

Needs Assessment Report for the Development of a Family Resource Centre in Longford Town

January 2025 – Commissioned by Longford County Council



Working in partnership

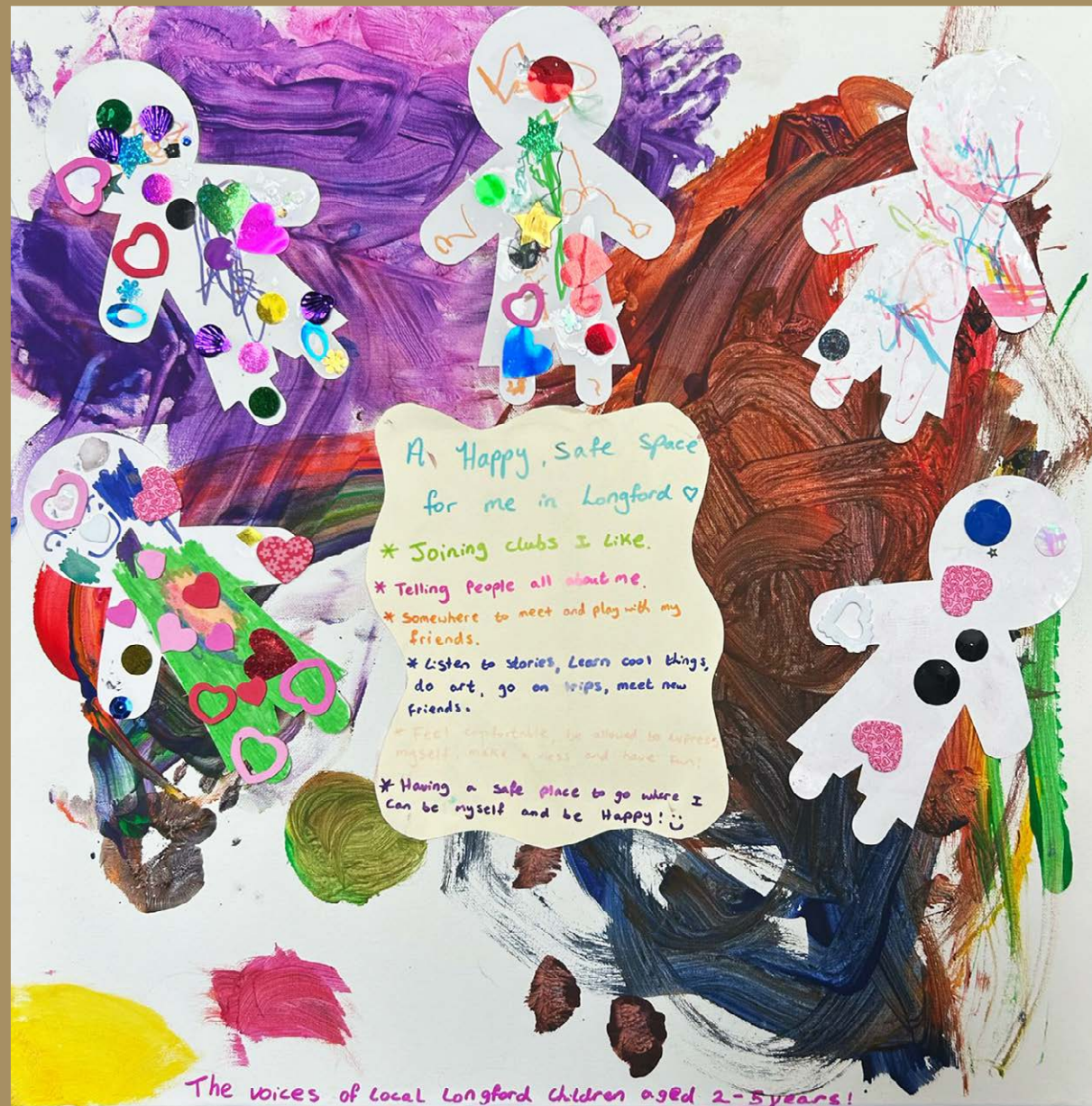


Healthy
Longford



'FRCs are like
a lighthouse
in the middle of
stormy waters.'





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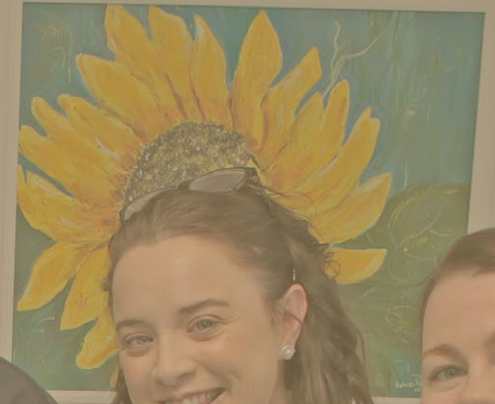
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We're
Breastfeeding
Friendly



We're
Breastfeeding
Friendly
Longford



Acknowledgements

This Needs Assessment Report was commissioned by Longford County Council, in partnership with Sláintecare Healthy Communities and the Longford Community Safety Partnership, to explore the need for a Family Resource Centre in Longford Town and its surrounding areas.

We wish to acknowledge the invaluable contributions of the Longford Family Resource Centre Advisory Steering Group, who guided and supported this process throughout. A sincere thanks to:

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This report is the product of a genuine community collaboration, and we thank all those who helped shape its content and intent.



Summary

Summary

Background:

Longford County Council commissioned this research in 2024 to explore the need for a Family Resource Centre in the Longford town and Edgeworthstown area. This need is driven by three key factors:

- 1. High Child Protection Rates:** Longford has consistently had high child protection and welfare referral rates, highlighting the need for enhanced preventative and support services.
- 2. Deprivation Indicators:** Longford faces multi-faceted disadvantages, as shown by recent censuses.
- 3. Public and Service Provider Demand:** There is strong demand for a Family Resource Centre, supported by consultations in various local and regional plans.

An advisory group was established to assist in the planning of the research, consisting of representatives from Longford County Council, FRCs in the county, Tusla and the Public Participation Network.

A set of research questions was identified as follows:

- What are the key issues impacting your community (as relevant to age/cohort)?
- What are the gaps in service provision?
- What difference would a Family Resource Centre make to the town of Longford?
- What considerations would be important in terms of the location, building and staffing for an FRC?

The same questions were posed with regard to Edgeworthstown.

A list of key informants was compiled, and a series of focus groups were organised accordingly.

There were a number of stakeholder specific focus groups as well as an open public call The local community as also invited to submit feedback via email. A total of 155 people participated in the research. This report draws on several sources of data, including Census 2022, Pobal Deprivation Statistics, Tusla statistics, and a number of research reports.



As part of this process, the funders aim to support the establishment of a Family Resource Centre action group, who will develop and submit an application to Tusla to receive financial support to enter into the National Family Resource Centre Programme. If successful, they would then set up a formal Board of Management and establish a service with a venue, staff, and Programme of Activities (PoA), based on the current Needs Analysis and any emerging trends or change in the future and being compatible with the available resources.

Pillars of the Family Resource Centre Programme:

The needs assessment follows the principles of the Family Resource Centre Programme, focusing on Family Support, Community Development, Education and Training, Mental health and Wellbeing, Poverty Alleviation and Inclusion, Universal Accessibility, and Child and Youth Development. The benefits of prevention and early intervention programmes are noted alongside reference to the Meitheal model of practice.

Profile of Longford Town:

Longford Town is the county's largest settlement with significant economic, administrative, and social functions. Between 2016 and 2022, Longford County saw a 14.38% population growth, with Longford Town's population increasing by 9.43%, reflecting the town's growing significance.

Thematic Analysis:

Thematic analysis of the data collected identified six main cohorts as follows:

- Children and young people
- Parents and families
- Older people
- People living with disability / life challenges.
- Travellers
- New communities (including refugees and asylum seekers)

In addition, four universal cross cutting themes were also identified in relation to each of the cohorts as follows:

- Mental health
- Family support
- Poverty, education, and employment
- Personal and community safety

These findings are a combination of the feedback from a particular cohort, as well as feedback from others about a particular cohort, under each of the four themes.

Summary

'People with disabilities face a lot of additional costs in their day to day lives... an FRC could provide them with valuable support'



Findings from the Research

Children (under 6 years)

Young children's input was gathered through a play therapist, highlighting needs such as safe spaces, clubs, social interaction, and the ability to express themselves.

Young People

The lack of accessible and well-resourced mental health services for young people was a key issue. Common mental health struggles included anxiety, depression, trauma, and stress from school pressures. The need for mental health services outside typical work hours (9am-5pm) was emphasised, along with additional services for LGBTQ+ youth. Play and art therapy for children – including those with additional needs – was identified as a significant gap. Young people expressed concerns about financial stress affecting families and the need for accessible family support services. The importance of creating a more vibrant community with better opportunities for young people, especially those who leave school early, was emphasised. Young people expressed concerns about safety on the streets at night, highlighting the need for safe spaces to socialize and concerns about drug-related issues.

Children with Additional Needs

There is a lack of services for children with additional/complex needs, especially for those with autism or who are neurodivergent. Parents reported delays in accessing assessments and specialists, with many having to seek private services. There was a strong need for sensory spaces and specialised support to help children engage in recreational activities and develop.

Parents and Families

While services for parents and families are doing valuable work in Longford including services for Lone Parents and or parents returning to education, they are under significant strain and facing increasing demands. A consistent theme was the absence of comprehensive family support services in Longford, particularly in the town itself. This includes a lack of childcare places and universal supports such as parenting classes. Families require both general and specialised support to address specific challenges at different stages of a child's development. Service providers emphasised the need for practical parenting support as well as assistance with more complex issues requiring therapeutic help. There was a noted gap in early intervention, especially in supporting vulnerable mothers during pregnancy and the early stages of child-rearing.



Key challenges include issues for families experiencing separation or bereavement, and concerns around finance, housing, and overall wellbeing. There is a significant shortage of mental health services, with long waiting lists. It was noted that many people experience stigma around accessing mental health services, and it was suggested that the provision of a neutral venue for therapy, such as a Family Resource Centres (FRCs), could address this issue.

The lack of affordable housing, high rents, and the threat of eviction and homelessness are also critical issues. Even families with employment are feeling financial pressure. The importance of adult education as a transformative tool was highlighted, with a call for more support to help parents return to education or training, allowing them to access meaningful employment and break the cycle of poverty.

Various safety issues were highlighted, including concerns about drug dealing, domestic violence, feuds, and safety in certain areas of Longford. The lack of a refuge for victims of domestic violence was noted as a significant gap. The need to build resilience within the community, was highlighted. The Community Safety Partnership and the Night Time Economy project were acknowledged, with suggestions to expand safety initiatives in housing estates due to a shortage of Gardaí.

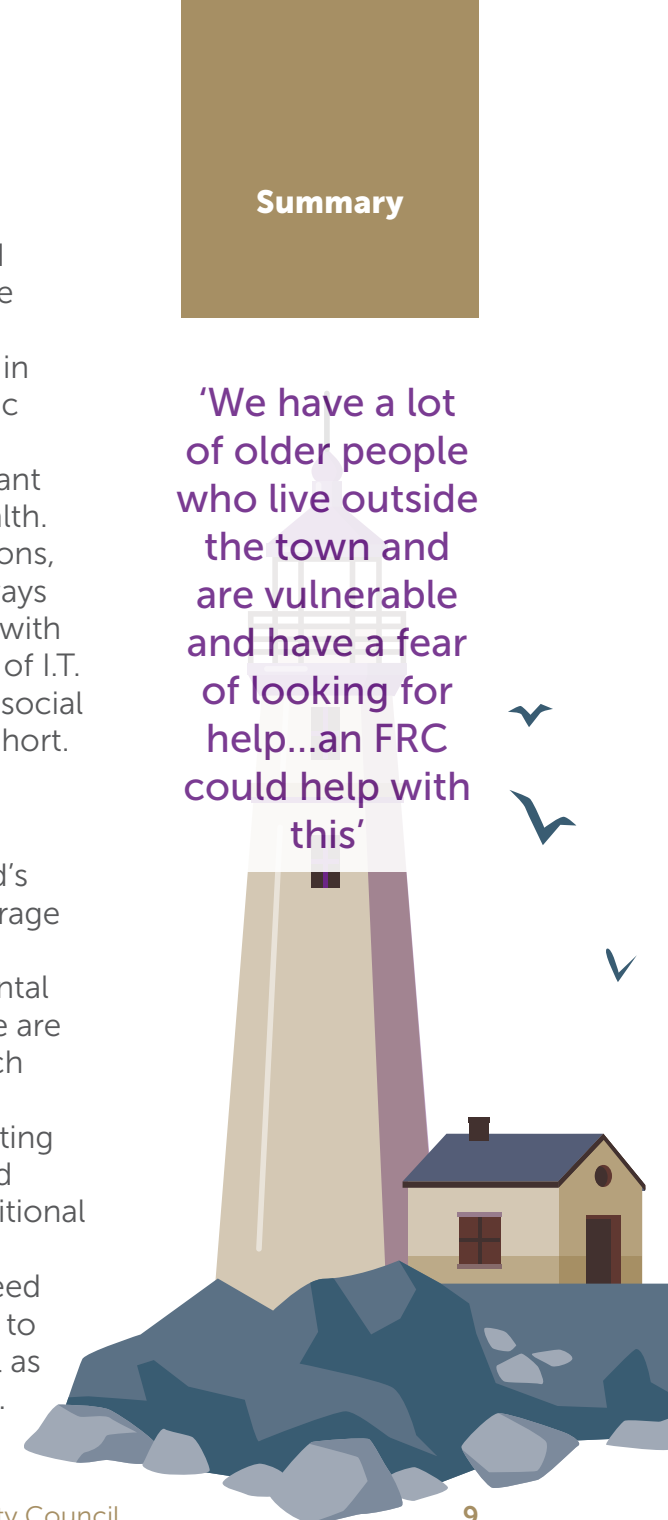
Older People

The old age dependency ratio in Longford has increased significantly, highlighting the growing needs of older people, including difficulties accessing services due to gaps in transportation as well as living with chronic medical conditions and reduced mobility. Loneliness was also identified as a significant issue impacting older people's mental health. Social activities, hobbies, movement sessions, and nutrition classes were suggested as ways to support older people in aging well and with confidence. Financial struggles and a lack of I.T. literacy, safety concerns and the need for social networks were also highlighted for this cohort.

