# The Children & Youth Digital Solutions Fund EVALUATION REPORT









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# **Executive Summary**

This report sets out an independent impact evaluation of the €600,000 Children and Youth Digital Solutions Fund, a one-year Fund created by Rethink Ireland in partnership with the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) under the 'What Works' Initiative via the Dormant Accounts Fund. The need for the Digital Solutions Fund emerged following recognition of the positive role of technology within the children and youth sector and the gap that exists for voluntary and community organisations to maximise its use across services. This was of particular importance amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. A total of nine Awardees were selected for the Fund. Eight of the successful applicants received cash grants of up to a maximum of €50,000 and all nine were awarded a Non-Financial Business Supports Package worth €10,000 and a place on Rethink Ireland's 6-month Accelerator Programme.

# **METHODOLOGY**

The evaluation adopted a mixed method approach to data collection and was informed by a desk-based review, a web-based survey and one-to-one semi structured interviews. All Awardees completed the survey and participated in interviews. Limitations of the evaluation methodology included challenge with defining success for the Fund in the absence of a set of consistent, defined outcome measures, non-inclusion of beneficiary voice, and an inability to determine the longer-term impact of the Fund on Awardees and beneficiaries due to timing.

# **SURVEY RESULTS**

The findings demonstrate that by investing in 9 Awardees, the Fund reached 831 schools, 383 parents and 77,506 children and young people. All 26 counties benefited with Cork, Dublin, Donegal and Galway impacted the most. People experiencing disadvantage, from a minority background (including Traveller, Roma, Refugees), living with a disability and those suffering poor mental health were supported.

The core outcomes delivered by projects to beneficiaries included improved education, increased independence and autonomy, improved health and wellbeing, reduced loneliness and isolation, increased access to services and an improved ability to participate or integrate in society.

The survey results showed that the Fund supported Awardees to pilot new/innovative online services (67%), improve their service offering to beneficiaries through digital solutions (67%), engage more extensively with their existing audience (88%) and reach a larger/bigger audience (78%). All Awardees reported improved impact measurement skills and capabilities, 77% reported improved communications and marketing and 78% reported improved partnership working and collaboration. Greater clarity on funding requirements was indicated by 89% of Awardees as was improved strategy and strategic thinking. 67% of Awardees also reported that the Fund strengthened their financial sustainability. For half of the Awardees, the Fund improved their ability to reach a more diverse audience (50%), increased their awareness of equality, diversity and inclusion (55%)

and improved their peer support network (55%). All Awardees also indicated that the Fund supported their ability to sustain and scale their projects. In terms of future scaling plans, scaling out and reaching more locations through partnerships as well as scaling deep and providing more services were most reported (75%) with scaling up and reaching new locations only the least reported ambition (50%). The average reported experience of the Fund was 4.8 out of 5 and all Awardees agreed that the Fund was aligned to their needs.

# **INTERVIEW FINDINGS**

Interview data reinforced survey findings.

Awardees identified a range of outcomes linked with project development and sustainability and organisational sustainability. This included improved impact measurement, fundraising capabilities and subsequent financial sustainability as well as strategic thinking. Awardees also reported an improved ability to market and promote their projects, improved credibility of their projects and an improved reach that was facilitated by their project. Partnerships, networking and strengthened strategic thinking were also identified as an outcome of the Fund by some Awardees.

All Awardees reported a positive experience with the Non-Financial Supports Package.

Key strengths of the Accelerator Programme included the group-based environment, online format and provision of useful, relevant and needs based content. Areas for improvement however included more targeted workshops and less general topics, shorter duration of workshops and improved communication about the workshops e.g., the content and schedule. In terms of the consultancy support, the expertise, knowledge, and approach (patience, enthusiasm, and passion) of the consultants and the one to one, remote format were deemed key strengths. Suggested areas for improvement included a lead in workshop on the strategic planning process and additional support regarding scaling projects.

The supportive and flexible approach of Rethink Ireland staff was also found to have facilitated a positive experience for Awardees.

# **DISCUSSION & CONCLUSIONS**

The evaluation concluded that the Fund successfully supported non-profit organisations to harness the power of technology to respond to and address the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on children and young people.

Through its investment, new innovations were realised and barriers to accessing services in the areas of youth education, health and housing were reduced. The reach of organisations was extended, with those who were especially vulnerable and experiencing disadvantage catered for. In the absence of the Fund, the findings suggest, this would not have happened or to a much lesser extent.

Whilst obstacles related to technology, remote engagement, staffing and resourcing did present, the use of technology represented an important opportunity for children and youth services. This was evidenced by the demand, buy-in and reach of Awardees' innovations and reinforced by Awardees' ambitions to sustain and scale their projects as well as the strategic commitments at a national level to enhance digitisation across the country. Given the strategic alignment of the Fund, coupled with the landscape and context in which it was conceptualised, the evaluation concluded that the Fund represented a timely and important investment for the sector.

The report also concluded that the Fund's investment in digital solutions represented a step in the right direction, but that there remained a need for the children and youth sector, and the non-profit sector more generally, to strengthen its digital position to respond to and remain relevant within the new digital era. Access to funding that encourages a test and

learn approach was deemed essential. The evaluation also demonstrated the importance and value of the capacity building support, and the need to optimise its delivery in line with Awardees suggested areas for improvement to facilitate attendance and engagement.

# **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The evaluation made four recommendations.

These were:

- 1. To support the non-profit sector in their strive towards digital transformation in a new, digital era, Rethink Ireland should raise awareness among Government and additional philanthropic investors of the need for continued investment in digital solutions for the non-profit sector and more specifically using this evaluation, of the benefits it can deliver for the children and youth sector.
- 2. In recognition of the added value of the Accelerator Programme and Consultancy Support for Awardees, Rethink Ireland should continue to offer the non-financial supports package within future Funds.
- 3. In response to a growing youth population and the anticipated long-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on Irish children and young people coupled with the financial pressures experienced by the sector, Rethink Ireland should raise awareness of the need for continued investment in the children and youth sector.
- 4. To enable more robust evaluation in the future, Rethink Ireland should commission external evaluators at fund initiation with responsibility for developing and defining key outcomes and indicators and an appropriate evaluation framework. Recommendation four also included capturing the voice of beneficiaries and stakeholders to add to the validity of findings, where resources permitted.

# Section 1: Introduction to the Report

This report sets out an independent impact evaluation of the one-year, €600,000, Children and Youth Digital Solutions Fund.

Launched in April 2021, the Fund was created by Rethink Ireland in partnership with the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) under the 'What Works' Initiative. It aimed to support not-for - profit children and youth sector organisations to increase their use of technology in the delivery and management of their services amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. A total of nine Awardees were selected for the Fund. Eight of the successful applicants received cash grants of up to a maximum of €50,000 and all nine were awarded a Non-Financial Business Supports Package worth €10,000 and a place on Rethink Ireland's 6-month Accelerator Programme.

The purpose of this evaluation is to assess the impact of the Fund on its Awardees and their respective projects.

# **REPORT OBJECTIVES**

The objectives of the evaluation as set out in the terms of reference are:

- To assess the extent the Fund supported Awardees to respond/pivot/adapt to meeting the needs of their beneficiaries digitally.
- To assess the extent the Fund enabled Awardees to improve their services or create additional services by means of digital solutions.
- To explore how the Awardees delivered their respective projects including what they did, how their projects worked and any key learning.
- To assess the extent the projects invested in delivered outcomes for children and young people and how they are measuring this impact.
- To assess the impact of transitioning to online for projects.
- To assess the extent to which the Accelerator Programme added value to Awardees and how.
- To assess the extent funded innovations are sustainable.
- To identify how Rethink Ireland can best support Awardees in the future.

# **REPORT STRUCTURE**

The report includes the following:

- Section 2 sets out the background context to the Fund including how its need emerged and the extent it was strategically aligned with national priorities.
- Section 3 presents an overview of what the Fund comprised.
- Section 4 sets out the methodology used to inform the evaluation and its limitations.
- Section 5 presents the survey results.
- Section 6 presents the interview findings.
- Section 7 discusses the learning and reflections for the Fund
- Section 8 presents recommendations based on the evaluation.

### INTRODUCTION TO RETHINK IRELAND

Rethink Ireland (formerly Social Innovation Fund Ireland) provides cash grants and business support to charities, community and voluntary organisations, and social enterprises working in Irish communities across the country. Since its establishment in 2016, Rethink Ireland has created a €65 million social innovation fund. They have partnered with companies, trusts, foundations, families and individuals to create 30 funds tackling issues such as inequality and educational disadvantage to support over 200 social innovations. These innovations have reached 300,000 people and enabled 864 people experiencing disadvantage to progress into employment.¹

### Rethink Ireland's vision is:

"An Ireland which is more inclusive, equal and sustainable because of social innovation"

### Rethink Ireland's mission is:

"To support the best social innovations so that they can grow and maximise their impact across Ireland"

# THE 'WHAT WORKS' INITIATIVE

'What Works', funded under Dormant Accounts, is an initiative designed by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY), which aims to maximise the impact of prevention and early intervention to improve outcomes for children and young people living in Ireland. There are four strands under What Works, namely data, evidence, learning and development, and quality. The Children and Youth Digital Solutions Fund was supported under the learning and development strand with the aim to further the use of technology as a tool.

https://rethinkireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Rethink-Ireland-Strategic-Plan.pdf

# Section 2: Why the Children and Youth Digital Solutions Fund?

# INTRODUCTION

The Children and Youth Digital Solutions Fund was created to address the disproportionate impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children and young people by investing in not for-profit organisations to help them harness the power of technology and bridge the digital divide. To understand the context in which the Fund was conceptualised, this section outlines how the need for the Fund emerged and the extent it was strategically aligned with national priorities.



