undertake assignments, a surprise to them & the project partners
- Very time-bound programme – if participants missed a week, then they fell behind - lack of flexibility frustrated some participants
- Lack of structure around the programme – halfway through, some participants were still struggling with the concept of RPL
- Participants & project partners felt a sense of irony that many of the traditional qualification tools (e.g. assignments, weekly ‘classes’, lots of paper work) were used as significant aspects in RPL
- Tension between providing greater structure for clarity and understanding & greater fluidity and flexibility so that every week isn’t just a ‘class’ – difficult to balance

Planning

- Issue with participants coming & going (usually either finishing on CE scheme or poor attendance) – difficult for facilitator to create a sense of team
- Lack of tracking of CE participants – it would be really useful to know where they've gone, what they've gone on to achieve & what they're doing now (how is the success of the CE scheme measured?)
- Both participants & project partners were unprepared for the amount of work RPL entailed
- Staff cover (for participants) needs to be arranged for RPL sessions & mentoring

Accreditation

- Project partners & participants expected a childcare qualification – they did not get this
- Need to find a way of getting 'chunks' of work accredited &/or recognised – at present, if participants don't fully complete the programme they leave with nothing
- Mixed views on the usefulness of the portfolio – some believed it to be a significant tool in the jobseekers bag; others felt that the reality was employers were only interested in qualifications – there was evidence to support both perspectives
- There was a view that within the timescale & workload, participants could have achieved more (in terms of accreditation & qualifications) through traditional training routes
- Some felt it did not fully capture on-the-job learning & therefore missed opportunities

Resources

- Mentoring process needs serious consideration – greatly underestimated time for mentoring support
- Whole RPL process incredibly resource-intensive
- Mentors need to have ring-fenced time to provide support & guidance
- Confusion about mentoring during system using panel of mentors – much better with one point of contact & single message / style
- RPL won't work without the mentoring

As there was so much learning and so many challenges from undertaking this RPL programme, in itself a relatively new training / education process outside of the mainstream system, the project partners were keen to find ways to share their experiences with others. These 'others' are those with an interest in RPL and in its application in a community setting, specifically with women, childcare sector and as a means of tackling social exclusion. This sharing of learning provides a mechanism by which RPL may be mainstreamed.

Information on mainstreaming & points for action learning are to be shared with:

- FETAC
- FÁS
- Quality Assurance Framework
- Longford Vocational Education Committee (VEC)
- Pobal
- Empower Training
- County Childcare Committees (Longford & beyond)
- National children's organisations e.g. Barnardos, NCDA
- Department of Justice, Equality & Law Reform
- Women's organisations e.g. National Women's Council
- European Anti-Poverty Network
- Lone parents organisations
- Other similar projects e.g. West Clare Early Years



The EMPOWER project was not included in FETAC's evaluation process or report of its country-wide RPL pilot project, of which EMPOWER was one of the participating providers.

There was no significant learning or challenges from the delivery of the 'Beginner's DIY...for Women' course.

CROSS-CUTTING ISSUES

- This was an enormous project – it was just too ambitious!
- Needed a longer lead in time – funders need to realise that good quality projects need planning, development & research time and shouldn't be expected to hit the ground running
- Similarly, there should be an exit period, which allows evaluation to be carried out beyond the last activities
- Greater flexibility for the timing of evaluation activities
- Shorter, sharper focus would have been better
- EMPOWER was totally under-resourced – two rather than one full-time post should have been supporting the activities
- Too steep a learning curve (particularly RPL)
- Need to find an effective mechanism to convey issues, challenges & achievements to funders
- Need to encourage support and understanding of the project with funders – through greater resourcing of dedicated project staff, for example
- Frustration of funders' cumbersome administration procedures & their effect on both the morale and finances of community projects and the organisation
- Need to ensure that learning is not embedded just in individual project partner staff members, but also in the organisations themselves so it can be referenced for the future
- Lack of tracking of CE participants – where they've gone, what they've gone on to achieve
- Very organic project – unfolded & developed in ways that could not have been foreseen (this was also a positive!)
- Considerable work still needs to be done on finding ways of mainstreaming both the social enterprise / childcare & RPL projects

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

hopes, opportunities & aspirations

This final section will focus on the two main aspects of EMPOWER – the creation of social enterprise business providing childcare services and RPL as a means of helping disadvantaged women access the workplace.