Travellers

Irish Travellers represent 1.95% of Longford's population, nearly double the national average (1%). This community faces high levels of discrimination, health inequalities, and mental health challenges. Within this cohort, there are groups who face additional challenges such as LGBTQ+ travellers and those struggling with addiction. The need to reframe parenting support, sharing of practical resources, and support for families with children with additional needs was also highlighted. Other issues highlighted included homelessness, the need for access to childcare to enable travellers to access education and employment as well as the need for an FRC to be culturally aware.

'We have a lot of older people who live outside the town and are vulnerable and have a fear of looking for help...an FRC could help with this'



New Communities (Including Refugees and Asylum Seekers)

34.65% of Longford's population were born overseas, with 31.88% non-Irish nationals. Refugees and asylum seekers face mental health challenges such as PTSD, anxiety, depression, and grief from loss (partners, children, siblings). The lack of extended family connections exacerbates feelings of loneliness, making integration and socialization more difficult. There is a need for opportunities to socialise in a welcoming, safe environment. Volunteering has proven to be an effective means of socialising and skill-building. Asylum seekers need parenting support and prenatal support. It was noted that cultural differences in parenting practices can complicate children's integration into schools. Feedback showed there was a clear need to promote vaccination programs for children and adults, potentially through mobile units at FRCs with interpretation service available. Access to English language classes is one of the biggest challenges for migrants, as language skills are crucial for integration and employment. Longford Westmeath ETB and Longford Community Resources do offer some classes in this area, but an absent shared space could be a barrier to attendance.

Service providers highlighted the lack of sufficient childcare places for children from new communities and noted that many parents do not have adequate information about Ireland's childcare system, which often results in children missing out on crucial early years education. There is a clear need for family support programmes and accessible parenting education for new community members to better navigate the Irish educational system and support their children's development. There are concerns about a lack of suitable housing as well as overcrowded housing. Refugees and asylum seekers face significant barriers to finding stable employment. There is also a strong need for vocational training to support long-term employment prospects.

Despite the range of services available Longford, many informants from new communities noted difficulties accessing information about available support services. There is a need for these resources to be compiled and made accessible in an easy-to-understand format. An FRC was seen as an ideal service to respond the range of needs for this cohort, for example, providing information and support regarding migrant rights, signposting services, as well as promoting cultural integration.



People with Disabilities and Those Living with Life Challenges

People with disabilities in Longford face significant barriers in daily life, such as inaccessible buildings, poorly placed bins, and obstructions in designated disability parking spaces. Challenges like dog fouling on sidewalks and high kerbs further complicate mobility. The importance of universal design in public infrastructure was stressed, ensuring buildings and spaces are accessible to people with physical, sensory, intellectual, and neurodiverse needs.

Many individuals with disabilities also serve as caregivers for family members, highlighting a need for dedicated networks and mental health support for carers to help alleviate the physical and emotional strain they face.

The implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities, which Ireland ratified in 2018 was emphasised. The need to meet the rights outlined in the Convention, particularly around accessibility and inclusivity was highlighted.

A suggestion for creating a building for the FRC with maximum accessibility standards, including specialised facilities like changing places for people with complex needs, was proposed. This would be the first of its kind in Longford and would provide critical services to the disability community.

Substances and Addiction

Drugs and drug-related intimidation are significant concerns in Longford, with a rising need for community education and intervention. While initiatives like the Midland Drugs and Alcohol Task Force (MRDATF) and THE Drugs Related Intimidation Violence Engagement (DRIVE) project are working to tackle the problem, the community's awareness and understanding of how Gardaí address drug-related intimidation needs improvement. Parents, particularly, are experiencing heightened stress due to concerns about their children being drawn into criminal activities. Informants emphasized the need for earlier engagement with law enforcement to prevent young people from becoming involved in drug-related crime. Support systems for individuals struggling with addiction need to be expanded, including multi-disciplinary teams and tailored interventions to assist those in recovery.

Summary

'Not everyone is in to sports... we need a space for people to access...a space that is accessible to everyone in this community'



Identified Gaps in Service Provision

Several critical service gaps were highlighted in the consultations, pointing to areas where Longford's services need to be expanded or improved to meet the community's diverse needs. These gaps include:

1. Services for Children and Young People:

- A lack of services for children under 10 years (noting that youth services primarily work with children over 10 years with exception of the Youth Diversion Project who provide services for 8 to 11 – but only on referral basis).
- Insufficient early intervention and prevention programs for younger children.
- The need for more safe spaces for LGBTQI+ youth, who face discrimination and safety concerns.
- Limited access to sporting facilities and safe spaces for young people, such as the absence of a boxing club and insufficient safe play areas for younger children.
- More opportunities for education, training, and employment for young people to help make Longford a more vibrant community.

2. Mental Health and Therapy Services:

- A shortage of accessible and affordable mental health services, including trauma-informed psychotherapy and counselling.
- A lack of play therapy and art therapy services for children.

3. Family Support Services

- A desire for more comprehensive family support services, particularly for parents and children.
- A lack of accessible childcare facilities, which limits opportunities for parents, including migrant families, to access education and employment.

4. Health and Social Services:

- Insufficient access to GPs and health-related services like prenatal care and ante-natal classes, especially for new communities.



5. Housing and Housing Support:

- Persistent issues surrounding the availability of suitable housing for vulnerable groups, including overcrowding, homelessness, and lack of affordable options.
- Special focus on the challenges faced by people living with disabilities and new communities in accessing appropriate and safe housing.

6. Support for Vulnerable Groups:

- The ongoing need for resources and support for the Traveller and Roma communities, who face unique challenges in terms of housing, social inclusion, and accessing services.

7. Support for Migrants and New Communities:

- The need for comprehensive information about migrant rights and services for new communities, such as tailored advice and signposting to relevant resources.
- The need for more English language classes at varying levels to support migrant integration.

8. Services for Older People:

- A lack of adequate services for older people, including the absence of a dedicated day centre, which would help combat isolation and provide needed support.

‘Lús na Greine and Bridgeways provide amazing facilities...that’s what we need in this town’



Potential Benefits of an FRC for Longford

1. Family Support and Early Intervention:

- An FRC would offer essential **wraparound support services** for families, especially those facing challenges such as child welfare concerns or substance misuse. The FRC could serve as a **prevention and early intervention** space, reducing the escalation of family problems.
- Longford has one of the highest child protection and welfare referral rates in Ireland, so an FRC could play a pivotal role in **supporting vulnerable families** through direct assistance and by providing neutral spaces for sensitive meetings (e.g. with Tusla, Gardaí or other related services).

2. Centralised Information and Support:

- An FRC could serve as a **central hub** for families, individuals, and groups, providing **comprehensive information** about all available services in the area. This would reduce confusion and barriers to accessing support, ensuring that people can easily find the help they need.
- An FRC would foster **collaboration** between different agencies, leading

to a more **cohesive and integrated approach** to community support.

- An FRC would provide a space for services to **work together** more effectively, making it easier for individuals to receive support in a welcoming environment without bureaucratic hurdles.

3. Reducing Stigma and Creating Safe Spaces:

- The **universal nature of an FRC** means that it would be free from stigma, providing a welcoming environment for individuals and families. People could access support without fear of judgment, and those attending less serious activities (such as a hobby or interest group) could discreetly learn about other services available to them.
- The FRC could also serve as a safe space for vulnerable individuals, such as those experiencing **domestic violence**, where they can access services in a **non-threatening and confidential environment**.



4. Educational and Recreational Opportunities:

- An FRC would offer **educational, recreational, and cultural opportunities** for all age groups. For example, relevant organisations could hold activities for skills development or hobbies. Similarly, the space could host **clinics** on topics like **money management, budgeting, and personal safety**.
- A key benefit of the FRC would be its ability to connect individuals from diverse communities, including **young people, new communities, minority ethnic groups, and LGBTQI+ individuals**, offering them a chance to socialise, access support, and engage in educational activities.

5. Supporting Addiction Recovery and Education:

- The FRC could be a valuable resource for **addiction recovery programs**, signposting aftercare support for those recovering from substance abuse. It could also be an **educational hub** for the community on topics like **substance misuse, mental health, and gambling addiction**.
- An FRC would provide a **safe space** for individuals in recovery to receive peer support, helping to reduce isolation and offering opportunities for individuals to connect with others who have similar experiences.

6. Improved Service Access:

- An FRC would not only offer access to various support services but would also provide **practical assistance** such as help with **form filling, CV preparation, and referrals to specialised services**.
- By offering a range of services in one location, the FRC could significantly reduce barriers to accessing help and increase the likelihood of individuals successfully receiving the assistance they need.

'I was able to access play therapy for my child in Granard.it made such a difference to him...I should have been able to get that here in Longford'.



Recommendations for the Physical Building and the Location of the FRC

The consultation with key informants highlighted several important recommendations regarding the physical building and location of the Family Resource Centre (FRC) in Longford. These recommendations aim to ensure that the building is accessible, inclusive, and functional for all community members.

Key Recommendations for the Building:

1. Location and Accessibility:

- The FRC should be **centrally located**, easily visible, and ideally situated in an area that is convenient for people from all parts of Longford, especially those who may face mobility or transportation challenges.
- It should be **universally designed**, ensuring that the building is accessible to all individuals, including those with physical, intellectual, sensory, and neurodivergent needs.
- The space should be **warm, welcoming, and free from stigma**, encouraging people to access services without fear of judgment.

2. Space Design:

- The FRC should be **future-proofed**, large enough to accommodate various services and activities for diverse groups and families. It should have meeting rooms, training spaces, and potential for expansion as demand increases.
- A **neurodivergent-friendly space** is essential, which includes a **sensory room** equipped with resources like weighted vests, sensory tags, and speech tablets. This would support children

Summary



and parents, providing a safe space for sensory breaks.

- The design should also consider the **lived experiences** of people with life challenges, with input from these people as well as **engineers, architects, and occupational therapists** to ensure the building is inclusive.

3. Amenities and Facilities:

- The inclusion of a **coffee shop** within the building would provide a social space and enhance the welcoming environment.
- Access to **IT facilities** and **quiet study spaces** would support students, job seekers, and others who need a peaceful environment to work or study.
- The building should also feature a **garden** or outdoor space where children can play, and families can relax.

4. Symbolism of Hope:

- The FRC should symbolise **hope and community resilience**, offering a space that inspires confidence in individuals to seek help when needed and to build their capacity to do things for themselves.



Recommendations for the Service and Staffing of the FRC

The success of the FRC will rely on the quality of its staff, the services provided, and the overall approach to community support. The following recommendations were made to ensure that the FRC is effective, inclusive, and responsive to the needs of Longford's diverse population.

Key Recommendations for Service and Staffing:

1. Manager and Staff:

- The FRC should be managed by a **manager** who is deeply invested in the area and possesses excellent **networking and community engagement skills**.
- Staff should be drawn from a variety of backgrounds, with expertise in **community development, cultural awareness, and trauma-informed practice**.
- Staff should be proactive in **making connections** with other services in the community, ensuring a **collaborative approach** to service delivery.

2. Approach to Service Delivery:

- The FRC should take a **strengths-based approach** that focuses on the needs and interests of individuals, rather than deficits. It should **welcome all communities**, fostering inclusivity and respect for diversity.
- As a **signposting hub**, the FRC should triage issues and efficiently connect individuals with the appropriate services, helping to save time and resources for other agencies.

Summary



3. Core Services:

- The FRC should offer a range of family supports, especially to those who are vulnerable.
- It should offer **accessible counselling and psychotherapy services**, especially trauma-informed therapy, which would be available without stigma.
- The FRC should also provide **specialised services** such as a **visiting advocate for people with disabilities**, and access to healthcare professionals, such as **speech and language therapists**, and **occupational therapists** who could hold **clinics** in the FRC.
- The FRC should provide **administrative support** to assist individuals with accessing services, completing forms, applying for entitlements, and connecting with education and training opportunities.