# THE CHILDREN AND YOUTH SECTOR IN IRELAND & THE IMPACT OF COVID-19

While many other countries are grappling with a declining youth population, in Ireland the youth population is growing. The results of Census 2016 confirmed that Ireland has one of the youngest populations in Europe with one-third aged less than 25 years<sup>2</sup>. A report by UNICEF in 2017 however, shows the challenges they face compared to others in the EU.<sup>3</sup> For example, Ireland has the fourth highest rate of suicide amongst teenagers in the EU with a rate of 10.3 amongst adolescents aged between 15 and 19 per 100,000 population and 22.6% of children aged between 11 and 15 have experienced two or more psychological symptoms more than once a week. The report also found the following:

- 18.3% of Irish children are living in relative income poverty.
- 23% of children are living in multidimensional poverty.
- 17.9% of children under 15 live with an adult who is 'food insecure'.
- 9.1% of 15-19-year-olds are not in education, employment or training.

To address this, community and voluntary groups across Ireland play a pivotal role in delivering essential services and supports to children and young people. These services supplement opportunities provided by the public sector and range from early-years childcare to education and mental health

supports. In March 2020 however, the COVID-19 pandemic created extraordinary social conditions in Ireland which had a profound impact on Irish society. Research revealed its disproportionate impact on Ireland's children and young people, specifically in areas of mental health, education, employment and social wellbeing, with intersecting identity factors, such as sex, gender, race, ethnicity, disability, and socio-economic disadvantage further exacerbating vulnerability. 456 The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is expected to effect children and young people long after restrictions on social gathering and the danger of the virus have passed. Research suggests that prolonged disruption to education may have long-term negative impacts on education outcomes, particularly those already at risk of education disadvantage<sup>7</sup> and that pandemics can create adverse childhood experiences for young people, through the risk to health, requirement for social isolation, and the increased stress levels of parents and caregivers8. Adverse childhood experiences have been found to increase the risk of poor mental and physical health, increase risky behaviours like smoking or heavy drinking, and reduce education and employment potential.9

Prior to the pandemic, almost all youth work was provided in person and face to face. 10 However, despite best efforts by youth work organisations and youth workers to re-engineer their services, research highlighted the detrimental impact of the restrictions and use of online engagement on youth work services and on young people who relied on

- 2 Census 2016, Central Statistics Office
- 3 http://cdn.thejournal.ie/media/2017/06/unicef-child-wellbeing-report-card.pdf
- 4 OECD Policy Responses to Coronavirus (COVID-19), Youth and COVID-19: Response, recovery and resilience (2020) Available at: <a href="https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/youth-and-covid-19-response-recovery-and-resilience-c40e61c6/">https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/youth-and-covid-19-response-recovery-and-resilience-c40e61c6/</a>
- 5 Growing Up in Ireland, Key Findings: Special Covid 19 Survey
- 6 Ibio
- 7 Darmody, M. et al (2021) Impacts of COVID-19 Control Measures on Widening Educational Inequalities. Young, 29(4), pp. 366-380. Available at: https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/11033088211027412
- 8 Araújo L.A. et al (2020). The Potential Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Child Growth and Development: A Systematic Review. Journal of Paediatrics, 97(4), pp369–377. Available at: https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7510529/
- 9 CDC (2019) Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). Available at: https://www.cdc.gov/vitalsigns/aces/index.html#:~:text=ACEs%20can%20 include%20violence%2C%20abuse,and%20substance%20misuse%20in%20adulthood.
- 10 NYCI 2022 PRE-BUDGET SUBMISSION

these services. <sup>11</sup> An independent review of the youth work sector's response to the COVID-19 pandemic found that, according to youth organisations, young people were reluctant to engage online; it was difficult to engage with the most disadvantaged young people; and due to digital poverty, many young people had no or limited access to devices or an adequate internet connection. <sup>12</sup> The study also found that 59% of the services surveyed had experienced a reduction in the number of young people with whom they engaged, with figures falling from 59,822 to 18,391. This equates to a 70% drop. 14% were also unable to provide a service during lockdown, impacting on approximately 6,900 young people.

The COVID-19 pandemic also emerged at a time of under resourcing for the children and youth sector. The sector endured steep cuts following the 2008 recession, with investment in youth work services decreasing by 31.8% from 2008-2014. Whilst investment has been on the increase in recent years, figures from 2021 highlight that financial support for youth work is still €6.3m below that of thirteen years ago, more when accounting for inflation.¹³ Whilst prior to the pandemic the sector was under pressure and facing cuts to funding, research highlights how the pandemic exacerbated these issues¹⁴. From a survey to its members in January 2021, the National Youth Council for Ireland found that the following:

- 47% indicated that the pandemic was having a severe impact on organisational income.
- 93% indicated that the pandemic will have a severe impact on the organisation's fundraising and earned income in 2021.
- 93% indicated that they were concerned if they had sufficient funds to provide services in 2021.

Despite limitations and challenges, the review underscored the advantages of using technology in children and youth work. These advantages

included widening the geographical reach, increased flexibility and room for further innovation and experimentation.15 It highlighted the importance of the youth sector strengthening its position to meet the current and emerging needs of young people in the face of challenges arising from the pandemic, with particular emphasis placed on offering a blended approach, combining both digital and face to face approaches. To mitigate the impact of the ongoing pandemic on the youth work sector in both the short and long term, it also highlighted that the following supports were needed:

Resourcing to address issues arising from the fallout of the pandemic.

Additional funding which can be adapted to meet the emerging needs of young people.

Investment in the supports to bring back volunteers, attract new ones and provide appropriate training and ongoing support and advice for volunteers.

Continued training, check-ins, and networking to encourage sharing of good practice and practice development.

Staff and volunteer well-being with appropriate support structures.

In recognition of the COVID-19 context, the positive role of technology and the gap that exists for the sector to maximise its use, the need for the Digital Solutions Fund emerged. To further understand the context in which the Fund was delivered, a review of how it aligns with national policies and agendas is presented below.

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# THE STRATEGIC POLICY CONTEXT FOR THE FUND

The Fund invested in not for profit children and youth sector organisations to help them harness technology for service creation and improvement whilst addressing the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on children and young people. This aligned to several national strategies and priorities, some of which are explored below.

# **National Development**

The 2020 Programme for Government (PfG) sets out the key commitments of the government under 12 priority missions across 5 years. The PfG shares the commitment of the Fund and the What Works Initiative to provide better outcomes for children and young people with specific regard to digital transformation. Further, both the Fund and PfG recognise the value of community and voluntary family support services and youth work in preventing harm and responding to the needs of Irish families. Several PfG missions align with the Fund, including:

- 'Mission Building Stronger and Safer Communities'
  which commits the Government to enact an
  Online Safety and Media Regulation Bill and
  establish an Online Safety Commissioner to
  promote positive digital citizenship among
  children and young people.
- 'Mission Reigniting and Renewing the Economy'
   and 'Mission Better Opportunities through
   Education and Research' which commit
   the Government to the development and
   implementation of two further strategies that
   aim to positively impact children and young people
   and their interaction with digital technologies: a
   National Digital Strategy and a Digital Education
   Strategy.

Ireland's National Recovery and Resilience Plan
(NRRP) which addresses the aftermath of the
COVID-19 pandemic and aims to contribute to a
sustainable, equitable, green, and digital recovery
effort synergises with the Fund's focus on improving
the digital and technological capacity of non-profits
following the pandemic. It prioritises an acceleration
and expansion of digital reforms and transformation

and recognises that digital transformation is a catalyst for wider national recovery.

Other national policies such as the **Project Ireland**2040 National Planning Framework and National
Development Plan 2021-2030 further align with the
Fund. Both of these policies seek to promote access
to quality services, a strong economy supported by
innovation, and digital adoption. The Sustainable,
Inclusive, and Empowered Communities strategy
which aims to create stronger and more effective
community and voluntary sector organisations with
the potential to run programmes informed by societal
value and community need is also aligned to the Fund.

# **Digital Policy**

Harnessing Digital – The Digital Ireland Framework is the national digital strategy which sets out a pathway to drive and enable the digital transition across Ireland's economy and society. The Framework is outlined across 4 themes, two of which the Fund specifically aligns:

- 'Digital Transformation of Business' aims to increase the adoption of digital technologies to maximise the benefits of the digital transition for the wider ecosystem, across productivity, innovation, and competitiveness.
- 'Skills' seeks to ensure that 80% of Irish adults to have at least basic digital skills by 2030 to enable all cohorts to fully engage in society and benefit from digital transformation.

The Fund shares this Framework's commitment to improving digital technology use across Ireland's services by investing in non-profits so they can better harness technology in the provision of children and young people's services

Impact 2030: Ireland's Research and Innovation
Strategy aims to position research, development,
and innovation at the heart of addressing Ireland's
economic and societal challenges, including the
digital transition. Framed around five pillars, the
Strategy seeks to maximise the impact of research

<sup>11</sup> National Youth Council of Ireland (2020). A Review of the Youth Work Sector Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

<sup>12</sup> National Youth Council of Ireland (2020). A Review of the Youth Work Sector Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

<sup>13</sup> National Youth Council of Ireland (2022) Budget 2022 'Progress on Youth Work but Youth Issues ignored again'. Available at: <a href="https://www.youth.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/NYCI-Post-Budget-Analysis-2022.pdf">https://www.youth.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/NYCI-Post-Budget-Analysis-2022.pdf</a>

<sup>14</sup> NYCI 2022 PRE-BUDGET SUBMISSION

<sup>15</sup> ibid.

and innovation on national priorities. Pillar One of the Strategy seeks to enable innovation to make a real impact on social wellbeing whilst Pillar Four includes a focus on nurturing and developing talent to drive research and innovation in the higher education and research system, enterprises, communities and public services. The Fund's investment in digital technologies promotes innovation within the sector and community for the benefit of children and young people.