In many respects the two strands of EMPOWER contrast most sharply at this point. The Childcare Panel appears to have huge potential for development for the project partners, not only in Longford but beyond. If resources can be found to take this social enterprise to the next level and a sustainable model developed, then the benefits will be significant, long-term and far-reaching.

Conversely, RPL is unlikely to be developed within Longford Women's Link (& other similar providers) in its current format, and with the current resourcing requirements. The challenges and issues around the RPL aspect of EMPOWER lie with the wider business, education and training community. There are real issues of credibility around vocational qualifications in Ireland, and the reality is that a cultural shift needs to take place before RPL can be considered as a serious contributor of equality for disadvantaged women in the workplace.

The 'soft' benefits to RPL participants came through very strongly, and it appears that it was these that translated into economic benefits, rather than the skills training model. The key issue now for the project partners is how to take forward the learning from the RPL aspect of EMPOWER, in particular how to emulate its success.

Next steps for the Childcare Panel

- Ensure that learning from the panel research is widely disseminated to relevant organisations, both locally & nationally
- Develop policies & procedures for panel (e.g. recruitment & selection, induction process, monitoring, placement procedures etc.)
- Secure resources to fund a co-ordinator to support the development of the panel
- Extend panel so that other crèches & childcare providers (e.g. Registered Childminders) can access it
- Open up access to further education, training & learning for panel members

Next steps for RPL

- Ensure that learning from the RPL pilot research is widely disseminated to relevant organisations, both locally & nationally
- Develop the use of FÁS Core Skills programme & integrate RPL principles into it
- Explore alternative ways for participants to achieve FETAC (or other) accreditation through work-based community-led training

And finally....

We hope that through this booklet and accompanying DVD, you feel a sense of the incredible journey that the EMPOWER project took us all on. It was a journey of many twists and turns, of constant surprises, relentless challenges but ultimately rewarding outcomes. The personal successes and individual stories of the women involved are testimony to this.

EMPOWER set out to make a positive impact on the lives of women in Co Longford, through the pursuit of equality for women in the workplace. We are confident we have delivered this, and hope that we have – in our own small way – contributed to achieving this equality for the benefit of all.

ACRONYMS

CE	Community Employment
EMPOWER	EMPLOYment Offering Women Economic Return
EWM	Equality for Women Measure
FÁS	Foras Áiseanna Saothair / Training & Employment Authority
FETAC	Further Education & Training Awards Council
LWL	Longford Women's Link
LCRL	Longford Community Resources Ltd
MEC	Making Experience Count
NDP	National Development Plan
QAF	Quality Assurance Framework
RAPID	Revitalising Areas by Planning, Investment & Development
RPL	Recognition of Prior Learning
VEC	Vocational Education Committee



THANKS TO

EMPOWER steering group

Project staff, mentors and trainers

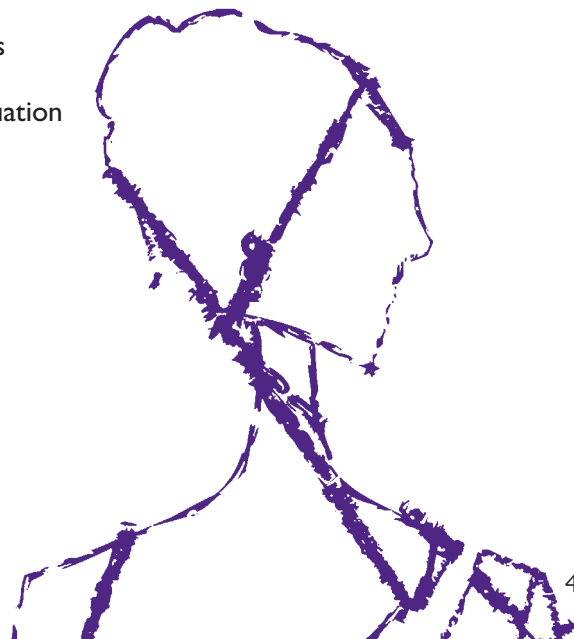
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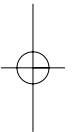
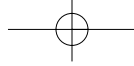
Social Economy projects and Community Employment Supervisors for their contribution to research

Local & National, Statutory, Community & Private organisations

Green Hat for their creative approach to the EMPOWER evaluation

And above all, the project participants





EUROPEAN SOCIAL FUND:
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RAPID PRINT, LONGFORD. TEL: 043 41168



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