4. Training and Education:

- A key recommendation was the provision of a range of **training programs**, including National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) & Further Education & Training (FET), which would help individuals enhance their skills and improve their employment prospects.
- **Flexible opening hours** should be implemented to ensure that the FRC is accessible to all, including on evenings and weekends, to accommodate working families and community groups.

5. Community Support:

- Given the challenges related to **transport access**, it was suggested that the FRC could act as a **community transport hub** or provide a **community bus service** to ensure equitable access to services for all residents.

'We can learn from Lus na Gréine and Bridgeways... they are shining examples...we could mirror what they do'



The Need for Provision of the Services of an FRC in Edgeworthstown

Edgeworthstown, with its rapidly growing population and high diversity, also faces significant social challenges. While some residents have access to services in Granard or Ballymahon, many still lack local support services. The following insights and recommendations were highlighted during the consultations.

Key Issues in Edgeworthstown:

1. Support for Young People:

- There is a **growing youth population** in Edgeworthstown, but no dedicated local youth service. There is a need for **youth-focused initiatives**, including recreational activities, mentorship, and counselling.

2. Diverse Population:

- The town has a significant number of **people from new communities**, requiring support related to integration, language barriers, and cultural adaptation.

3. Family Support:

- There is a clear need for **family support services** in Edgeworthstown, particularly in addressing issues of poverty, child welfare, and community safety.

4. Drug Use and Safety Concerns:

- Like Longford town, Edgeworthstown is grappling with issues related to **drug use** and **personal safety** concerns. There is a need for targeted services to address these concerns.

Summary



Recommendations for Edgeworthstown:

1. Outreach Service from Longford FRC:

- There was a strong consensus that an outreach service from the Longford FRC, operating at least **one day per week** in Edgeworthstown, would be highly beneficial.
- This service could help bridge the gap in local support, offering much-needed resources and referrals for individuals and families in Edgeworthstown.

2. Collaboration with Existing FRCs:

- Longford FRC could work collaboratively with **Lús na Gréine** and **Bridgeways** FRCs, ensuring effective and efficient service delivery across the county. Joint planning between the three centres could streamline services and support the wider population, including residents of Edgeworthstown.

3. Community Transport:

- Providing a **community transport solution** or subsidies for transportation could help residents from outside the town, including Edgeworthstown as well as those with reduced mobility to access services in Longford, thereby enhancing service equity.



Conclusion

Longford faces a range of complex and intertwined issues, including gaps in services for children, young people, families, and older people, for people with disabilities, travellers, refugees, and asylum seekers. The key issues impacting these groups include concerns about mental health, a lack of family support services, poverty, drug-related challenges, and a need for more inclusive, accessible services for vulnerable communities. The provision of a Family Resource Centre in Longford town, with outreach services to Edgeworthstown, could play a crucial role in supporting integration, providing educational resources, and offering essential support networks in a safe, stigma-free environment.

Key recommendations emphasise the importance of a central, accessible, and inclusive physical space, a strengths-based service approach, and collaborative, community-driven service delivery. By addressing these needs, the FRC would become a crucial resource for the people of Longford and its surrounding areas, promoting well-being and empowering individuals to thrive.



Introduction



HARD AND FAST FACTS

Pedestrians hit by a car...

at 30 km/h – 1 in 10 will die



at 50 km/h – 5 in 10 will die



at 60 km/h – 9 in 10 will die



Section 1: Introduction

1.1 Background

Three principal elements form the backdrop to the undertaking of this needs assessment for the establishment of a Family Resource Centre in Longford :

Overall, Tusla in the Midlands, and specifically in Longford has traditionally had high child protection and welfare referral rates to the Agency and its predecessor, the Health Service Executive. This has created awareness amongst Tusla regional management, interagency groups such as Children and Young Peoples Services Committee (CYPSC), Longford Community Safety Partnership , Longford Local Community Development Committee, and others, of the desirability for enhanced preventative and support services.

Deprivation indicators have been consistent over recent Censuses, showing that Longford town and its hinterland suffer from multi-faceted disadvantage.

The identification of a demand from the general public as well as service providers for a Family Resource Centre in Longford Town has been demonstrated in multiple public consultations for local and regional plans and strategies. This includes Longford Community Safety Plan, Longford 2024: A Town Centre First Strategy; County Longford Local Economic and Community Plan 2023-2029; the draft Longford Town Local Area Plan 2025-2030; Slaintecare Healthy Communities Work Programme, Social Inclusion Community Activation (SICAP) work plan.



1.2 Purpose of the Needs Assessment

A number of policy documents and research reports prepared over the last number of years point to continuing and ongoing family support gaps in the Longford Town and Edgeworthstown area. This includes a previous application to Tusla for an FRC in Longford dating back to 2017. This is in conjunction with a rapidly increasing population, which includes a high proportion of new and minority community groups and shows that the gaps and needs are now being exacerbated by the increasing challenges and barriers being faced by the communities in Longford and Edgeworthstown.

Longford Community Safety Partnership and the Sláintecare Healthy Communities Programme(Local Authority), having identified these gaps as part of consultation and planning activities, established two Community Houses in the Longford Town area in 2022. The purpose was to act as a catalyst for agencies to offer family support and community development services in areas identified as disadvantaged. This was supported by Longford County Council, and one of the aims was to ascertain if the provision of these hubs would show the need , if any, for a wider Family Resource Centre and related services. In 2024, it was agreed by the constituent partners of Longford Community Safety Partnership and Slaintecare Healthy Communities (Longford)

that it would be beneficial to fund and undertake a needs assessment with a view to:

- examining the overall situation with regard to family support needs in the Longford town and hinterland area.
- identifying what services are currently providing support in the area.
- identifying any gaps in services that may exist.
- making recommendations around proposals for the future development of family support and community development services

As part of this process, the funders aim to support the establishment of a Family Resource Centre action group, who will develop and apply to Tusla to receive financial support to enter into the National Family Resource Centre Programme. If successful, they would then set up a formal Board of Management and establish a service with a venue, staff (Coordinator supported by a part-time Administrator and part-time Community Development/Family Support Worker at a minimum) and Programme of Activities (PoA), based on the current Needs Analysis and any emerging trends or change in the future and being compatible with the available resources.

'We have a high population of new communities and we need to support integration'



1.3 Pillars of the Family Resource Centre Programme

In undertaking this needs assessment, we were guided by the foundational pillars of Family Resource Centres, which show a holistic approach and champions early intervention and prevention.

FRCs are located within a community-based model of family support, which is at the heart of the Programme. Community development's centrality in informing the approaches, values, and methods underpinning FRCs' work is a defining feature of their contribution. A further defining characteristic of FRCs is that they are managed by local voluntary management committees, which are critical in facilitating meaningful participation within communities and in ensuring local knowledge and accountability. FRCs have an open-door policy.

A central feature of the FRC programme is the involvement of local people in identifying needs and developing needs-led responses. FRCs are participative and empowering organisations that support families while building the capacity and leadership of local communities. FRCs provide a range of universal and targeted services and development opportunities that address needs of families.

Depending on the level of resourcing available, FRCs generally provide, deliver, and facilitate the following activities :

- **Family Support:** Parenting programmes, therapeutic interventions, and early years education
- **Community Development:** Promoting integration, building capacity and local leadership, and supporting collaboration among service providers.
- **Education and Training:** Skills workshops, youth development programmes, and pathways to employments
- **Mental health and Wellbeing:** Accessible counselling, play therapy, art therapy, peer support and recreational activities.
- **Poverty Alleviation and Inclusion:** Practical supports like form-filling assistance, housing advice and access to welfare entitlements.
- **Universal Accessibility:** A stigma-free, fully accessible, confidential space tailored to diverse community needs.
- **Child and Youth Development:** Safe spaces, sensory spaces, and services for neurodivergent children and their families.



1.4 Profile of Longford Town

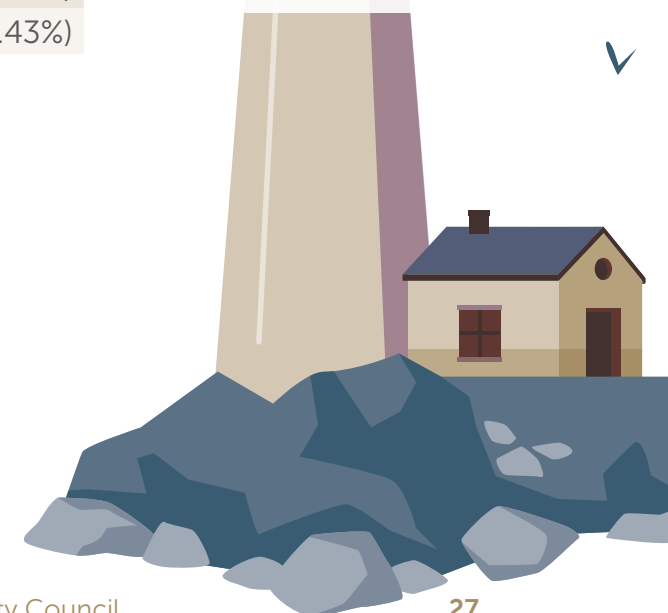
Longford Town is the dominant settlement in the County in terms of population, economic activity, level of service and infrastructure and connectivity. The town has well-established economic, administrative, and social functions along with important retail, service, and amenity functions for the County and neighbouring towns. Please see Appendix 1 for a map of the boundary area.

Census 2022 shows that between April 2016 and April 2022 that Ireland's population grew by 8% from 4,761,865 to 5,149,139. Within County Longford the population increased from 40,873 persons in 2016 to 46,751 persons in 2022. This represents an increase of 14.38% (5,878 persons) between 2016 and 2022, the highest growth rate across the Country. During this time Longford Town experienced a rate of growth of 9.43% (944 persons), which is also higher than the national growth rate. (See Table 1)

Table 1: Population Growth in County Longford and Longford Town 2016 – 2022
(Source: CSO Census 2022)

	Population 2016	Population 2022	Growth Rate (2016-2022)
National	4,761,865	5,149,139	387,270 (8%)
County Longford	40,873	46,751	5,878 persons (14.38%)
Longford Town	10,008	10,952	944 persons (9.43%)

'We have a high Traveller population... who don't always get the same opportunities as settled people.... an FRC could be a great support to them'



1.4.1 Gender

As per Census 2022 in Ireland, overall, there were 2,604,590 females and 2,544,549 males or 98 males for every 100 females. Of County Longford's population, 23,302 were female and 23,449 were male, which means there were 101 males for every 100 females. As per Census 2022 the total population of Longford town (10,952 persons) is made up of 5,345 males and 5,607 females.

1.4.2 Age

Nationally, the average age of the population was 38.8, up from 37.4 in April 2016. The average age of County Longford's population in April 2022 was 38.8 years, compared with 37.4 years in April 2016.

According to the Census 2022 the age profile of Longford town includes a high percentage of children and young people (Table 3.2). The age cohort 0-19 makes up 29.23% of the population. The 20-64 age cohort, which represents those of working age, is 56.56%. There is a lower proportion of the population over 65 years with 14.21% compared to nationally.

The number of people aged 65 and over continues to grow. This age group increased by 26% to 7,332 in County Longford, and by 22% to 776,315 at a national level since 2016. In Longford Town 14.21% (1556 persons) were aged 65 years and over in Census 2022. As such, a lower proportion of the population is in this older age category than at a county and national level. In terms of the gender split in the higher age cohort there are more females to males.

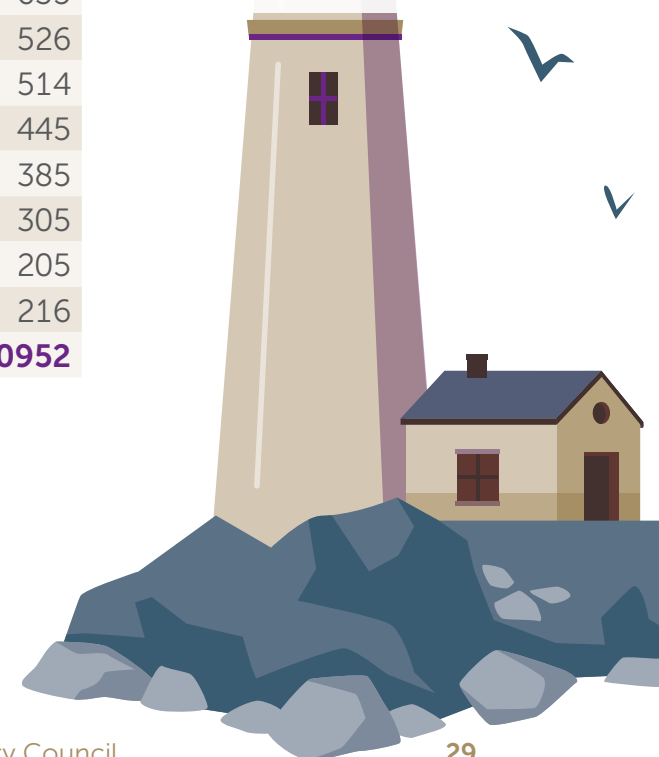


Section 1: Introduction

Table 2: Population by Sex and Age (Source CSO Census 2022)

Age	Male	Female	Both sexes
0 – 4	330	349	679
5 – 9	458	419	877
10 – 14	460	449	909
15 – 19	383	353	736
20 – 24	333	276	609
25 – 29	311	332	643
30 – 34	343	400	743
35 – 39	392	447	839
40 – 44	444	476	920
45 – 49	387	379	766
50 – 54	305	330	635
55 – 59	261	265	526
60 – 64	243	271	514
65 – 69	206	239	445
70 – 74	193	192	385
75 – 79	137	168	305
80 – 84	94	111	205
85 and over	65	151	216
Total	5345	5607	10952

'Social Inclusion could coordinate with an FRC.... there is scope for more cross departmental collaboration'



1.4.3 Citizenship

Nationally, dual Irish citizenship increased by 63% from 104,784 to 170,597 people and non-Irish citizens made up 12% of the population. In County Longford, the number of dual Irish citizens increased from 752 to 1,523 while non-Irish citizens accounted for 13% of the county's population.