# **Children and Young People**

The Fund aligns with national policy for children and young people, including **Better Outcomes**, **Brighter** Futures: The National Policy Framework for Children & Young People 2014-2020 (in place until a successor is published). This Framework sets out the Government's agenda and priorities in relation to all children and young people under the age of 25. The Framework is formed around 5 outcomes areas, with outcome 2 'Achieving full potential in learning and development' recognising that young people's digital literacy will be fundamental to their life chances, and essential to the development of an equitable society. The Framework seeks to better understand and respond to the increasing influences on childhood of new technologies and digital media, making commitments to increase the digital literacy of young people and to build their skills and understanding about being safe online. This aligns with the overall purpose of the Fund which seeks to improve outcomes for children and young people by enabling them to benefit from digital technologies. Further, the Framework has a focus on ensuring quality services and supports for children which can address the full range of their needs. Through the Fund's investment in non-profit children and youth sector organisations to improve their use of technology in the delivery of prevention and early intervention services, there is alignment with the Framework as both seek to promote access for children and young people.

The Fund also synergises with the **National Youth Strategy 2015-2020** which focuses on enhancing the contribution of current and emerging policies, programmes, and services to improve national outcomes for young people aged 10-24 years. It aims to enable all young people to realise their maximum potential by respecting their rights and hearing their voices, while protecting and supporting them as they transition from childhood to adulthood. The strategy

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aims for children and young people services that are open, accessible, and resourced, and seeks to promote the use of new technologies and support the acquisition of digital skills for young people.

The Digital Strategy for Schools to 2027 aims to create an education system which is fit for the digital age and ensure that all learners are supported to have appropriate and equal access to digital technologies, in particular individuals at risk of educational disadvantage and those with additional learning needs. The Strategy highlights that the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated how the effective use of digital technologies can help schools and teachers to ensure continuity of learning and synergises with the Fund in its commitment to using digital technologies to improve the learning experience and outcomes for all students (young people) nationally.

First 5: A Whole of Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children, and their Families and the National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making also align with the Fund's commitments to improving outcomes for children and young people through digital technologies and working with young people for the improvement of existing services.

# **Summary**

The preceding section demonstrates a wellestablished need for the Children and Youth Digital Solutions Fund. This need anchors on the children and youth sector context which highlights the challenges faced by services to harness digital, fundraise and respond to increased demand amidst the COVID-19 pandemic and, on a policy context that recognises the critical role of digital in addressing the needs of Ireland's children and young people. Given the strategic alignment of the Fund, coupled with the landscape and context in which it was conceptualised, the Fund appears to be an important investment at a national level for addressing the needs of children and young people through digital transformation. To further assess the Fund's value, the sections that follow evaluate its impact.

# Section 3: What is the Children and Youth Digital Solutions Fund?

# INTRODUCTION

This section presents an overview of the Children and Youth Digital Solutions Fund including its application and selection process, its Awardees, and what they received.

# **FUND SNAPSHOT**







Counties Reached by Projects



# APPLICATION AND SELECTION PROCESS

The Children & Youth Digital Solutions Fund was launched in April 2021 with applications accepted until mid-May 2021. The Fund was available to voluntary and community organisations, as well as the key networks of statutory, non-statutory and non-government organisations working to improve outcomes for children, young people, and their families. The Fund aimed to invest in innovative, collaborative projects using digital solutions to solve a problem, collect relevant data or scale resources for children, young people, and their families. To be successful, applicants were required to demonstrate that they:

- Aimed to improve their services or create additional services by means of digital solutions.
- Worked with or provide services for children (age 0-12) and/or young people (age 14-24) and/or their families.
- Were active in the Children and Youth sector e.g.,
   Children and Young People's Services Committees,
   Child and Family Support Networks, or Family
   Resource Centres.

Rethink Ireland received 57 applications from across all 26 counties in Ireland with a total funding request of €2.85 million. The Awardee selection process took place between May and July 2021.

### This included the following steps:

### Stage 1

**Eligibility Criteria screening:** The initial screening process was carried out by Benefacts, who are experts in non-profit governance in Ireland. This screen ensured that applicants met the core fund criteria.

### Stage 2

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**Internal Review:** Preliminary review of applications by Rethink Ireland staff and the Fund Panel against a core set of Fund criteria. 25 applications were selected to move to stage 3.

### Stage 3

**External Expert Review:** An expert panel of 9 reviewers from education, digital technology and children's rights work, as well as DCEDIY staff members carried out an external review of the 25 applications.

### Stage 4

**Fund Panel Selection:** Informed by stage 3, the Fund Panel selected 21 of 25 projects to be interviewed.

### Stage 5

**Interviews:** 21 projects were interviewed. Interview panels included Rethink Ireland staff, external subject matter experts and a team from DCEDIY.

### Stage 6

**Final Selection:** 9 projects were selected for the Fund (8 of whom to receive cash grants).

# Stage 7

**Government and Donor Approval:** Ministerial approval for the proposed projects was received.

### Stage 8

Rethink Ireland Grant Making Committee and Board Approval: The final selection of Awardees was approved by the Grant Making Committee (GMC) of Rethink Ireland and the Rethink Ireland Board.

Following the assessment and selection process, 9 Awardees were notified of their selection in July 2021 and 'Welcome Meetings' commenced in August 2021. These meetings introduced the Awardees to the Fund and determined goals to be included in their contracts.

### **FUND MANAGEMENT AND OVERSIGHT**

The Fund team consisted of a Fund Manager and a Social Impact Analyst. The Fund Manager was responsible for ensuring achievement of Fund deliverables and acted as the main point of contact between donors and Rethink Ireland. The Fund team engaged in quarterly meetings with the Awardees in January 2022, April 2022 and July 2022 to assess their progress towards contract goals as well as determining what additional Non-Financial Support would be required.

# THE AWARDEES AND THEIR PROJECTS

The table below presents an overview of the successful Awardees and their projects.

Awardee	Project Description
Cancer Care West	The Children Unite in Bereavement Support (CUBS) project is a new, 8- week programme targeting children aged 7-12 who have been bereaved by cancer within the last year. Tailored for both onsite and remote implementation, it aims to help children to build and maintain coping strategies, through the use of therapeutic art and play.
Cybersafe Kids	The 'Setting the Standard' pilot project offers access to the CyberSafe Tool for Schools (CSTfS) and wraparound support to primary schools in 3 counties. The first of its kind in Ireland, it aims to provide a cross-sectional view of online safety from the perspective of the school leadership, the teaching body, and pupils with the aim of improving policy and practice.
Dyspraxia/ DCD Ireland	The Partnering for Occupational Therapy Telehealth Services (POTTS) project is a collaboration between DCD/ Dyspraxia Ireland & The School of Allied Health at the University of Limerick which offers a free online Occupational Therapy Service to provide goal-directed, task orientated, family-centred occupational therapy support to children, youth & families experiencing Developmental Coordination (DCD)/ Dyspraxia. It is also a clinical immersion for Occupational Therapy students providing essential clinical placement hours while ensuring that they meet the CORU standards of proficiency.
Foróige	Inspired by a desire to keep young people involved in youth work on a deeper level than computers or phones allowed during pandemic, VRóige uses VR technology to break down barriers and create a social and developmental youth workspace where young people could gather, create, learn and get support without leaving their homes. As the first of its kind in Ireland, it aims to make a real-world difference in the lives of young people facing isolation in their lives.
Junior Achievement Ireland	The JA Finance Park® Virtual project uses technology-enabled learning to empower students to build a foundation on which they can make intelligent financial decisions that last a lifetime, including decisions related to income, expenses, savings, and credit. The project comprises several teacher-led, in-class lessons and culminates in a hands-on, online budgeting simulation, that is supported by business volunteers. On full rollout the project will offer two implementation options: "Entry Level" geared toward late-stage primary and early-stage junior cycle and "Advanced" suitable for all second-level students.

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### **Awardee**

### **Project Description**

# NASC Migrant and Refugee Rights Centre

The Building Connections project addresses educational inequality and improves access to services for asylum- seeking and refugee children and young people in Cork. They do this by helping them to rebuild their language skills through virtual classes, connect them to vital services through their virtual accompaniment service and help to improve mental health through links to online therapy. They use innovative technology to overcome geographical barriers to asylum seekers and refugees in remote areas and provide hands-on support to help them transition to digital solutions, to ensure easier access to vital resources.

# The Ark

'Live from the Ark' combines in-depth creative workshops, downloadable activity packs and filmed performances to bring the best art to thousands of children all over Ireland. By promoting directly to DEIS schools and making activities and resources available free of charge, they aim to expand their reach among disadvantaged children. All aspects of the programme, particularly their workshops (delivered live in the classroom via Zoom) aim to support personal and academic development through creativity.

# Treoir/Dublin Community Mediation

The 'Let's Work it Out' project addresses parenting issues that emerge for many parents who do not live together to create a more collaborative parenting model for their children. They do this by providing a suite of supports to one or both parents to build their capacity to communicate more effectively and manage conflicts that emerge. This innovative project adapts to the needs of parents and is provided online nationally.

# Le Cheile Family Resource Centre

Founded in 1999, Le Cheile Family Resource Centre has served the population of Mallow and the greater North Cork area since. As part of the National Family Resource Centre Programme funded by the Child & Family Agency, Tulsa, they provide a vast range of services including Counselling, Tenancy Support, Social prescribing, Community Health, Family Support, Community Development opportunities, Refugee Resettlement project, Literacy Support and Childcare for children aged 0-6 years.

# WHAT DID AWARDEES RECEIVE?

Through the Children and Youth Digital Solutions Fund, Awardees received the following:

# A Cash Grant

Eight of the nine successful Awardees each received a cash grant of up to €50,000. This investment could be spent on costs relating to the following: marketing, training, IT infrastructure, salaries and project running costs.