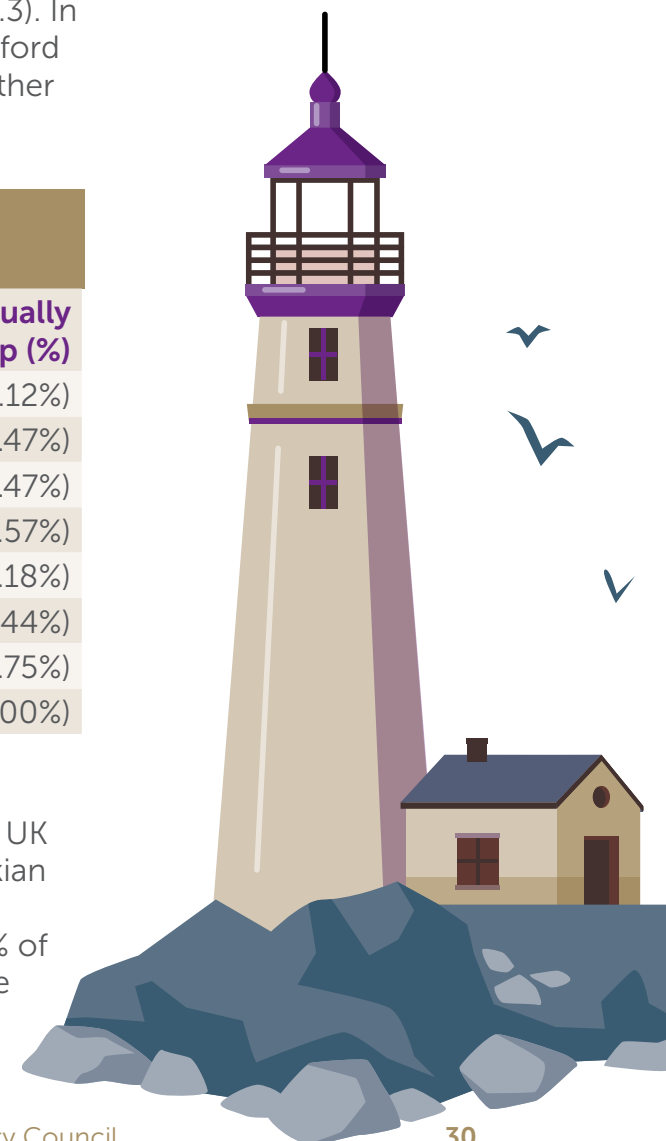
Longford town is a diverse settlement with many nationalities living in the local area which contribute to the local population and vibrant community. As per census 2022, 34.65% of the town population were born overseas and 31.88% are not of Irish nationality (Table 3.3). In terms of non-national population in Longford Town there are high concentrations of 'Other EU'; Polish and 'Rest of World' evident.

Table 3: Usually, resident population of Longford town by Birthplace and Nationality
(Source: CSO Census 2022)

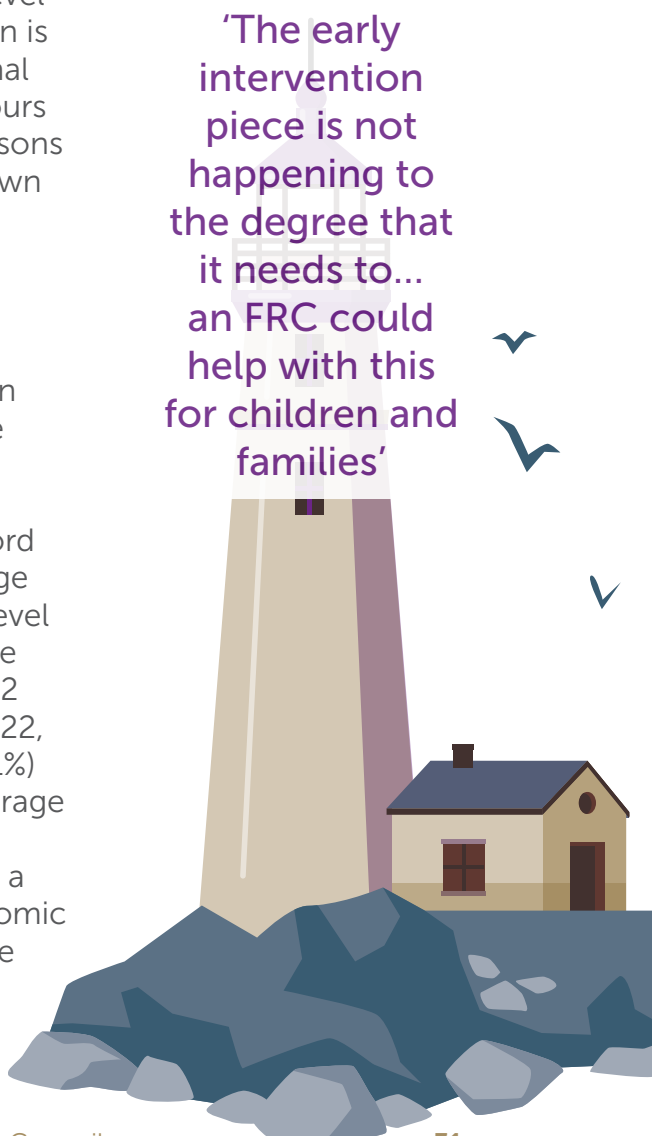
Location	No of persons usually resident by Birthplace (%)	No. of persons usually resident by Citizenship (%)
Ireland	7022 (65.35%)	7372 (68.12%)
UK	502 (4.64%)	159 (1.47%)
Poland	834 (7.71%)	700 (6.47%)
India	74 (0.68%)	62 (0.57%)
Other EU (excluding Ireland and Poland)	1339 (12.37%)	1210 (11.18%)
Rest of world	1001 (9.25%)	589 (5.44%)
Not stated	0 (0%)	730 (6.75%)
Total	10822	10822 (100%)

When comparing statistics in Longford with national statistics, 21% (9,580 people) were born outside the State, which was up to 19.5% in 2016. Nationally 20% of the usually resident population in April 2022 were born outside the State. In Longford non-Irish citizens accounted for 14% of the country's population. Among the non-Irish

citizen's residents, the largest group were Polish citizens (1,508 people) followed by UK citizens (886), Lithuanian (559) and Slovakian (523). Nationally there were more than 631,000 non-Irish citizens, which was 12% of the population. This highlights the fact the numbers in Longford were higher than the national average.



'The early intervention piece is not happening to the degree that it needs to... an FRC could help with this for children and families'

An illustration of a lighthouse on a rocky island. The lighthouse is tall and tan with a purple band near the top. A small house with a blue roof and a chimney is on the island. Three birds are flying in the sky.

1.4.4 Travelling Community

In terms of cultural and ethnic identity, it is noted that as per Census 2022 that 913 persons identified as 'White Irish Traveller' in the county and of this number, 725 live in Longford town. This represents 6% of the total population of the town. The total Traveller population nationally is 32,949 which is 1% of the total population. Longford has the second highest Traveller population per capita in the Country.

1.4.5 Tenure and Home Ownership

In 2022, in County Longford, 61% of households owned their own home, with a further 31% renting. This compared with 66% of households owning their home nationally and 28% renting.

In Longford Town as per census 2022 the level of home ownership (Table 3.6) either with or having no mortgage is 37.97% (1,533 households). This consists of the following categories: home ownership with a mortgage or loan at 13%; and owned outright (24.97%). This is considerably below the aforementioned county and national figures.

In Longford town overall the rental sector dominates household occupancy, with private rental the dominant form of occupancy for 1190 households (29.48%). The level of social housing is also high at 906 households (22.44%)

1.4.6 Education

As per Census 2022, the percentage of persons over 15 years of age identifying as having no formal education and primary education is 1,002 persons (15.40%). The level of educational attainment in Longford town is low especially for those holding professional qualifications, including ordinary and honours bachelor's degrees. The percentage of persons holding these qualifications in Longford town is 13.85 % (Table 3.8).

1.4.7 Employment

As per Census 2022 nationally, there were 313,656 additional people (+16%) at work. In County Longford there were 19,695 people (aged 15 and over) at work, an increase of 4,523 people (+30%) between 2016 and 2022. Employment levels in County Longford (48.4%) were lower than the national average (53.4%) and unemployment at the county level (11.8%) was higher than the national average at (9.1%). In Longford town there were 4,032 persons (47.51%) at work. As per Census 2022, employment levels in Longford town (47.51%) were marginally lower than the County average (48.4%), and also lower than the national average (53.4%). Upon further examination, a notable difference between principal economic status of the male and female portion of the population in Longford town was also evident, (Table 3.9). Specifically, there

was a lower proportion of females at work and higher proportion at home or looking after families when compared to males. In contrast, unemployment was relatively high for males.

1.4.8 Health

As per Census 2022, nationally, 83% of people stated that their health was good/very good, compared to 87% in 2016. In County Longford 76% of people stated that their health was good or very good compared with 85% in 2016. Of the population of Longford town 73.09% described their health in a positive light either as 'Good or Very Good'. Longford Town therefore had a lower percentage rate with a positive health perception than both the county and national levels. While 14.79% of the population described their health in a negative light as 'Fair, Bad or Very Bad' (Table 3.14).

1.4.9 Deprivation

The Pobal HP Deprivation Index shows Longford town and the associated levels of affluence and deprivation. (See HP Deprivation Index Maps – Electoral Areas and Small Areas). There is a high level of deprivation present in Longford town as indicated in Pobal's HP Deprivation Index Maps based on Census 2022. The electoral areas within the Plan area which contains Longford no. 1 urban. Longford Rural are categorised as 'Disadvantaged'; while Caldragh and Longford no. 2 Urban are categorised as 'Marginally above Average'.

In terms of the 'Small Areas' Map which looks at the plan area at a more microscopic level the results indicate a high level of deprivation in Longford town, with no areas indicated as 'Very Affluent', or 'Affluent'. Significant land areas are classified as 'Very Disadvantaged', and 'Disadvantaged' including Mac Eoin Park, Great Water Street; and the Saint Michael's Road area is classified as 'Extremely Disadvantaged'. Please see Appendix 2 for the Pobal Deprivation Index 2022 by Electoral Division.



Methodology



Section 2: Methodology

2.1 Advisory Group

An advisory group was established to assist in the planning of the research, consisting of:

Janine Bartley	Coordinator	Longford Local Community Safety Partnership
Laura McHugh	Coordinator	Healthy Ireland, Longford
Patricia Forde	Local Development Officer, Longford	Slaintecare Healthy Communities (Local Authority)
Eileen Finan	Manager	Lus Na Greine Family Resource Centre
Emer Maguire	Acting Manager	Bridgeways Family Resource Centre
Siobhan Cronogue	Development Officer	County Longford Public Participation Network
Rita Culligan	Principal Social Worker	Tusla Midlands

2.2 Research Questions

A set of research questions was identified as follows:

- What are the key issues impacting your community (as relevant to age/cohort)?
- What are the gaps in service provision?
- What difference would a Family Resource Centre make to the town of Longford?
- What considerations would be important in terms of the location, building and staffing for an FRC?

The same questions were posed with regard to Edgeworthstown.

A list of key informants was compiled, and a series of focus groups was organised accordingly.

There were a number of stakeholder specific focus groups as well as an open public call focus group, which was advertised in the local paper and through Longford County Council's social media platforms. The local community was also invited to submit feedback via email.

The focus groups and the interviews took place between August and November 2024.



2.3 Aim of the Research:

This research aims to identify the need for a Family Resource Centre in Longford. This report draws on several sources of data, including Census 2022, Pobal Deprivation Index, Tusla statistics, and a number of research reports.

2.4 Data Collection

The primary data collection involved direct engagement with young people, parents, residents, representatives from a variety of groups and service providers through the use

of a qualitative methodology including focus groups and semi-structured interviews. People in the local community were also invited to email submissions.

In total, 20 in-person focus groups were held:

- 4 focus groups with young people
- 16 focus groups with parents and service providers
- 8 individual semi structured interviews took place with key informants and one session was facilitated by a play therapist with 5 children under 6 years.

'I want to be able to access a service that offers confidentiality and avoids embarrassment... I want to talk to somebody but not everybody'

Table 4: Organisations and Individuals who participated in the research.

A Garda Síochána	6
Autism Friendly Committee	2
Bridgestreet Accommodation Centre	2 staff + 5 service users
Bridgeways Family Resource Centre (Ballymahon)	1
Children Under 6 years	5
Comhairle na nÓg	17
County Childcare Committee	1
Community House	1
Community Development Worker	1
Disability Community Representatives	2
EDI	1
Foróige	2
Home School Community Liaison (HSCL)	3
HSE	3



Section 2: Methodology

Irish Country Women's Association (ICA)	1
LEAP (Foroige)	2 staff + 2 young people
Longford Community Resources LCRL	9
Longford County Council Staff	18
Longford Volunteer Centre	1
Longford HSE Child and Adolescent Drugs Service (under 18's Adapt)	2
Longford Women's Link	1
Longford Youthreach (young people)	20
Longford Youth Service	2
Lús na Greine Family Resource Centre (Granard)	1
Midlands Regional Drugs Task Force	2
Longford Traveller Primary Healthcare Project	3
Parents	6
Public Participation Network (PPN) Staff and members	6
Public Representatives	4
Primary Care Services Co Longford (County Manager)	1
Representatives from the Traveller Community	4
Richmond Court Direct Provision Service (staff and service users)	3
Traveller Health Manager	1
Tusla	
Education and Welfare	1
School Completion Programme	2
Social Work	2
Total number of focus groups	21
Submissions	3
Individual Interviews	8
Total number of informants	155



The National Research Context



Section 3: The National Research Context

This section provides a brief overview of some of the national research pertaining to some of the themes arising in the needs assessment.

3.1 Young People and Mental Health

Research from the Ombudsman for Children in 2023¹ indicated that almost eight in ten young people (aged 12 – 17 years) in their research, reported that they felt low, stressed, or anxious at least some of the time, and just under three in ten said that their mental health was poor and that they needed help to manage it. The lack of mental health supports available to young people were also identified as an issue. Additionally, research on the long-term effects of Covid-19 on children and young people is emerging. ²Research, published by the ESRI and produced in partnership with the

Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY), showed that the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in poorer mental health among young adults. Using data from the Growing Up in Ireland COVID-19 survey, carried out in December 2020, the findings indicated that four-in-ten 22-year-old men and over half (55 per cent) of 22-year-old women were classified as depressed. These were much higher figures than two years previously when 22 per cent of men and 31 per cent of women were depressed. It is also important to note that research from the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland indicated that³ also showed that those who had mental health issues in childhood were as likely to encounter educational/economic difficulties in young adulthood as they were to face further mental health problems.

1 Ombudsman for Children (2023). Children's Mental Health Survey. Stressors, Supports and Services.

2 Disrupted Transitions? Young Adults and the Covid-19 Pandemic. Smyth, E. & Nolan, A. (2022) The Economic and Social Research Institute. Research Series. Number 142.

3 Dooley, N., Kennelly, B., Aresenault, L. (2023) Functional Outcomes among Young People with Trajectories of Persistent Childhood Psychopathology.



3.1.1 LGBTQ+ Young People and Mental Health

LGBTQ+ young people have been specifically identified as a group at risk in terms of their mental health. Being LGBTQI+ in Ireland⁴ is a research project that aimed to examine the mental health and wellbeing of LGBTQI+ people in the Republic of Ireland. The first report was published in 2016 and a subsequent report has been published in 2024, which builds on the findings from that initial report and includes a comparative analysis. Key findings from the new study indicate that mental health and wellbeing have declined amongst the LGBTQI+ population since 2016, with significant challenges experienced by younger age groups and the transgender and gender non-conforming communities.

Significantly, since the 2016 *LGBTIreland*, there has been a:

- 17% Increase in symptoms of severe/ extremely severe symptoms of depression
- 30% Increase in symptoms of severe/ extremely severe symptoms of anxiety
- 33% Increase in symptoms of severe/ extremely severe symptoms of stress

3.2 Parental Mental Health

Research published by Barnardos in 2024⁵ outlined the prevalence of poor parental mental health and the impact it has on children across the country. One in five (20%) parents said they were currently experiencing poor mental health, and of that cohort, one in ten said that this had a significant impact on their parenting. The long-term effects of Covid-19 are also being documented in relation to mental health, for example, the Institute of Public Health (2022)⁶ published findings indicating that 30% of respondents reported that their mental health had worsened since the beginning of the pandemic.

**‘Edgeworthstown
has grown
rapidly...and
has the same
challenges of
any big town’**



4 Higgins A; Downes C; O'Sullivan K; de Vries J; Molloy R; Monahan M; Keogh B; Doyle L; Begley T; Corcoran P; (2024) The National Study on the Mental Health and Wellbeing of the LGBTQI+ Communities in Ireland: Key findings report. Trinity College Dublin and Belong To: Dublin

5 Parental Mental Health and the Impact on Children. Report January 2024. Barnardos.

6 Healthy Ireland. Healthy Ireland Survey 2021: Summary Report. Dublin; 2021.

3.3 Traveller Mental Health

Research published by Pavee Point in 2023⁷ indicated that the Traveller suicide rate is 6 times higher when compared to the general population and accounts for approximately 11% of all Traveller deaths. Suicide for Traveller men is 7 times higher, most common in young Traveller men aged 15-25, and suicide for Traveller women is 5 times higher than the general population. This research also showed that mental health services lack comprehensive data on Traveller service users, as service providers do not collect information on ethnic or cultural background. This results in significant gaps in knowledge on the access, participation and outcomes to mental health and suicide prevention services for Travellers. While data from All Island Travellers Health Survey (AITHS) confirmed that mental health services were available to Travellers, services were often perceived as inadequate. Findings from that survey also indicate various institutional, cultural, social, and structural barriers that restrict Travellers from accessing and engaging with mental health services. These include:

- Discrimination and racism (both at individual and institutional levels)
- Lack of trust with healthcare providers
- Lack of culturally appropriate service provision
- Lack of engagement from service providers with Travellers and Traveller organisations
- Social and cultural stigma attached to engaging with mental health services.
- Waiting lists (62.7%)
- Embarrassment (47.8%)
- Lack of information (37.3%)
- A third of Travellers said they had difficulty reading and 50% reported difficulty reading instructions for medication.



⁷ Evidence and Recommendations on Mental Health, Suicide and Travellers. Pavee Point Traveller and Roma Centre (2023)

3.4 Older People and Mental Health

The Mental Health Commission's report on Mental Health Services for Older People (2020)⁸ stated that approximately 15% of adults aged 60 and over suffer from a mental illness, including depression, dementia, anxiety, alcohol dependence, and schizophrenia. In this age group, physical illness is more common and includes heart disease, loss of mobility, lung disease, chronic pain, and frailty. Other considerations include lack of appropriate accommodation, loneliness, bereavement, and financial difficulties. Older people and their carers need to feel that they are being listened to; they need to feel safe; they need to feel respected; and they need to feel that they are being engaged with.

3.5 Issues Impacting People living with Disability

Research published by the Rehab Group in 2021⁹ identified five key issues impacting people using their services as follows:

1. The most prevalent issue raised was the struggle to live on current rates of social welfare, and this is especially so if the person was living independently or wanted to live independently.
2. Challenges in finding employment.
3. The cost and availability of suitable housing
4. The lack of appropriate transport and the high costs this imposes.
5. Hidden healthcare costs.

**'When children
are waiting for
professional
assessments...
they could
access the FRC
to get support
while they are
waiting'**



⁸ Mental Health Services for Older People. Mental Health Commission. Finnerty, S. (2020)

⁹ Rehab Research Report: The Challenges facing people with Disabilities in Ireland in 2021 – the voice of people who use Rehab Services.

3.6 The Impact of Early Intervention Programmes

National and international evidence shows that prevention and early intervention approaches achieve much better results for children than later intervention. These benefits also extend to parents, teachers, and society, as indicated in the research below.

3.6.1 Benefits for Children

- Improved cognitive development, problem-solving skills, educational, speech, motor skills.
- Improved school readiness, more pro-social behaviour
- Reduced risk of social, emotional difficulties, fewer sleep problems
- Less internalisation/ externalisation of problems
- Improved eating patterns
- Higher immunisation
- Less likely to have chest infections, asthma, less likely to be hospitalised
- Less disordered, hyperactive behaviour

3.6.2 Benefits for Parents and Teachers

- Improved parenting skills, strategies, confidence, mood
- Improved parent-child, sibling behaviour, higher quality, less hostile relationships with children, improved interactions
- Reduced parental stress
- Improved class management skills, teacher – student relationships.
- Reduced marital conflict
- More friends, meeting them more frequently, more social support, improved connections to their community
- Reduced use of alcohol
- Raised aspirations for children
- More knowledge of infant development
- Planned rather than unplanned pregnancies

3.6.3 Benefits for Society (Projected Outcomes)

- Reduced truancy and exclusion
- Less use of psychiatric and general hospital in and outpatient services
- Less need for special education and other in-school assistance
- Less demand on foster care, social work
- Reduced use of services: nurse, speech therapist, physiotherapist, social worker, paediatrician, casualty, outpatient
- Better birth outcomes



3.7 Meitheal: An Example of an Early Intervention and Practice Model

Meitheal refers to an Irish early intervention and prevention practice model that is used when children and young people need support around, for example, behavioural issues or emotional needs; but do not meet the threshold for an intervention by Tusla's Child Protection and Welfare (CPW) service. Meitheal is coordinated by a Lead Practitioner, oftentimes this is a key tool used in a Family Resource Centre setting or would be instigated by a family involvement with an FRC staff member. The family's voluntary involvement in identifying their strengths and needs and developing associated action plans is a key part of the process. In some cases, a single organisation can provide support but usually a team of people from a number of agencies with relevant expertise is brought together to work with the parents or guardians, the child or young person. A coordinated action plan is developed to meet the needs of the child or young person and if necessary other family members. Regular meetings are held to review the progress made and to discuss possible new actions. Child and Family Support Networks are multi-agency networks developed to improve access to support services for children and their families.

Research conducted by the UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre in NUIG¹⁰ indicated that Meitheal is improving family outcomes over time, particularly from the perspective of mothers, showing the potential of Meitheal to improve and sustain improvement in outcomes over time. Meitheal was described as empowering by parents and families. They valued being listened to. The research also indicated that Meitheal can have a positive impact on parental attitudes towards help-seeking behaviours and accessing services.

There is a significant body of research which highlights the benefits of early intervention programmes, indicating the effectiveness of the service provided by an FRC.

'Our biggest challenge is being able to access a space for young people'



¹⁰ Meitheal and Child and Family Support Networks Work Package Final Report Key Findings Dr Leonor Rodriguez, Dr Anne Cassidy and Dr Carmel Devaney UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre, NUI Galway SEPTEMBER 2018



A group of approximately ten women and several young children are posed for a group photograph in an indoor setting. The women are dressed in a mix of casual and semi-formal attire, including blouses, sweaters, and a blazer. Some are holding infants or young children. The background features blue doors, a framed picture, and a small sign that reads "Please don't touch". The overall atmosphere is warm and positive.

Research Findings

Section 4: Research Findings

This section presents the findings from the focus groups and individual interviews, as well as the emailed submissions.

4.1 Research Cohorts

The vast majority of the 20 focus groups were comprised of mixed groups from a variety of services, professions, volunteers, members of the public, parents, and family members. separate focus groups were held with children and and young people. Thematic analysis of the data collected identified six main cohorts as follows:

- Children and young people
- Parents and families
- Older people
- People living with disability / life challenges.
- Travellers
- New communities (including refugees and asylum seekers)

4.2 Research Themes

In addition, three universal cross cutting themes were also identified in relation to each of the cohorts as follows:

- Mental health
- Family support
- Poverty, education, and employment

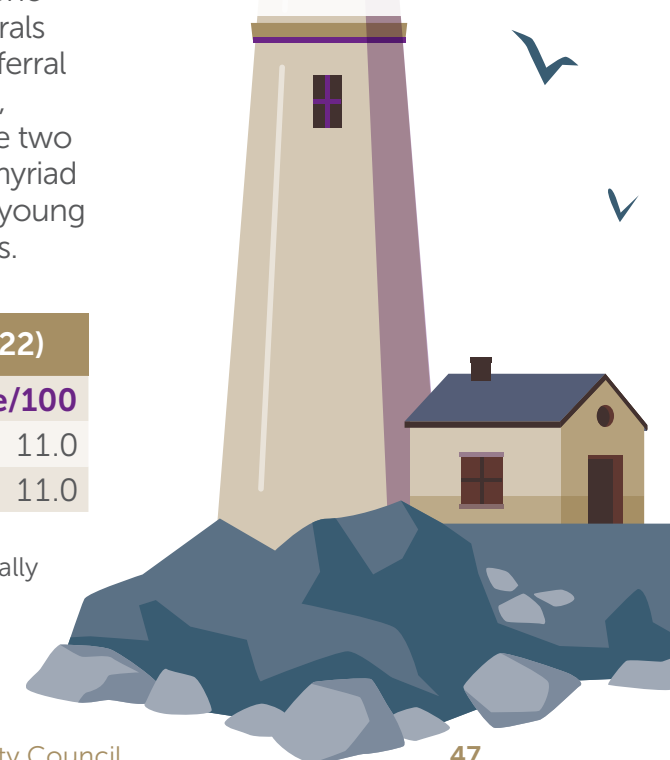
Two additional themes arose in the consultations:

- Substances and Addiction
- Personal and community safety

Thematic analysis was used to identify the key findings under each theme in relation to each cohort. These findings are a combination of the feedback from a particular cohort, as well as feedback from others about a particular cohort, under each of the three themes. The two additional themes did not arise consistently across all of the cohorts but were significant enough to warrant inclusion.