# Non Financial Business Supports Package

Rethink Ireland are committed to supporting the best social innovations to scale and maximise their impact. This is done by using a venture philanthropy model which is a funding method that uses the tools of venture capital investing, alongside grants to support long-term social and environmental impact.

Strategic Planning, Impact Management and Storytelling were key areas of focus or the Fund. The strategic planning support came at a time of change due to the pandemic, and this afforded the opportunity to both revisit existing strategy, as well as tailoring it to a new and evolving context.

The Non-Financial Business Supports Package was worth €10,000 per awardee and supported by five expert consultants who provided one-to-one mentoring in the following areas:

- Theory of Change: Articulating key activities based on Awardees' intended impact, mission and vision.
- Strategic Plan: Development of a guiding document that sets out the business journey over the next 12 months, setting up for growth and sustainability.
- Project Video: A video to capture the impact and the story behind the Awardee's projects.

Upon completion of the above, the Fund team allocated additional Non-Financial Business Supports based on the unique challenges or opportunities being experienced by their organisation. For example, some of the Awardees were supported with the following:

- Developing a communications campaign: messaging and public relations
- Developing a value proposition document
- Exploring the development of a new customer/ client relationship management system
- Exploring impact management and measurement tools
- Website and communications development to improve business processes, booking and organisation

# The Accelerator Programme

From September 2021 to May 2022, Awardees participated in Rethink Ireland's Accelerator Programme. This was designed to equip Awardees with the tools and techniques needed to expand and deepen their impact. It provided online and face-to-face training from experts in the private, non-profit and public sectors, across a range of areas including:<sup>16</sup>

- Impact measurement and management,
- Business and strategic planning,
- Communications and storytelling.

An overview of the workshops is presented overleaf.

<sup>16 5</sup> of the 6 workshops were delivered online due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

# **Workshop Overview**

# **Creating Impact Online**

Provided an overview of shifting services to an online platform - what platform options exist, what are the pitfalls and benefits - and how to define and measure the impact of your project when it is digital. This workshop also allowed Awardees to meet each other for the first time.

# Impact Measurement Framework

Provided an overview of
Rethink Ireland's Impact
Management framework,
Theory of Change, Strategic
Planning, and Value Mapping.
These tools are central to
organisations demonstrating
the impact of their work.

# **Equality, Diversity & Inclusion**

Explored equality, diversity, and inclusion from a range of perspectives including the business, moral and legislative context to increase their organisation's awareness when engaging with beneficiaries and stakeholders.

# Articulating Value Proposition & Case for Support

Explored how to communicate a vision, strategic objectives, values and the impact and importance of their work through the creation of a S.M.A.R.T (Sustainable, Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant and Time-Sensitive) Case for Support.

# **Financial Sustainability**

This workshop asked awardees to reflect and examine what makes for a financially sustainable project/ organisation. It helped them identify actions to assess and strengthen their financial sustainability.

# Mental Health & Wellbeing for Managers

Introduced Awardees to potential training, resources, and supports for Managers to identify and support positive mental health in their organisations and projects.

# Section 4: Evaluation Methodology

# INTRODUCTION

In January 2021, Rethink Ireland commissioned S3 Solutions to complete an independent impact evaluation of the Children and Youth Digital Solutions Fund. The following sets out the methodology used to inform the evaluation including approaches to data collection and analysis as well as some limitations which may impact on findings.<sup>17</sup>



The Ark

<sup>17</sup> Project specific monitoring data is available in Appendix 1.

# **DATA COLLECTION**

The evaluation adopted a mixed method approach to data collection and has been informed by the following:

- Desk based review of Fund background information
- Online survey developed by S3 Solutions to capture the reach and impact of the Fund. All 9 Awardees responded to the survey.
- 9 one-to-one semi structured interviews with
   Awardees to provide in-depth qualitative insights
   to the impact of the Fund and its support package and, to identify any areas of learning for the future.

# **DATA COLLECTION**

Qualitative data analysis was conducted using thematic approaches. Categories were developed, coded, and reduced to identify emergent themes and issues and to explore the relationships between issues.

# **LIMITATIONS**

We note the following limitations:

- There are no clearly defined indicators of success or outcome measures, making it challenging to define success for the Fund.
- The evaluation was focused primarily on the Fund's impact on Awardees and did not include primary research with beneficiaries. This was due to access, time, and resource constraints. Impact on beneficiaries was reliant on data provided by Awardees via consultation.
- The timing of the evaluation coincides with the end of the Fund and therefore does not allow for a comprehensive long-term impact assessment of the Fund on Awardees and their beneficiaries.



Junior Achievement

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# Section 5: Survey Results

# INTRODUCTION

To assess the reach and impact of the Fund, this section presents the findings from the web-based survey.



# PROFILE OF AWARDEES' BENEFICIARIES

Through their projects, Awardees have engaged a total of 831 schools, 383 parents and 77,506 children and young people aged 0-24. Children and young people aged 12-16 years are catered to the most, with 6 projects serving this cohort. This is followed by:

- 5-11-year-olds (4 projects)
- 0-4-year-olds (1 project)
- 17-20-year-olds (1 project)
- 21–25-year-olds (1 project)

3 projects also worked to support parents and adults aged 26-55.

People experiencing disadvantage are catered to the most with 7 of the 9 projects delivering a service to this target group. This is followed by:

- People from a minority background (including Traveller, Roma, Refugees) (2 projects)
- People living with a disability (2 projects)
- People suffering poor mental health (2 projects)

# IMPACT OF AWARDEES' PROJECTS ON BENEFICIARIES

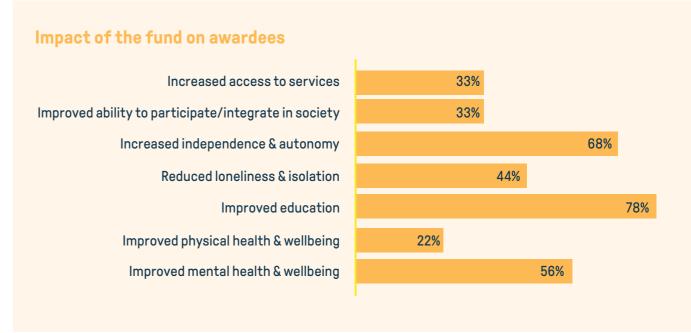
Awardees were asked to indicate the outcomes that their project delivered for their beneficiaries. Awardees could select multiple options. Improved education was the most reported outcome (78%) followed by increased independence and autonomy (68%) and improved mental health and wellbeing (56%).

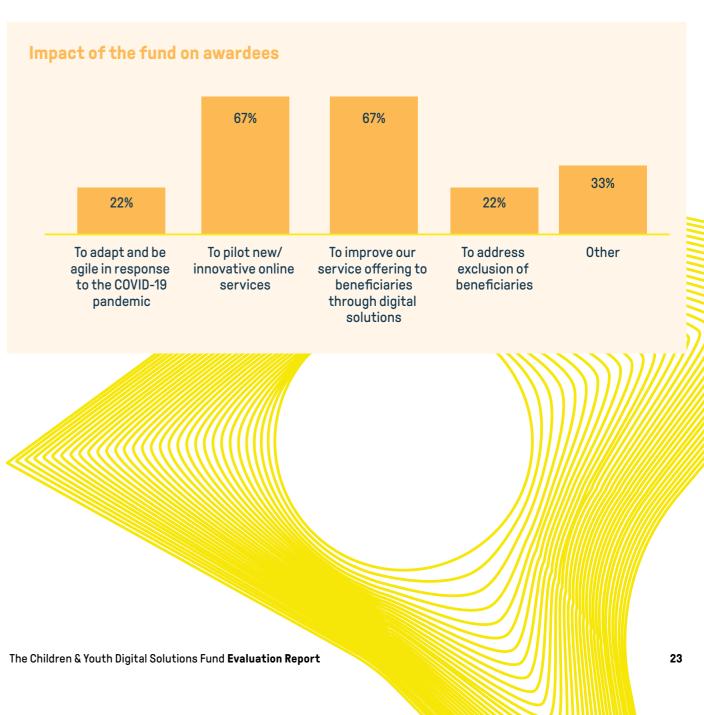
# **IMPACT OF THE FUND ON AWARDEES**

Awardees were also asked to identify the impact of the Fund on their organisation. Help to pilot new/ innovative online services and improving Awardee's service offering to beneficiaries through digital solutions were the most reported impacts of the Fund (67%).

Those who selected 'other' provided examples of how the Fund supported their organisation's ability to develop new services and improve existing services.

The survey also asked Awardees a range of questions in relation to the impact of the Fund for their organisation. Key findings are presented below and overleaf:





The Children & Youth Digital Solutions Fund **Evaluation Report** 

# Impact of the Fund on Awardees

88%

agreed that the Fund supported their organisation to 'engage more extensively with their existing audience'

# HALF

agreed that the Fund supported their organisation to 'reach a more diverse audience' 78%

agreed that the Fund supported their organisation to 'reach a larger/bigger audience'

55%

agreed that the Fund
increased their organisation's
awareness of equality,
diversity & inclusion

55%

agreed that the Fund supported their organisation to develop an improved peer support network 78%

agreed that the Fund improved their partnership working & collaboration

4.8/5

Awardees' average reported experience of the Fund

100%

agreed that the Fund improved their organisation's impact measurement skills & capabilities

77%

agreed that the Fund improved their organisation's communications and marketing

89%

agreed that the Fund
improved their clarity on
funding requirements and
how to meet them

67%

agreed that the Fund strengthened their financial sustainability 100%

agreed that the Fund supported their **ability to sustain** their project with all indicating the intention to sustain

100%

agreed that the Fund supported their **ability to scale** their project with 89% intending to scale 100%

Reported that the Fund had 'good alignment' or was 'fully aligned' to their needs 89%

agreed that the Fund improved their organisation's strategy & strategic thinking

50%

Reported that their scaling plans were to Scale Up: Reach new locations **75%** 

Reported that their scaling plans were to Scale Deep: provide more services to same group/audience

**75**%

Reported that their scaling plans were to Scale Out:
Reach more locations through partnership

# Section 6: Interview Findings

# INTRODUCTION

To further substantiate survey findings, this section presents the findings from one-to-one qualitative style interviews. All Awardees were interviewed.