‘Youth services are restricted in terms of the target groups they can work with....we need more universal provision’



4.3 Children and Young people

The young age dependency ratio¹⁰ in Longford town, with 35% above the State ratio (30.1%) (Census 2022). Notwithstanding the fact that there are a number of services doing excellent work with children and young people in Longford, most, if not all of these services are stretched to full capacity. Services are also constrained in terms of funding directives about whom they can work with. A consistent theme in the focus groups was the lack of space to work with children and young people outside of the school setting. In particular, the excellent work of the youth services, Foróige and Longford Youth Service was referenced, whilst recognising the lack of suitable space to do youth work, as well as an insufficient number of youth workers to meet both need and demand. Current youth work funding prohibits work with children under 10 years and there is a significant gap with regard to services overall for this younger age group. Additionally, the consultation section of the

Youth Work Plan (2023 – 2027) for Longford Westmeath ETB¹¹ noted the importance of increased funding for existing youth services, developing services for identified new needs, the provision of more services locally and the provision of more youth workers. The actions in the plan include advocating and applying for resources to support existing youth services as well cultivating interagency collaboration, among others.

National data is indicative of the level of need in relation to children and young people in Longford. Data from Tusla¹² for 2023 indicated that the Midlands (including Longford) has one of the highest rates of child protection referrals in the country (the data below compares referral rates in the Midlands (Longford, Westmeath, Laois & Offaly) with Dublin North City, as the two highest in the country). This highlights the myriad of issues negatively impacting children and young people’s lives and their long-term outcomes.

Table 5: Number and rate of referrals, by area, 2023 (ranked by rate) (population Census 2022)

Area	#Referrals	#0 – 17 years	Rate/100
Midlands	8,889	80,962	11.0
Dublin North City	5,446	49,682	11.0

¹⁰ Young age is defined as “the ratio of the number of young people at an age when they are generally economically inactive, (i.e. under 15 years of age), compared to the number of people of working age (i.e. 15-64).

¹¹ Youth Work Plan 2023 – 2027. Longford and Westmeath Education and Training Board.

¹² Tusla Annual Review of the Adequacy of Childcare and Family Support Services Available. 2023

4.3.1 Children (under 6 years)

A specific group was held for younger children in order to ensure their voices contributed to the needs assessment. Children and their parents/guardians were invited to participate in a session in the library in Longford town. It was agreed that the most appropriate methodology to best understand the needs of children from this age group was to work with a play therapist who engaged them in discussion and activity around what a family resource centre could potentially mean to them. The children created an image (displayed on the inside front of the report) and named their needs as follows:

- A happy safe space for me in Longford
- Joining clubs, I like
- Telling people all about me
- Somewhere to meet and play with my friends.
- Listen to stories, do art, learn new cool things, go on trips, meet new people.
- Feel comfortable, be able to express myself, make a mess and have fun.
- Having a safe place to go where I can be myself and be happy.

4.3.2 Young People

Four additional focus groups were held with young people as follows:

- LEAP-Youth Diversion Program
- Youthreach (Two focus groups)
- Comhairle na nÓg

As well as consultation with Longford Youth Services; who are the delivering the UBU program on behalf of Longford Westmeath ETB. The UBU – Your Place Your Space Scheme (UBU) is a targeted youth work funding scheme introduced by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) in 2020.

The mission of UBU is to provide out-of-school supports to marginalised, disadvantaged or vulnerable young people (aged between 10 and 24) in their communities to enable them to overcome adverse circumstances and achieve their full potential. Funding is awarded by the DCEDIY, as Grantor and administered locally by LWETB. There are currently two staff-led youth projects, provided by LCRL operating under the scheme. These are:

1. Longford Town Youth Project
2. County Longford Youth Project (Ballymahon, Edgeworthstown, Granard)



The scheme operates on a 3-year Cycle whereby organisations apply in year one to enter the scheme and subsequently apply for funding on a renewal basis annually.

In summer of 2021 DCEDIY invited ETBs to make submissions identifying areas of greatest need for inclusion on a Panel for the development of new UBU Services.

The area identified by LWETB were the geographical areas of north and west Longford, including Lanesboro, Newtownforbes and Drumlish.

The findings outlined in the next section came from both the young people themselves, as well as some additional observations from service providers and parents.

4.3.3 Young People and Mental Health

The national data is reflected in the local experience. The lack of sufficiently resourced mental health services was consistently referenced. While there is some service provision, the waiting lists are long, and services are not always easily accessible.

The mental health issues impacting young people included anxiety, depression, and trauma. Service providers spoke about the experiences of some young people, who are dealing with trauma in the home (as a result of various events and circumstances), resulting in fear and anxiety. Additionally, some young

people are tasked with looking after younger siblings and taking on a degree of responsibility far beyond that which could reasonably be expected for their age.

The young people themselves spoke about the high levels of stress in their lives, because of pressures related to school and exams. It was recognised throughout the consultations that the school system is not suited to everyone and alternatives such as Youthreach are more suited to some young people.

‘It’s all about results and the Leaving Cert.... there’s no let-up’.

Service providers noted that local schools are stretched to capacity, trying to support young people and their families with these issues and the reliance of schools on the excellent services provided by the FRCs in both Granard and Ballymahon was highlighted.

‘Schools in Longford really value and benefit from the FRCs in Granard and Ballymahon’.

‘I’ve attended Lús na Greine and its really good – especially with the new building.... it would be great to have this in Longford for other young people’.

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‘Our service is stretched to full capacity...we can only work with so many people...an FRC would be life changing for so many people’



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Service providers also spoke about their concerns in relation to the mental health of young people who are LGBTQ+ and the need for additional services in this regard. While there is a support group in Longford for young people who are LGBTQ+, this service is also stretched to capacity.

Service providers highlighted the need for mental health services to be easily accessible in a place and at a time that works for children and young people, for example, most mental health services operate between 9.00am and 5.00pm and this results in children and young people having to take time out from school, which negatively affects those who already experience challenges with regard to school attendance.

Service providers also highlighted the need for the provision of initiatives locally, such as the Rainbows Programme. Currently, referrals for children for this programme are being made to Mohill in Leitrim, but this service is only accessible to families with their own transport, and where there is capacity but often this is not the case.

There is very little access to play therapy/art therapy for children with additional/complex needs. In particular, parents of children living with disability/life challenges spoke about how the lack of these services is adversely affecting their children's development and emphasised the improvements that could be made in terms of their children's long-term outcomes if these services were available.

An FRC in Longford would be well placed to facilitate a range of mental health supports and therapeutic interventions, similar to Lús na Gréine and Bridgeways, in order to meet what is likely to be an increasing demand for these supports.

‘The need for play therapy is huge’.

‘I was able to access play therapy for my child in Granard.it made such a difference to him...I should have been able to get that here in Longford’.

4.3.4 Young People and Family Support

Young people in the focus groups were also conscious of the challenges facing parents, in terms of financial worries and concerns about their children, and the need for parents to be able to access support and advice to deal with the variety of issues that can arise within in families. They also spoke about the need for services for older people, including grandparents who may face loneliness and isolation as well as being affected by issues such as bereavement.

‘There should be groups where grandparents who have lost their husbands and wives....where they could go and talk to people’.



4.3.5 Children and Young People with Additional / Complex Needs

The consultations highlighted the lack of facilities, services, and groups for children with additional/complex needs, including those who have autism / are neurodivergent. Parents of children with additional needs highlighted the challenges in relation to accessing professional assessments as well as the lack of access to specialists such as speech and language therapists. In some cases, parents (who can afford it) pay for private assessments. The lack of follow-up services remains an issue.

A number of parents spoke about their personal experiences regarding their own children who have autism. They spoke about the lack of services in general, and highlighted the lack of sensory spaces for children in the town and the difficulty that families of newly diagnosed children have in getting initial support and being signposted to services. They emphasised the need for these spaces as well as the provision of appropriate equipment such as weighted vests, sensory tags, speech tablets, etc., as well as the provision of additional supports such as swimming lessons to enable children to engage with the community and with recreational activities in order to develop to their full potential. Service providers also highlighted the closure of Hollyhouse in St Christopher's as a 'huge loss to children with complex needs. It is suggested that an FRC may be able to do some of this signposting and support.

'It's a constant fight for a parent of a child with additional needs sometimes people don't have the confidence to push'.

'There is nothing in Longford for kids with disabilities.

4.3.6 Young People – Poverty, Education and Unemployment

Both young people and adults stressed the need to make Longford a more vibrant place to live and work in for everyone in the community. The need for more options for young people who leave school early was highlighted, whilst also recognising the valuable work of Youthreach. Some service providers expressed concerns about young people who leave school early, without a plan for their future. The need for access to training and long-term meaningful employment opportunities for young people was emphasised.

Research has highlighted the significant impact of anxiety on children and young people in general, as well as the links between anxiety and school refusal. Nationally, 28% of students were absent for more than 20 days in 2021, a significant increase on the previous year's figure of 17%. Figures from the CSO show that Longford had the highest rate of absenteeism at 32.0%. This data

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'It would be great to have a facility that everyone can go to and feel proud of'



has serious implications for the long-term educational outcomes for this cohort. Services such as Home School Community Liaisons, which provide a bridge between school and families and are a critical part of any welfare response. However, informants noted that parents and families require more support on this regard. Additionally, in terms of being able to engage fully with school, it was reported that some young people do not have access to a suitable quiet place to study. It was suggested that an FRC could provide that space, as part of an overall support service to ensure that children and young people achieve their full potential in relation to education, training, and employment.

4.4 Parents and Families

The findings presented in this section reflect feedback from both parents and service providers.

As with children and young people, services working with families are doing excellent work but again are stretched to capacity and report increasing demands. A range of challenges was identified, including those affecting lone parents, families experiencing separation and bereavement, as well as concerns about finance, housing, and overall wellbeing.

4.4.1 Parents and Mental Health

The lack of sufficiently resourced mental health services was consistently referenced in the focus groups and interviews. While there is some service provision in this regard, the waiting lists are long. Some people are referred to services in Tullamore and Mullingar, where there are long waiting lists, and the lack of transport causes additional challenges for people who do not have access to their own transport.

Informants also stressed the need for therapeutic services in the aftermath of traumatic life events such as suicide. Some respondents also noted that there is still a stigma for some people in relation to accessing mental health services. Service providers suggested, that in some cases, parents would prefer to access counselling/therapeutic supports in a neutral venue, devoid of any stigma, such as in an FRC.

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‘Some people won’t access counselling in a building labelled counselling’.

‘You could be going into the FRC for anything...no one would know what for’.

It was also noted that some mental health issues arise because of isolation, and may not necessarily require a formal therapeutic intervention, but could benefit from an opportunity to make connections with other people and / or access support groups such as those provided by SHINE or GROW. It was suggested that these types of support services could provide an outreach service in an FRC. It was highlighted that sometimes, individuals might just need to talk to a staff member initially to determine if they require a formal therapeutic intervention or if they just need a listening ear.

‘Where parents and families could access emotional support A listening ear’

Some service providers reported that some of their service users are living with undiagnosed mental health conditions or behavioural disorders. In some cases, this results in people coming to the attention of An Garda Síochána and coming before the courts, due to a lack of mental health supports. The lack of supports is also bringing some people into an ongoing cycle of homelessness. A range of supports and early interventions (such as those provided by an FRC) could help address some of these issues.

4.4.2 Parents and Family Support

The lack of a family support service in Longford town was highlighted throughout the consultations. A consistent theme in the consultations was the need for parents to be able to access family support to help them cope with the range of challenges in family life. The lack of childcare places was also emphasised.

The need for universal supports such as parenting classes was highlighted, as well as the need for more targeted supports provided by ‘specialist services’ to support families in dealing with specific challenges that may present at different times in the life course of a child and a family. Service providers spoke about the need to support parents in terms of the practicalities of parenting, including the ‘management of family time, healthy

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“You could be going into the FRC for anything... no one would know what for’.



eating, and management of screen time'. They also referred to the need to embed the motivation for parents to 'get their kids out to school'.

'All parents need help with challenges in their lives and families, regardless of their background'.

'There is a need for family support for parents to help get their kids out to school'.

'We need a place where young mothers and fathers can go to get support and information and to get emotional support'.

'The huge issue now is parenting...there is a need to promote active play... parents and children spending quality time together'.