The Ark

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# AWARDEES' EXPERIENCE OF THE FUND

All Awardees indicated that the non-financial supports, i.e., the Accelerator Programme and Consultancy Support, added value to their organisation. Their feedback in relation to both components is provided below:

# **The Accelerator Programme**

All Awardees reported a positive experience with the Accelerator Programme. In terms of what worked well, the following was identified:

- Some of the content was useful, relevant, and appropriate to their needs. The workshops in finance, impact measurement and management, marketing and communications and diversity and inclusion were all described as beneficial (Awardees 1, 2, 4, 7, 8 and 9).
- The group-based environment provided the opportunity to discuss various topics with other Awardees and was noted as enjoyable (Awardees 4, 5 and 7).
- The online format worked particularly well and facilitated Awardee's participation and engagement with the programme (Awardees 3, 4 6, 7, 8 and 9). For example, Awardees described how the online facilitation was easier to slot into their working day than if all the workshops had been face-to-face. This was especially important in the context of the pandemic, busy schedules, and the time needed for project development (Awardees 6, 8 and 9). Awardee 8 also noted that while they had a good experience of the faceto-face workshop, they felt more comfortable engaging in an online setting and although Awardee 5 indicated that an 'in person' format worked best for them, they also explained that they had a 'good virtual experience'.

Despite an overall positive experience of the Accelerator Programme, six Awardees identified several areas for improvement. These included:

 Provision of more specific, targeted workshops in line with Awardee's needs with less broad and general topics (Awardees 2, 7 and 8). Awardee

- 8 described how this could be a collaborative process between Rethink Ireland and the Awardees to better enable alignment, identifying that more practical, solution-based topics in areas such as managing processes, sourcing funding, time management, and resource management may have been more useful.
- Shorter duration of workshops to reduce time pressures (Awardee 2) and allow for more complex subjects to be better understood i.e., splitting one long topic into multiple, shorter workshops (Awardee 1).
- Improved communication regarding workshops including the earlier distribution of the workshop schedule (Awardee 5) and more information regarding content and how it aligns to the organisation ahead of their attendance to enable attendance (Awardee 9).
- Better alignment/timing of when the content of the Accelerator Programme and Consultancy support are covered (Awardee 1).

# **Consultancy Support**

All Awardees reported a positive experience with the Consultancy Support. Key positives included the following:

- The expertise, insight, and knowledge of the consultants. This supported Awardees learning across key areas such as Strategic Planning, Theory of Change and Value Propositions (All Awardees).
- The approach taken by the consultant including their patience, enthusiasm, and passion as well as their informal, conversational style helped foster a positive consultant-Awardee relationship (Awardees 1, 3, 4, 5, 7 and 9).
- The one-to-one format provided the time and space to receive more tailored, in depth and focussed support in areas important to their specific organisational needs (Awardees 1, 7 and 9).
- The remote format was beneficial for facilitating access and although face to face was a noted preference for Awardee 1, the value of the remote engagement to ensure their access was identified (Awardees 1, 5 and 6).

In terms of Consultancy Support improvements, only two Awardees offered suggestions. This included:

- A lead in workshop on the strategic planning process to help with navigating and understanding some of the key terminology used (Awardee 3)
- Additional or more support in the area of scaling their projects (Awardee 4)

# **Rethink Ireland Approach**

Two Awardees (Awardee 3 and 7) also made specific comments in relation to supportive and flexible approach of Fund staff in facilitating a positive and 'bespoke' experience of the Fund.

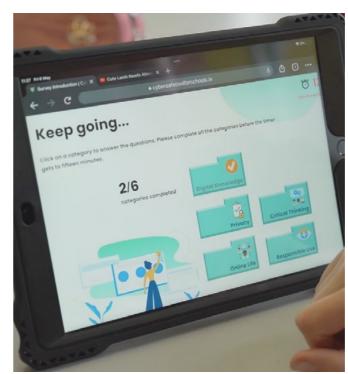
# IMPACT OF THE FUND ON AWARDEES

In describing the overall impact of the Fund, Awardees identified a range of outcomes that are linked with project development and sustainability as well as their overall organisational sustainability. These included:

- Creation of new, digital services in response to the pandemic: Six Awardees indicated that without the Fund and its investment, their online/ digital project would not have been developed (Awardee 1, 6, 7) or that it would have taken longer (Awardees 2, 4, 5). This was related to an inability to 'justify the project during the pandemic when staff capacity was already stretched" (Awardee 1); being unsuccessful with securing funding for the project in its in-person format and finding it difficult to identify funders with a willingness to invest in pilot projects (Awardee 5); and not having enough of their own financial resources to cover the costs associated with the project (Awardee 2, 4, 6). For the Awardee that did not receive the cash grant, they also explained how the Fund's non-financial support package helped to progress their online presence and app for their childcare provision. The app is due to be launched in September 2022.
- Improved impact measurement: Seven Awardees
   (Awardees 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8) described how the
   Fund strengthened their impact measurement
   and management processes. Improvements

- in awareness, knowledge and understanding of impact measurement were noted and correlated to the support provided by the consultant in Theory of Change (Awardees 2, 3, 4, 5, and 7). Awardees 4 and 7 specifically referenced that their impact measurement processes across the organisation will be stronger as a result and Awardees 1 and 8, referenced the value of the Fund's cash grant in enabling the employment of a researcher or research admin support to support the effective implementation of evaluation.
- Organisational Strategy: Seven Awardees
  (Awardees 1, 2, 3, 5, 7, 8 and 9) described the benefit of the strategic planning process and its impact on their organisation's strategic direction. Examples of how it helped Awardees to identify next steps, better align their organisational goals to the impact they sought to achieve as well as enhancing their overall understanding of internal operations and the resources they required were provided.
- Improved Fundraising Capabilities and Financial Sustainability: Six Awardees (Awardees 1, 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8) referred to the impact of the Fund on their fundraising capabilities and subsequent financial sustainability. This included an improved capacity and skills to approach funders (Awardee 1 and 7), the improved capacity of the organisation's leadership to identify future funding opportunities (Awardee 5) and the improved ability to communicate their value and impact with prospective funders using the strategic plan developed through the Fund (Awardees 4 and 6).
- Improved Marketing and Promotion: Five Awardees (Awardees 1, 2, 4, 7, 9) highlighted the impact of the Fund in improving the marketing and promotion of their project. Specific reference was made to consultancy support in areas of copy writing and how to approach online marketing and communications, funding received for the project's promotional video and learning gained from the Accelerator Programme workshops.
- Improved Credibility: Four Awardees highlighted the positive impact of the Fund, specifically being a successful Awardee of Rethink Ireland, in

- adding credibility to their project. This related to an increased willingness of stakeholders to refer to their project (Awardee 1), and how the funding success 'galvanised' or 'sold' the project to key staff or board members in their organisation, creating buy-in and enabling the project to be prioritised (Awardees 3, 4 and 9).
- Improved Reach: Four Awardees (Awardees 2, 3, 7, 8) described the impact of the Fund and its investment in their digital solution on the reach of their organisation. Examples of how the digital solutions invested in by the Fund enabled the Awardees to reach children and young people who wouldn't or couldn't typically access their services (Awardees 7 and 4) and encouragement received from Rethink Ireland to extend reach across additional counties to overcome project related challenges (Awardee 3) were provided.
- Improved Partnerships and Networking: Two Awardees described how the Fund increased their network within and across the sector thereby enhancing the overall development of their project. Connections were made by Rethink Ireland staff with former Awardees which resulted in increased referrals (Awardee 1) and insight regarding appropriate Customer Relationship Management (CRM) Systems (Awardee 8).



Cybersafe

# IMPACT OF FUNDED PROJECTS ON BENEFICIARIES

To assess the impact of their projects, all Awardees had implemented or were in the process of implementing evaluation methodologies. This included focus groups, validated and non-validated survey tools, and testimonials from key stakeholder groups. While the evaluators did not directly consult with beneficiaries, using insights gained from their own evaluation practice, Awardees described the impact of their projects in this area. A summary of their findings is presented below:

# Impact on Children and Young People

All of the Awardees who received a cash grant used the investment to develop and deliver a project to benefit children and young people. When asked to describe the impact of their project on their beneficiaries, Awardees identified several core outcomes. These included:

- Improved Mental Health and Wellbeing:

   e.g., greater confidence to speak about grief or difficult emotions outside of the home and improved coping capacity (Awardee 1) improvements in self-esteem (Awardee 4) and children reportedly feeling happier because of their parents improved relationships (Awardee 8) or in better 'form' following their participation in the project (Awardee 7).
- Reduced Loneliness and Isolation: this related to having access to a support network and others in a similar situation from across the country to share experiences of grief during a time when grief was exacerbated from the effects of the pandemic (Awardee 1) and young people reporting feeling connected to other including those from island communities in the middle of Winter and during exam time (Awardee 3).
- Improved Personal Development Skills e.g., developing independent living skills including confidence and shaving (Awardee 4), and empathy (Awardee 3).
- Improved Education e.g., Financial literacy (Awardee 5), digital literacy and online safety (Awardee 2), and English language skills (Awardee 6).

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 Reduced risk of homelessness and poverty for those most at risk (Awardee 6).

The role and value of the digital solution in reducing barriers to access services among children and young people, particularly those that were exacerbated because of pandemic restrictions was highlighted (Awardees 1, 3, 4, 6 and 7). These included travel, money, and illness. Two Awardees also described how they used the cash investment to cover the costs of digital equipment for their beneficiaries thereby addressing barriers relating to the digital divide (Awardees 1 and 6).

# Impact of Funded Projects on Stakeholders

Three Awardees also identified the positive impact of their project on various stakeholders. These included parents, Schools/Teachers, Universities, University Students and the courts/justice system. The following outcomes were reported for each stakeholder group:

 Parents: Improved mental health & wellbeing via reductions in stress and sense of burden (Awardee 1), Increased Access to a Support Network (Awardee 1), improved skills e.g.,

- confidence and parenting capacity (Awardee 1 and 2) and improved relationships (Awardee 2)
- Schools/Teachers: Increased skills and knowledge in online safety (Awardee 2)
- Universities: Improved ability to offer students placements (Awardee 4)
- University Students: Increased knowledge, skills, and confidence in chosen field (Awardee 4)
- Courts/Justice System: Cost savings due to reduced reliance on services (Awardee 8)

# AWARDEES' EXPERIENCE DELIVERING FUNDED PROJECTS

Awardees reported an overall positive experience with the delivery of their projects. Key successes included the following:

 Level of buy in, interest and demand for the service/project. For example, this included a good response among people who wouldn't consider themselves very 'techy' (Awardee 3), a lot of desire for the project among targeted young people (Awardee 5) and a good level of uptake, referrals and connections with new audiences who traditionally could not access their services



Cybersafe

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- (Awardees 1, 4 and 7). Awardee 7 also noted that local people, who could access services in-person were opting for online as it was accommodating and flexible.
- Ability to respond to needs and deliver impact to beneficiaries. This related to interventions successfully increasing young people's confidence and self-esteem (Awardee 4), students benefitting from an improved learning experience (Awardee 4), an ability to continue operations during the pandemic and improve young people's financial literacy (Awardee 5) and remote solutions enabling the frequency of support to be enhanced with goals of improving education and wellbeing achieved (Awardee 6).
- Learning from delivery. For example, Awardee 3 described that because of the project's success they have had conversations with TUSLA about the applicability of the online solution to facilitate counselling. They have also had calls with youth services and mental health organisations in North America, Finland, and Iceland which has created the opportunity to share best practice and be seen as a leader in the industry. A key success reported by Awardee 8 was using the learning from this project to explore the applicability of digital for their other projects.

Among project success, however, were several challenges. These are summarised below:

Technical Issues: This related to issues with using Microsoft Teams (Awardee 1), the time required to upskill staff on technology (Awardee 3), ensuring project participants' WIFI connection was appropriate to facilitate their engagement (Awardee 4 and 8), delays with securing technology licenses (Awardee 5), expensiveness of technology (Awardee 5), time required to get technology ready (Awardee 5 and 6) and finding the appropriate technological solution for their project (Awardee 6 and 8). Awardee 8 also described the logistical challenge of coordinating a centralised zoom subscription, instead they opted for individual staff operating their own zoom accounts. This was supported through the Fund.

- Staffing: For four Awardees, projects were labour intensive and the staff levels available to deliver were insufficient to meet demands (Awardees 1, 2, 4 and 8).
- Budget/Finance: This limited project marketing and promotional campaigns (Awardee 2) and staff employed to deliver the project (Awardees 1, 2, 4 and 8).
- COVID-19 Restrictions: This prevented a face-to-face launch event, (Awardee 2) created barriers to effectively engaging project partners due to the focus on delivering COVID-19 responses (Awardee 2) and resulted in a loss of project momentum following easing of restrictions (Awardee 3).
- Managing Remote Delivery: This related to ensuring the home environment and space was appropriate for the sessions (Awardee 4) ensuring parents were there but not interrupting (Awardee 4), maintaining concentration among children with conditions such as ADHD, Autism and Dyslexia (Awardee 4) and the challenge with developing relationships through faulty connections (Awardee 6).

Awardee 7 did not report any challenges with the delivery of their project but attributed this to learning gained from experience with transitioning to online prior to the Fund.

# THE FUTURE OF THE AWARDEES' PROJECTS

All of the Awardees who received a cash grant for the development of a specific project indicated that they plan to sustain their project, five in a blended format (Awardees 1, 2, 4, 6, 8) and three fully remote/virtual (Awardees 3, 5, 7). However, this will not be without challenge. Seven Awardees indicated that the main barrier to their project's sustainability was sourcing and securing funding. Meeting funder's criteria (Awardee 4), defining their fundraising model (Awardee 2) and securing enough funding to cover core project costs (Awardees 2, 4, 6, 7, 8) were provided as examples of the barriers faced in this area. Other barriers to sustainability included:

Skills to define and communicate the value of their

- service to stakeholders and funders (Awardee 2 and 6)
- Time required to market and reach a wide enough audience (Awardee 2 and 6)
- Access to Schools (Awardee 2)
- Public Advocacy (Awardee 8)

Seven of the Awardees who received a cash grant also indicated that they plan to scale their project in the future. Examples of Awardees plans to scale included:

- Scaling up: Replicating or expanding the social innovation across multiple geographies by own efforts (e.g., expanding to a different country or national roll out) (Awardees 1, 2, 4, 5, 7)
- Scaling Out: Replicating or expanding the social innovation across multiple geographies with others in partnership. (Awardee 3)

 Scaling Deep: Delivering more impact to current customers/beneficiaries in the same geography (e.g., through new or more bespoke services offered) (Awardee 3, 8)<sup>18</sup>

Although Awardees had ambitious plans to scale their projects, the following were noted as key challenges: Communication, digital marketing and use of tools (Awardee 2), staffing and training (Awardee 3 and 8) and funding (Awardee 6).

When asked what supports they needed most in the future, seven Awardees indicated funding to cover staff costs (Awardees 3, 6, 7, 8) and technology related costs (Awardees 5 and 6)



The Ark

# Section 7: Learning, Reflections & Conclusions

# INTRODUCTION

This section of the report sets out the key learning and reflections of the Children and Youth Digital Solutions Fund.

# THE IMPACT OF THE FUND AND ITS STRATEGIC RELEVANCE

The findings demonstrate that by investing in 9
Awardees, the Fund reached 831 schools, 383 parents and 77,506 children and young people resident across all 26 counties in Ireland. People experiencing disadvantage, from a minority background (including Traveller, Roma, Refugees), living with a disability and those suffering poor mental health were catered to amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. The core outcomes delivered by projects to beneficiaries included improved education, increased independence and autonomy, improved health and wellbeing, reduced loneliness and isolation, and an improved ability to participate or integrate in society.

Through its investment and non-financial business supports package, the Fund supported Awardees to pilot innovative online services, improve their service offering through digital solutions, and engage more extensively with their existing audience. In some cases, Awardees were supported to reach a larger, more diverse audience. The Fund also improved Awardees' impact measurement, communications and marketing skills, partnership working and collaboration and strategic thinking. It offered credibility to their projects, provided greater clarity on funding requirements, strengthened financial sustainability, and improved their ability to sustain

and scale their projects. These results reveal that the Fund has delivered the goals and commitments of key strategies to which it was aligned (see Section 2.3).

The Fund's investments in child and youth sector organisations who were working to address a range of critical social factors including mental health, education, housing and poverty further strengthened its strategic fit. For example, investment in Dyspraxia/ DCD to provide a free online occupational therapy service contributed to the PfG's Mission Universal Healthcare: Focus on expanding universal access to health care in a manner that is fair and affordable. Investment in Junior Achievement Ireland and NASC Migrant and Refugee Rights Centre contributed to PfG's Mission Education and Research: Focus on increasing progress of learners at risk of educational disadvantage and helping those delivering education to continuously improve. Similarly, investments also delivered against key priorities identified in Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures:

 Having a secure, stable, and caring home environment; recognising that the consequences of childhood trauma caused, for example, by parental relationship breakdown and/or bereavement can hinder good mental health (Cancer Care West and Treoir/Dublin Community Mediation)

<sup>18</sup> Awardee 3 has plans to both scale out across Ireland and Europe via partnerships and scale deep through the pilot of an additional digital service.

- Positive networks of friends, family, and community: Children and young people may experience difficulties maintaining friendships due to social exclusion or rural isolation and the internet plays a growing role in forming and maintaining friendships which are essential for the psychological, emotional, and social development of children and young people (Foróige)
- A commitment to strengthen social inclusion measures and re-invigorate efforts to improve educational outcomes among, and integration of, Travellers, Roma and migrant children and young people (NASC Migrant and Refugee Rights Centre)
- Enjoying play, recreation, sport, art, culture and nature: Early and ongoing exposure to art and culture lays a positive foundation for creativity, an essential component in critical thinking and innovation (The Ark)

The strategic alignment and contribution of the Children and Youth Digital Solutions Fund to the delivery of key priorities in the areas of national development, digitisation and children and young people whilst addressing the needs and challenges of the sector amidst of the COVID-19 pandemic underscore the timeliness and value of the Fund.

# THE ROLE OF DIGITAL FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE SERVICES

The findings of this evaluation demonstrate that the Fund has successfully supported non-profit organisations to harness the power of technology to respond to and address the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on children and young people. Through its investment, new innovations were realised and barriers to accessing services in the areas of youth education, health and housing were reduced. The reach of organisations was extended, with those who were especially vulnerable and experiencing disadvantage catered for. In the absence of the Fund, the findings suggest, this would not have happened or to a much lesser extent.

Whilst obstacles related to technology, remote engagement, staffing and resourcing did present, the findings of this evaluation show that the use of technology represents an important opportunity for children and youth services, not just in the context of the pandemic. The relevance and importance of digital child and youth services is evidenced by the demand, buy in and reach of Awardees' innovations. This is further reinforced by Awardees' ambitions to sustain and scale their projects as fully virtual or through a blended delivery model, as well as the strategic commitments at a national level to further enhance digitisation across the country.