Where families are experiencing more complex challenges, informants spoke about the need for one-to-one support and traditional parenting programmes that may not be very suitable in these situations. Some parents

may lack the confidence or capacity to engage in a traditional parenting programme and may require a therapeutic intervention. It was consistently reported that there is a lack of therapeutic interventions in Longford town with regard to family support. Service providers also stressed that there is a lack of early intervention supports with universal accessibility for parents and families. One example cited was the gap in relation to greater engagement with mothers in the early stages of pregnancy, particularly for those who are marginalised and vulnerable and who need support in relation to caring for a newborn baby. The lack of awareness of the existing Community Mothers' Programme in Longford was highlighted as well as the overall gap in antenatal support.

'There's nowhere for young parents to go to get help and support'.

'Parents are coming to the HSCL for support ... they have nowhere else to turn to'.

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4.4.3 Parents – Poverty, Education and Employment

The impact of the increasing cost of living on families was constantly referenced, where families are struggling to make ends meet. Food poverty was identified as one of the issues impacting families, with service providers noting that an increased number of people are presenting in need of assistance in this regard. The lack of suitable housing, high rents, the threat of eviction, and homelessness were also highlighted. It was noted that these are not just issues for people who are unemployed and that families with access to employment are also under financial pressure. Some key informants spoke about the **'transformative impact of adult education'** and emphasised that supports need to be put in place to enable parents to return to education and training to enable them to access meaningful employment and lift families out of the trap of poverty. Examples of support provided by FRCs around food poverty include community gardens, links with St Vincent De Paul and EU Food Hamper scheme/Food Cloud. Longford would greatly benefit from an FRC that could provide similar supports in an easily accessible manner to those most vulnerable.



4.5 Older People

The old age dependency ratio¹³ in Longford town has increased to 22% (from 15%) in 2022 (Census 2022). This high age ratio highlights the need for intergenerational work. The focus groups emphasised the plight of older people who are experiencing isolation and vulnerability.

Additional challenges facing older people were also identified, such as issues arising when they are discharged from hospital. In some cases, older people require adaptations in their homes, such as the installation of handrails, etc. and they experience difficulties in finding someone to do this work. It was suggested that an FRC could identify suitably qualified individuals to provide these services.

Other challenges identified facing older people included chronic medical conditions and reduced mobility. It was suggested that older people could benefit from sessions on movement and the opportunity for social interaction, which could be provided in an FRC.

4.5.1 Older People and Mental Health

It was also noted that some of the medical issues impacting older people arise out of loneliness and isolation. Service providers also spoke about the need to support people to age well and with confidence. Opportunities for socialisation and classes on hobbies/interests

as well as practical classes on movement and nutrition were highlighted as supports that could be provided by an FRC.

'Loneliness in one of the biggest things impacting people now'.

4.5.2 Older People and Family Support

It is important to recognise that there is no universal day centre / family support provision for older people in Longford town. Comparisons were drawn with Lús Na Gréine, where the FRC provides social and recreational activities for older people, providing them with both practical support and an enhanced quality of life. The importance of access to transport was also recognised and while the rural link system was acknowledged, it was also highlighted that there are gaps in this service, making it difficult for older people to travel to the services they need.

'If an older person had access to a bus that would really help... they don't want to feel like they are putting someone out by asking for a lift'.

It was also suggested that there is a corresponding need for a support service for caregivers, some of whom are in that phase of life, often referred to as the **'sandwich generation'**, caught between the responsibilities for caring for both their children and their parents. An effective family



¹³ The old dependency ratio compares the number of people aged over 64 with the working age population.

support system would help ensure that all of the generations in a family are supported to experience the best quality of life possible.

4.5.3 Older People – Poverty, Education and Employment

Informants noted that poverty is a particular issue for older people in terms of both food poverty and heating poverty. It was also noted that older people require support to access the benefits / supports they are entitled to, for example, finding the relevant Government Department they need to contact, help with completing forms, information about voluntary support services, etc. It highlighted that older people could experience discrimination in terms of accessing employment and educational opportunities, because of issues such as ageism. There are also additional challenges for older people who lack technological literacy, and this impacts their access to services such as banking, health services, communication platforms, etc. This means that older people are effectively barred from being fully engaged members of society and their ability to retain their independence is compromised. It was suggested that an FRC could assist older people in this regard and there are examples of existing intergenerational programmes, where young people teach older people a range of I.T. skills, and older people share their skills. These programmes obviously benefit everyone involved, not just in terms of skills sharing but also in terms of social interaction.



4.6 Travellers

Irish Travellers make up less than 1% of the population nationally, however, in Longford, the percentage of the population who are Irish Travellers is 1.95%, almost double the national average. Longford has the second highest Traveller population of Travellers per capita after Tuam. This is a historically marginalised group, with higher rates of suicide and experience of discrimination and Traveller health inequalities have been well documented in the last number of years. Census 2022 shows that 26% of the Traveller population report experiencing at least one long-lasting condition or difficulty compared to 22% of the total population. Looking at the overall population, 15% were aged 65 years and over, compared with just 5% of Irish Travellers. There are additional challenges for Travellers in terms of accessing services in the community or accessing transport due to their fears of discrimination. Currently there is no Traveller led Community project (such as a 'Traveller Movement') in Longford despite the high population. An FRC could be key to providing a welcoming space and catalyst for developing this. In the last 2 years, there have been a small number of very targeted interventions devised through Sláintecare Healthy Communities Programme aimed at Travellers which have proven very successful (such as Homework Club and an employment training programme for Traveller Women). However, overall, there

is a lack of sustainable targeted services and supports built around the needs of this community.

4.6.1 Travellers and Mental health

Travellers in Longford, in line with the national research, are experiencing a range of mental health issues, including anxiety, depression, stress, panic attacks, insomnia, coping with grief and post-natal depression. In some cases, Travellers are hiding their struggles from other people due to fear and stigma. Some informants noted that young mothers could experience isolation as a result of being at home with young children and lack opportunities to go out and meet other parents as part of a larger support network. Older Travellers are also experiencing isolation, due to the lack of safe places in which to socialise. It was recommended that the provision of a range of activities such as bingo, card playing, storytelling, playing pool, drafts and a book club would help address this isolation and could be within the remit of an FRC.

The specific challenges for Travellers who are LGBTQ+ were also noted and the corresponding impact this has on their mental health. In some cases, Travellers are hiding their sexual orientation/identity and there is a need for a safe space for them, where they can access support.



The challenges for Travellers in recovery from addiction were also highlighted and the need for support in this regard was emphasised.

An FRC could facilitate members of the Travelling community to access the relevant mental health supports in a safe, supportive environment, free of any judgement or discrimination.

4.6.2 Travellers and Family Support

It was recognised that all parents need support and that parenting courses need to be reframed, taking account of the fact that society has changed so much in the last number of years, and traditional parenting practices within the Traveller community may not be as relevant or effective in the present day. For instance, the need to educate traveller parents on the safe use of social media, as well as the need to recognise that young travellers have agency in their own lives were two of the examples given.

Informants noted the need for practical support for parents, including being able to be able to share resources such as baby clothes and equipment such as highchairs, bouncers, etc. This was identified as something that could be provided within an FRC.

The challenges that arise for families when children have additional/complex needs were also identified. It was noted that if the parent is unaware of the potential condition in the

first place, this creates a delay in accessing the supports and services required. It was further noted that many children are not being picked up on in terms of additional needs until they go to school, where the teacher may identify an issue and inform the parents accordingly. Again, it was highlighted that assessments are difficult to access, and Traveller parents do not necessarily have the money required to pay for private assessments. The challenges continue with regard to being able to access school places which can accommodate children with additional needs. It was reported that some parents believe that they need to access a special school and do not realise, for example, that many schools have specific units for children who are neurodivergent. It was noted that an FRC could provide support, guidance and information to parents navigating this challenging journey.

4.6.3 Travellers – Poverty, Education and Employment

Homelessness is impacting all age groups within the Traveller community, from the visible levels of homelessness to the issue of hidden homelessness, where adult children, and in some cases their families, are living with their parents. This means that many people are crammed into a small space, leading to heightened levels of stress and mental health issues. This can also have a negative impact on the social welfare entitlements

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An FRC would
provide us with
more cohesion
across all of the
services'



of the adults in a home. There are also health and safety considerations, with equipment such as play pens taking up a huge amount of space in small rooms.

Informants spoke about the need to be able to access childcare to enable traveller parents to access education, training, and employment. They also noted that Traveller children in school do not have enough opportunities to see role models in education from their community, such as Special Needs Assistants who are Travellers. There is a corresponding need to have more Travellers trained as SNAs.

It was suggested that an FRC could help provide young Travellers with life skills, such as money management, etc. to enable them to access better opportunities and outcomes in their lives by signposting to services or through a youth group. Informants stressed the need for an FRC to be culturally aware, balancing the positive traditions and values in the Travelling community with what is required to thrive in present day Ireland. The need for education on citizenship and leadership to enable travellers to develop as leaders in their own communities was also emphasised.

4.7 New Communities (including Refugees and Asylum Seekers)

As cited earlier, Longford town is a diverse settlement with many nationalities living in the local area, which contribute to the local population and vibrant community. As per census 2022, 34.65% of the town population were born overseas and 31.88% are not of Irish nationality. In terms of non-national population in Longford Town there are high concentrations of 'Other EU'; Polish and 'Rest of World' evident. 10% of Longford town's residents identify as Black/Black Irish or Asian/Asian Irish (9.59%) which is higher than the state (3.5%) and the county (3.9%). Each of the new community groups have different socio-economic characteristics and a range of needs.

4.7.1 New Communities and Mental Health

Service providers and service users spoke about the range of mental health issues impacting refugees and asylum seekers, including Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, bereavement (where people have lost partners, children, siblings, and parents), anxiety, depression, and where people have come from war zones, etc. These issues also impact people's ability to engage in opportunities for socialisation and integration, leading to further isolation and loneliness. People from new communities also face the additional challenge of being without extended



family connections, thereby increasing feelings of loneliness and isolation and adding to stress. An FRC would be well placed to help people from new communities to access therapeutic services, and also to avail of opportunities for social interaction.

Informants from new communities stressed the need for opportunities for socialisation providing the chance to go to somewhere different and meet new people in a safe and welcoming environment. Some service providers noted the interest in volunteering from new communities including refugees and asylum seekers, which is indicative of their wish to integrate with and contribute to the local community. Asylum seekers themselves spoke about the benefits of volunteering, for example with the Tidy Towns initiative, both in terms of opportunities for socialisation as well as learning new skills, such as horticulture.

4.7.2 New Communities and Family Support

Asylum seekers and service providers highlighted the need for access to prenatal care such as antenatal classes to provide information and support on preparing for childbirth, advice on nutrition and choices during labour as well as the practicalities of looking after a new baby and breastfeeding support.

The opportunity to meet other parents and children was also highlighted, both in terms of opportunities for socialisation, as well as peer support. Parenting support for new parents was seen as particularly important and the support required to support parents who have lost partners, particularly fathers, to teach them the basics of looking after children, getting them out to school, helping with homework, etc. was also emphasised. Service providers spoke about the need to support families in direct provision who require help with accessing schools, housing, GP services, mental health supports, language supports, training and employment and overall integration.

Service providers also noted some of the cultural differences in parenting practices, which create challenges for children in terms of integrating into the school environment, for example, differences in the ages at which children are toilet trained or the age at which children are weaned from breast feeding (in some ethnic groups, weaning might take place at 7 years old). They also spoke about the need to promote vaccination programmes for babies, children, and adults. It was suggested that an FRC would be an excellent location for a mobile vaccination unit or other community health campaigns (in conjunction with an interpretation service).

Service providers also expressed concerns about the general lack of services for

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**'Where FRCs
exist, they
are a huge
resource to a
community....we
are missing this
in Longford'**



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people from the Roma community and the lack of a safe place for them to meet. While there is an existing Community Development specifically targeting Roma Community there is still a need for a safe space. Again, it was felt that this is something an FRC could help address through the provision of that safe place.

4.7.3 New Communities – Poverty, Education and Employment

One of the most pressing needs for people in new communities is accessed to English language classes. Research from University of Galway (2024) has revealed the extent to which language plays a part on how migrants integrate in rural Ireland.¹⁴ Some of the key findings are that English classes have a crucial role in facilitating social inclusion, building connections among migrants and with local communities. Additionally, mothers with small children reported having a hard time accessing language classes and training due to childcare responsibilities. Even when educational opportunities were available, migrants who are eager to work pointed to a lack of more advanced language education, which can become a barrier to satisfactory employment.

Whilst English classes are available in Longford, some informants from new communities felt that some classes were too advanced for their level of understanding, while some others noted that there are not enough classes available to build fluency. The accompanying challenges around language have affected access to available services, for example, being able to communicate symptoms when attending the GP/hospital. Additionally, a number of participants in the focus groups were new /expectant mothers and the language barrier particularly affected their experience of prenatal care and delivery. It was noted that Bridgeways FRC & Longford Community Resources Limited are engaged in rolling out the initiative 'Failte Isteach', conversational classes in English, and it was suggested that a similar initiative could be provided in an FRC in Longford town.