The Fund's investment in digital solutions represents a step in the right direction, but there remains a need for the children and youth sector, and the non-profit sector more generally, to strengthen its digital position to respond to and remain relevant within the new digital era. Access to funding that encourages a test and learn approach, like that of the Children and Youth Digital Solutions Fund, is vital to ensure the successful digital transformation of the sector. This offers important learning for the design and development of future funds.

# THE ADDED VALUE OF NON-FINANCIAL SUPPORTS

The results of the evaluation demonstrate the positive impact of Rethink Ireland's non-financial supports package. While cash injections are vital for developing and delivering projects in response to needs, the Fund's Accelerator Programme and Consultancy Support are shown to be important for addressing sector specific needs. Being an Awardee of the Fund strengthened the capacity of children and youth sector organisations in areas of strategy, planning, resource generation, impact measurement, collaboration, and communications. In 2021, the Wheel highlighted that these were specific support needs of Irish non-profits.<sup>20</sup>

The evaluation shows that this capacity building support, not only helped to build programmatic

strength but also addressed foundational factors that strengthened Awardee's functioning and subsequent ability to fulfil their mission over time. The evaluation also shows however, that attendance and engagement in capacity building can be difficult to prioritise amidst busy schedules and the need to keep non-profit organisations operational.

In recognition of the added value of this supports package, there is a need to ensure that its delivery is optimised in the future. Learning from this evaluation shows that remote delivery is a key facilitative factor and the combination of one-to-one and group-based support contribute to the most productive and positive experience for Awardees. This offers useful insight for the design and delivery of future accelerator programmes and mentoring support.



Junior Achievement

National Youth Council of Ireland (2020). A Review of the Youth Work Sector Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

 $<sup>20 \</sup>qquad \underline{\text{https://www.carmichaelireland.ie/app/uploads/2021/03/Consultation-Report-Nonprofit-Sector-Final-V1.75-23-March.pdf} \\$ 

# Section 8: Recommendations

# INTRODUCTION

Based on the evaluation findings, a series of recommendations are set out below, reflective of the analysis and key findings within this report.

# Recommendation: 1

# Future Investment in Digital Solutions

The Children and Youth Digital Solutions Fund provided a one-off annual cash grant to eight of its nine Awardees. Although this represented an important investment for the sector, digital transformation will continue to be relevant in a post pandemic world. Awardees displayed a desire to sustain and scale their digital solutions and national policy outlines the Government's agenda to support and enable digital transformation across Ireland. For the non-profit sector however, access to appropriate funding and resources to implement such solutions is essential; this was the primary barrier to sustainability for Awardees.

It is therefore recommended that Rethink Ireland use the findings of this report to raise awareness among Government and additional philanthropic investors of the need for continued investment in digital solutions for the non-profit sector, and more specifically the benefits it can deliver for the children and youth sector.

# Recommendation 2:

# Continued Non-Financial Supports

The Non-Financial Supports Package delivered through the Fund has added value to Awardees. It is therefore recommended that both the Accelerator Programme and Consultancy Support remain key components in future Rethink Ireland funds. To maximise their value, consideration should be given to continuing a remote or blended delivery model coupled with group based and one-to-one support. The delivery of more tailored, focussed support in line with Awardees needs should also be prioritised.

# Recommendation 3:

# Future Investment in Children and Youth Sector

As Ireland's youth population grows, so too will demand for children and youth sector organisations. To address the disproportionate effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on the youth population and its anticipated, long-term impact on their development, health, employment, and education achievement, coupled with the financial pressures experienced by the sector, continued future investment is vital. It is recommended that Rethink Ireland use the findings of this report to raise Government awareness of the need for continued and enhanced investment in the children and youth sector, for the benefit of the population served, and for the long-term benefit to Irish society and economy.

# Recommendation 4:

# Monitoring, Reporting, and Evaluation

The evaluation of the Children and Youth Digital Solutions Fund relied on data collected by the independent evaluators who were contracted midway through the Fund. A key limitation was that there were no clearly defined, consistent set of outcomes or indicators for the Fund or for Awardees specifically, and a reliance on retrospective survey data and interviews. Further, due to access, time, and resource constraints, impact on beneficiaries was reliant on data provided by Awardees via consultation.

Whilst the evaluators are satisfied that the findings are accurate, to enable a more robust and comprehensive approach to the evaluation of future funds, it is recommended that Rethink Ireland commission evaluators at Fund initiation with responsibility for co-designing the Fund's intended outcomes, indicators, and evaluation framework from the outset. This may include a Fund logic model or Theory of Change and should consider ongoing data collection via Fund monitoring. Resources permitting, future evaluations should also consider the inclusion of consultation and engagement with participants/ beneficiaries and stakeholders to add to the validity of impact reported.

# **Appendix**

# **DYSPAXIA / DCD IRELAND: POTTS**

# Quantifiable Data

Number of children: 75

Number of sessions provided: 526 over 5 placements

Number of Occupational Therapists working on project: 3 qualified OT supervisiors, 1 OT manager

Number of student placements: 30 students completed placement

Number of group sessions: 16

Number of individual sessions: 510 over 5 placements

Additional provided: Number of webinars = 15 completed

# **Qualitative Answers**

Was there any evidence of a difference in results from individual sessions versus group sessions?

Individual and group sessions have different objectives and outcomes. Group sessions for parents are about information sharing and what they can expect, how to prepare the room for their child's sessions etc. It is an opportunity for parents to meet and for those that can't attend we record for them. Other group sessions are for families with similar key goals, and they can come together to work towards the same goals – the children have a lot of fun, and the student occupational therapists also work together as well. There is a social aspect to the group sessions and knowing you're not the only one going through this experience is very powerful. The individual sessions focus on meeting particular goals for particular children. They are very specific and are developed with the client and the student occupational therapist working together to identify goals that are important to the participant (person-centred approach).

### Qualitative Answers, continued

What have been the major successes/ challenges in using online methods for Occupational Therapy?

Successes: telehealth services can reach more people who would not otherwise have the opportunity to access therapeutic services. The fact that this programme was free also provided greater access. The online environment works well for some people. Having a person centred programme meant that each person was working on goals that were specifically important to them rather than generic goals. Providing student placements, particularly during COVID when no placements were available was very successful as was the upskilling of students in the use of telehealth. Engaging with other Allied Health services to develop a multi-disciplinary approach to telehealth service provision is an emerging success. Challenges: Not all aspects of Occupational Therapy are easily transferable from in-person to online. Up to 70% of young people with DCD have co-existing conditions - dyslexia, ADHD, and ASD (autism) being the most common. This adds additional layers of complexity in ensuring that a broad range of supports can be provided. E.g. for children with co-existing ADHD it may be harder to maintain concentration. Ensuring that WIFI is available and consistent is important and although we haven't had any families who have not had access to the internet or to computer hardware it is something we are conscious of. Timing of sessions can be challenging because the student occupational therapists normally work during the day and children are at school during the day. We are exploring other options including having time set aside in school for sessions. If sessions are held in the evening, the child may be tired or they may have after school activities that clash with their session. The students also aren't paid for their placement so there are limitations in what can be expected of them in terms of working outside normal placement hours.

Are online methods something which you will continue to use postpandemic?

Yes, we have seen the value of providing this service online. It is valuable to families who would not otherwise have access to therapeutic supports and it is valuable to students who are developing skills that will give them a greater depth of learning and will provide them with an important skillset as they move into employment. We are currently developing a hybrid model of service delivery to ensure that aspects of service provision that do not transfer easily to telehealth can be offered in person. We are also developing a multi-disciplinary approach to delivering the POTTS programme by engaging with other departments within UL, namely physiotherapy and music therapy. We hope to engage with speech therapy and dietetics in the coming year.

# **FORÓIGE: VRÓIGE**

# **Quantifiable Data**

Number of children who participated: 409

Number of sites the programme was carried out: 43

Number of sites in disadvantaged areas: 43

### **Qualitative Answers**

Was there a reduction in isolation amongst the participants? How do you know?

Yes, this was one of the questions we asked in a google form sent out over Christmas. We asked did the young people feel connected. There was a 100% response from young people reporting feeling connected and that included young people from 3 island communities in the middle of Winter.

Did participants express a desire to continue to use this method of interaction postpandemic? Absolutely – I'm conscious of offering the young people the opportunity to stop taking part but we haven't had many. We're getting really positive feedback from the young people. The VR panel we have set up had 6 people last year and now there's 19 registered so yes, they want to continue

What implications does this technology have for the future of youth work at Foroige - if any? It's able to meet the needs of children with additional needs who wouldn't otherwise be receiving support or as much support. The VR project will continue post-COVID because there's a need to be in these spaces going forward. Foroige has a wider digital youth work strategy, and we'll sit within that. We can demonstrate that we are connecting with the traditionally overlooked young people and it's significant in terms of how we can grow this out. In terms of a bigger picture, VR can be used for other things and we're already piloting VR mentoring through the big brother big sister scheme and looking at young carers as potential beneficiaries. The bigger vision involves widening the current offering so that the online youth work slots form an evening schedule, not just one night a week thing. Young person can decide that they want to drop in to a conversation in VR hosted by Foroige around e.g., self-care or learning to dj, 3d sculpting. Like the old schools tv guide, you can tune into a virtual space, and you decide when to drop into, that's the idea for the future.

# CANCER CENTRE WEST: CHILDREN UNITED IN BEREAVEMENT SUPPORT (CUBS)

### Quantifiable Data

Number of children that participated: 23 children; 16 parents

Number of therapists who were trained: 3

### Number of sessions held: 44

(on 4th programme each programme has 8 children sessions and 3 parent sessions)

### **Qualitative Answers**

Are there now plans to develop a sibling programme or will the programme continue as is? It's in mind but not developed yet. We can expand to different family members in bereavement too. We will continue to evolve and try to keep face. We're also looking to train facilitators in other locations and would like to roll it out nation wide to other support centres. Once that's done and the research from that is published, we can evolve it further into different groups.

# NASC MIGRANT AND REFUGEE RIGHTS CENTRE: BUILDING CONNECTIONS

### **Quantifiable Data**

Number of children that participated: 44

Number of interventions by Nasc: 301

**Number of volunteers in the project:** 5 (3 English teacher and 2 translators)

### Number and type of Govt. services that have engaged in the three way solution: 8

(Department of Housing, Local Government, and Heritage; Department of Social Protection; Department of Education; HSE; Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration, and Youth; Department of Justice; An Garda Siochana; and Immigration Services)

### **Qualitative Answers**

Did allowing for the programme to be carried out online see an uptake in the number of participants and volunteers?

I don't think it saw an increase in uptake in terms of numbers participating, but our English teachers would have been doing face to face all pre-pandemic. That would have meant a lot of driving to the remote locations because that's where the direct provision services are. When they can teach online and the student has access to the technology to engage online, then the number of children/young people that can be taught in a day will go up. The time spent in the car was removed which enabled an increase in the frequency of the support.

Did online classes hinder the participants from learning in any way? Did the children who participated succeed in improving their language skills? I don't think it hindered their learning. There was definitely an improvement in language skills seen. I do think though it may have created issues around connections, it might have hindered that relationship development so in future we'll be looking at a blended approach.

### Qualitative Answers, continued

What outcomes did the programme deliver in terms of preventing neglect, homelessness and poverty?

This was the main impact really, and its where we saw the most work being done. It's an ever present issue for the cohort of people we work with, and it was laid bare by the pandemic. We saw a huge impact on the prevention of poverty and homeless, which in turn leads to issues of neglect that stem from structural issues e.g., housing crisis. People were put into housing and the digital accompaniment service enabled them to reach essential services during the pandemic.

What evidence is there that the programme provided the participants with strategies to deal with stress and improve their mental health and wellbeing?

This came out when we assessed the success of interventions. How that works is that all engagement with clients – could be one or multiple intervention per client, are assessed for success. Coming from a social work approach, we tease out with clients to determine success. We look at it holistically and determine whether the intervention has been a success. We know from this that the strategies and interventions in place on this project for improving health and wellbeing were successful.

Did three way service provide an easier route for families to access services?

It was certainly easier during the pandemic because they wouldn't have had any access to services otherwise. In terms of the future, we will move to a blended approach so that services can still be accessed but to enable the relationship building which is facilitated by face-to-face interaction.

What was the view of Govt. services in respect of the three way service?

I think we have a strong relationship with statutory and voluntary bodies. I think for the most part it was received well. There were barriers because they were working from home and weren't as accessible, but I think being able to use different platforms definitely would have helped access to essential mainstream services for clients.

# **JUNIOR ACHIEVEMENT IRELAND: JA FINANCE PARK**

# **Quantifiable Data**

Number of specialists who were procured in the project: 3 (2 IT specialists and 1 education specialist)

**How many teachers are expected to use the programme in their teaching:** Volunteers will deliver the project and the teacher will assist. We hope to have 100 schools involved by year 4 – so 100.

Number of schools who have introduced the programme: 2

How many of these schools are situated in a disadvantaged area: 1 DEIS and 1 in a Disadvantaged Area

# **Qualitative Answers**

What steps taken to align the project to education and practices in Ireland?

The programme has been evaluated with our education specialist who wrote the business curriculum from 1st to 3rd year in Irish secondary schools. We worked together on how this incorporates project into the junior cycle and identified where we could tie it in. It has been tied in and enhances the elements which are already being covered in schools.

Were there any difficulties in adapting the approach to the Irish education system?

No. It's an American programme but it was a very simple adaption to the Irish system and we will continue to edit as we go.

# TREOIR: LET'S WORK IT OUT

# **Quantifiable Data**

Number of parents who participated: 70

Number of sessions: 400 with training

**Number of locations:** Nationally – online, from all around the country. We've hit all the counties bar northern Ireland.

### **Qualitative Answers**

How did the feedback provided by participants alter the services of the programme?

In the overall sense it gave us encouragement that we were on the right track. We weren't clear that this was going to work but their feedback refined the way we worked with them online – initial ways were ham-fisted and how we do the work online has changed. We've become more efficient overtime which is also helped by the volunteers gaining more experience.

What needs were identified by the participants throughout the course of the programme?

Parents sometimes came in with idea that someone would wave a magic wand. We've helped parents learn that this is about capacity development and they won't be relying on the mediator. There's been a huge change there. In terms of volunteers, we've been adjusting how we communicate, collaborate, and make decisions. We focus more on educating volunteers.

# THE ARK: LIVE FROM THE ARK

### **Quantifiable Data**

**Number of children, teachers and parents reached by the programme:** 70,780 children viewed performances. 4,478 teachers viewed performances. Over 63 thousand so far

Number of locations in which the programme was held: Over 700833 schools in 27 counties to date.

Number of children engaging with workshops, workbooks and other material in addition to performances: Workshops = 770 children and 36 teachers. Activity pack downloads = 224292. Total engagement is 76,365 Children and Teachers

# **Qualitative Answers**

Were any of the outcomes of the programme impacted by its online nature?

Even local people are opting for the digital option because it's flexible and accommodating and really suits. Really extraordinary thing. We had no idea we'd reach this many. Had no idea we'd have this spread. Feedback has been really positive; teachers have been really pleased. We moved to digital to keep reaching existing audience but now realise that it's not only about existing audiences but also those we didn't have before. It's about the kids who wouldn't get to come to the centre normally, and that's been transformation.

How was the success of the programme measured?

We collect feedback. During and after online workshops children are asked how they're feeling and generally speaking they're always in good form throughout or are in better form after. We also ask them if there's anything that would make the experience better for them. We also gather feedback from conversations with teachers and sent out a survey to all teachers who accessed performances. We also make a note of anything which is informally said to us, either through email or things we hear in workshops. That is written into our end of day report.

Has the programme shown an increase in participation of children in the arts and theatre?

The sheer scale of it has been an extraordinary thing for us. In a typical pre covid year it was 30-35 thousand children. If you ran a performance for a month and sold it well, you would get 3-4 thousand in seeing the show. One addition of live from the ark was seen by 63 thousand in every country in ROI, 1 IN NI, and every postal area in Dublin. We took on this project knowing that digital was here to stay and it helps us reach children who don't normally access our services.

How has the practices of the Ark changed with respect of data use and collection?

We are tweaking our booking process to collect more information at booking stage, so we don't have to follow up as much. The theory of change is also going to be injected deeper into the organisation and will affect how we design programmes from now on and we will be focused on talking to end users at all points.

# CYBERSAFEIRELAND CLG (T/A CYBERSAFEKIDS): SETTING THE STANDARD

# Quantifiable Data

Number of teachers that signed up to the workshops: 120 schools

Number of workshops held: 37 (23 parent, 9 teachers, 5 debriefs)

Number of teachers who continued to engage with the programme after attending the workshop: 62 schools completed with 14,132 pupils

**Number of schools in disadvantaged areas:** 19 but only 12 specifically DEIS, potential that more could be considered disadvantaged

### **Qualitative Answers**

How were schools in disadvantaged communities made aware of the workshops and encouraged to participate?

Originally partnered with the CYPSCs. We sent them the list of schools per country – Louth, Meath and Wicklow. Asked them to identify DEIS and other schools they also find disadvantaged. There were plenty identified that weren't DEIS but still seen as disadvantaged. But then we moved out of those counties as getting in contact was difficult so we only know those identified as DEIS. We don't have that intermediary. That was something that was very clear at the beginning and not at the end.

How was the direct impact on children and young people and their online safety measured? What were its findings?

In terms of the direct impact on the children it's hard to measure because the main purpose is to focus and tighten up on online safety in schools. Will inevitability have impact on children but don't have the capacity to measure that and it will be hard to trace the benefits back to the tool. Will be hard to measure it. Could go back and ask how useful they found it but even that has issues. One of the things that we ask the schools is how often they teach online safety in the school. There is a recommendation that this should be covered a few times a term. Even if they're upping that that would be a good measure. Our concern would be schools would only focus on it once. It's a kind of a peripheral subject at the moment and we want digital literacy to be more important. Need greater resourcing – if schools are upping the regularity that will be sign of success and impact.

# LE CHÉILE FRC: LE CHÉILE FRC

# Quantifiable Data

Number of projects that have been assessed by the new Strategic Planning, Impact Measurement, Communications and IT system: 1 (Childcare service)

# **Qualitative Answers**

Has the Accelerator programme allowed for the successful networking with other Digital Solutions Fund Awardees?

They definitely did push that for us. At the start there was a heavy focus on getting to know each other but I was terribly busy and didn't have time to attend all of the networking mornings and couldn't go to one in Dublin so it wasn't something I took part in.

How have the nonfinancial supports (consultancy support and Accelerator workshops) assisted in the overall running of the organisation? Had reservations about taking part in the Fund because we weren't receiving the cash grant, but it's been fantastic. We worked on a strategic plan and examined the online presence and what comes with that. We looked at my five year plan and the consultant picked out themes. She pulled it apart and put it all together. It took no extra work on my part and she was able to formulate it. It was the best piece of work anyone could have done for us. I was able to present the plan then to the boar and they were impressed. My 5 year plan factored in not only my goals but those form the staff and the board because I know from change management theory you need buy in from the staff and to be grass roots up. We also spoke about the use of technology. I needed an online booking system which could be accessed from home with payment online and thought it was complicated. The consultant spelt it all out and made everything so relatable and showed that this was actually accessible. It's great for us now to have both an online and in-person presence to meet client need.