¹⁴ *Rural Villages, Migration, and Intercultural Communication (VICO)*, Ciribuco, A. from the School of Languages, Literatures, and Cultures at University of Galway.2024

Service providers also expressed concerns about the lack of childcare places and the importance of children from new communities being able to access early years education. They noted that in some cases, parents do not have the information about how the childcare system works in Ireland, and because of this, their children may miss the two years of pre-school education. This then means that these children are entering the primary school system at a disadvantage. Access to pre-school education was viewed as particularly important for children with additional needs. Service providers emphasised the need for an overall programme of family support and access to parenting programmes was also highlighted.

The issue of access to suitable housing was also emphasised by a range of service providers. Concerns were expressed about the level and impact of overcrowding in existing housing, leading to outbreaks of Hepatitis A, as well as situations where children are being exposed to adult behaviour that is not appropriate for them to witness.

| 'Accessing housing is a challenge'.

Informants in the direct provision centres spoke about the need for access to training opportunities in order to gain employment in the longer term. Suggestions for training included:

- Repairing mobile phones
- Electrical training
- Barbering
- Fitness instructors
- Skills in job seeking.
- Sports coaching
- Safe Pass
- Manual Handling

Some people in the centres had accessed volunteering opportunities, e.g. gardening with the Tidy Towns initiative. This not only provided skills in gardening but also gave the opportunity for socialising with new people, which was considered a great support to mental health, as well as integration into the community.

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'An FRC could
lift the tide in
this community'



‘People need support with employment and staying in employment’.

‘If you can’t find employment you need training to give you the necessary skills.’

‘An FRC could give people from new communities a sense of belonging’

Again, it was noted that while there are services in Longford, some informants from new communities stated that it can be difficult to access information about all of these services and emphasised the need to bring it all of this information together in an accessible manner. The need for easily accessible advice on migrant rights was also highlighted.

‘An FRC would be an ideal space for an international protection person to drop into and access signposting to the other services they need’.

‘An FRC would benefit cultural integration’.

4.8 People with Disabilities /People living with Life Challenges

24.1% of Longford town’s population have identified themselves as having a disability and Longford town has a higher population of people living with a disability than the State level (21.5%) (Census 2022). Representatives from the PPN Disability Network, as well as disability representatives, spoke about the challenges people with disabilities experience in their own lives on a day-to-day basis. These challenges reflected the issues identified in the national research. The fact that some disabled people also act as carers for family members was also noted and the need for a network for carers was highlighted in order support them relation to their own mental health and employment needs. The pressing need to break the cycle of poverty for people impacted by multiple levels of disadvantage and/or discrimination.

On a practical level, the lack of accessible buildings means that people with disabilities are more likely to experience isolation, loneliness, social exclusion, oppression, etc. Even something as simple as traveling on the pavement/street becomes even more challenging because of preventable issues such as dog fouling and people parking cars in designated spaces for people with disabilities or even in bus stops. Issues with the placing of bins, the height of kerbs and the incorrect placing of audio boxes at traffic lights were also highlighted.



It was also highlighted that it is important to remember that a disabled person could be either a service user or a staff member or volunteer, hence the need for any building housing an FRC to be fully accessible, taking account of physical, intellectual, sensory, and neurodiversity needs, among others. This requires that the building is universally designed, focusing on maximum standards rather than minimum. The building should have a changing place facility (funding is available in this regard). This would be the first of its kind in the county and would provide a vital service for people with complex needs. A suitably accessible building would benefit future generations. Representatives from the Disability Community stressed that it is important to note that Ireland ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities in 2018 and it is now crucial to focus on the implementation of this Convention.

4.9 Substances and Addiction

Key informants at several focus group spoke about the extent and impact of the drugs issue in Longford and referred to a number of initiatives that have been implemented in relation to this. The work of the Midlands Regional Drugs and Alcohol Task Force (MRDATF) and the County Longford Drugs and Alcohol Forum was acknowledged, as well as the work of the Drugs Related Intimidation Violence Engagement (DRIVE) project in An Garda Síochána. The Midland Regional Drug & Alcohol Task Force and its sub-structures bring together members, representing the community, voluntary and statutory sectors, public representatives, and key interest groups to develop and co-ordinate a collective and integrated response to drug and alcohol problems in the midland region which covers the catchment area of Longford, Westmeath, Laois, and Offaly. The Drug and Alcohol Forum comprises representatives drawn from the local, voluntary, community and statutory sectors, who aim to work collaboratively to coordinate the delivery of drug and alcohol awareness initiatives to include promoting the range of services and supports available in county Longford in relation to problem substance misuse. DRIVE is an interagency project with systems and structures to respond to drug related intimidation and associated violence (DRIVE) in Ireland. The Gardaí highlighted the need for awareness

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'We need a whole family support approach...that takes account of different experiences and cultures'



raising among the wider community to show how Gardaí deal with drugs intimidation, with due regard to the stress this place on families, and their desire to allay some of the fears people have with regard to approach the Gardaí for help. The Guards also emphasised that they would like parents to engage with them at an earlier stage when they are experiencing difficulties with regard to drugs intimidation involving their children. Service providers also expressed concerns about **'young people being sucked into the criminal activity.... transporting drugs'**

'Parents are worried sick and are exhausted from this'.

'People are afraid to come to the guards, but the guards can help them'.

It is also worth noting that the MRDATF and AGS are developing a video on dealing with drugs intimidation.

The ongoing need for education, prevention, and intervention initiatives to address the drugs issue was also highlighted, alongside the need to provide multi-disciplinary teams, as well as the need for support for people in addiction and an FRC could be the hub for these services and supports in Longford.

4.10 Community and Personal Safety

A number of aspects in relation to community and personal safety were highlighted by the key informants. These included concerns about safety on the streets, the lack of a safe space for younger people to 'hang out' during the day or evening, the impact of drug dealing on individuals and families and associated intimidation, domestic violence, feuds between groups/families as well as concerns about safety in relation to particular areas within Longford.

Safety was one of the most pressing concerns for older people, especially for those people living on their own. Some informants in the focus groups spoke about their own elderly parents and the concerns they had for their safety. Some of the safety concerns expressed may have had more of a basis in perception rather than reality. As society has become more disjointed, there are fewer opportunities for people to get to know everyone in their community, and for an older person, passing by a group of strangers can give rise to feelings of vulnerability. Also, some older people lack the social supports needed to make them feel safe, such as having someone to call into them and check on them. It was suggested that an FRC could help to build resilience in older people and link them into a network of social supports through the provision of an Active Age initiative.



Service providers working in the area of domestic violence spoke about the impact of this on individuals and families, as well as the impact of intergenerational trauma and the fact that the whole family needs support. Longford Women's Link was highlighted as a great support in Longford but the lack of a refuge in Longford was also highlighted.

'Also, Gardaí dealing with domestic violence could also meet with victims in the FRC in a safe way'.

The valuable work of the Community Safety Partnership and the Night Time Economy project was acknowledged in the consultations. Additionally, the need to build resilience within the community to help improve people's sense of and perception safety was highlighted by several informants. The existing FRCs (Bridgeways and Lus na Greine) already working collaboratively on projects with Longford Community Safety Partnership and an FRC in Longford would be well placed to benefit from this existing network of support and help to build and enhance community resilience further in Longford Town.

4.11 Gaps in Service Provision:

The following gaps in service provision were identified by the range of informants:

- The lack of a comprehensive family support service to work with parents and children and the need for additional parenting support.
- The lack of services for children under the age of 10 years (Youth services are confined to working with over 10's with exception of the Youth Diversion Project who provide services for 8 to 11 – but only on referral basis).
- The lack of activities and responses for early intervention and prevention work with children and young people.
- The lack of accessible affordable mental health services and supports (including counselling, and trauma informed psychotherapy).
- The lack of provision with regard to play therapy and art therapy.
- The need for a safe space for LGBTQI+ young people, who face discrimination and safety concerns.
- The need for a safe play area for younger children to play in. Some parents spoke about their experience of living in communities where there is a lack of safe spaces for younger children and the negative impact this has on their children.

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**'People need
a space where
they can belong'**



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- The lack of suitable sporting facilities for young people, including the lack of a boxing club.
- The need for increased opportunities for young people in terms of education, training, and employment in order to make Longford a more vibrant place to live in.
- The ongoing need for increased provision of education, prevention, and intervention with regard to substance use and misuse.
- The lack of suitable housing.
- The lack of accessible and affordable childcare facilities.
- The need for intergenerational support on the basis of the high age dependency ratio.
- Insufficient access to GPs.
- The lack of health-related services such as ante-natal classes for parents from new communities.
- The need for increased provision of English language classes (at a range of levels).
- The need for access to advice on migrant rights.
- The lack of adequate services for older people, including a day centre.
- A lack of targeted supports and resources to support travellers and people from the Roma community.

- The lack of services for children and adults living with a disability / life challenge, including those living with physical disability, intellectual disability, autism, those who are neurodivergent and those with complex needs.
- The need for a fully accessible public space tailored to those individuals with complex needs.
- The need for public service to cater adequately to the needs of people with disabilities/living with life challenges.
- The need for a support network for carers.
- The need for a community hub where people of all ages can access information on all the relevant services.
- The need for a safe meeting space offering educational and recreational opportunities for all age groups in the community.

‘There are significant gaps with regard to family support work with children, young people, and parents – this is also an intergenerational issue in some cases. This also includes families impacted by drugs.

‘We need a venue We can provide training for people to help them set up groups...but we have no place to meet’.



4.12 What difference would an FRC make to Longford?

The terms 'one stop shop' and 'hub of the community' were used constantly by informants throughout the consultation process. There was recognition of the range of services available in Longford and the high quality of the work they deliver. However, there was also a recognition that existing services are stretched to capacity. Additionally, some services are limited in relation to the target groups they can work with due to funding directives. Many service providers welcomed the opportunity to be able to make referrals to an FRC, where the issues presenting are outside of their mandate and resources and could be addressed by an FRC. Access to an additional support for all age groups and cohorts was viewed as something to be welcomed. Informants also spoke about the challenges in relation to high-level coordination of services and the challenges for some in being able to access information about the various services. It was suggested that an FRC could act as a central hub, signposting families, individuals, and groups to relevant services, as well as to the range of cultural and social opportunities available to the public in Longford, which the general public are not always aware of.

'The CYPSC is stretched to capacity – serving 2 counties in such a huge area'.

'People on the ground don't always realise the full range of services to them'.

'If the FRC was in Longford, services would start to collaborate more'.

'We are desperately in need of referrals'.

'To have a universal service that people can be referred to without a lot of bureaucracy'.

'To have access to a multifaceted support service, that belongs to everyone rather than a distinct group'.

'The services are not currently working together but there is a willingness to come together'.

One of the other benefits highlighted was that an FRC is well placed to provide a much-needed wraparound service for families. This would encompass the many and varied elements of family support as well as acting as a prevention and early intervention service, thereby helping to prevent the escalation of issues within families. It was noted that Longford has one of the highest rates of child protection and welfare referrals in the country, and accordingly, an FRC could contribute to practice models such as Meitheal, which is an early intervention, case co-ordination

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'An FRC would provide us with a cradle to grave service in a warm and accepting atmosphere'



process for families with additional needs who require multi-agency intervention but who do not meet the threshold for referral to the Social Work Department under Children First. It was further suggested that an FRC could also provide a neutral venue for hosting sensitive meetings in relation to various aspects of child and family welfare, as the existing FRCs in the wider Midlands regions do already.

The practical benefits delivered by an FRC included help with accessing supports and entitlements, form filling, CV preparation, signposting to relevant services as well as informal meeting space to drop in 'have a cup of coffee and a chat' were highlighted. In addition, some service providers highlighted the more sensitive benefits that could be accessed such as the possibility of using the FRC as a safe neutral venue as a handover point in domestic violence and child welfare venue or meeting with Gardaí in relation to cases of intimidation.

The fact that an FRC is a universal service means that it is devoid of any stigma. The community is reassured that there is no judgement in relation to being seen accessing the building. This also means that people coming in to attend a hobby/interest group/ drop in have the opportunity to learn about other services/supports in relation to more complex needs, in a discrete and confidential manner. This could include direct access to counselling and psychotherapeutic services, including support with addiction in relation

to substances and gambling, as well as signposting to external services and supports.

'Someone might come in to go to a mainstream service and then realise they can get help with a problem in their lives'.

'Once you get someone through the door, they can build trust with staff, they open up and then they can access the other things they need'.

An FRC could be a more open informal meeting space which could be accessed by all ages and cohorts in the community (including young people, people from new communities and minority ethnic groups, travellers, LGBTQ+ people, etc.) in order to socialise, access information and support (formally or informally).

Many service providers also noted potential benefits in relation to services being able to hold 'clinics' in the FRC, such as the provision of advice on money management and budgeting, advice, and support on personal and community safety from An Garda Síochána, Citizens' Information, MABS, after care groups for people recovering from addiction, etc. This again emphasised the notion of an FRC as somewhere people could go to access advice and support, in a safe confidential space, devoid of stigma.

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‘An FRC provides other services with access to seldom heard groups and individuals in a way that they might not easily achieve otherwise’.

‘FRCs have great freedom to respond to needs....they are seen as an honest broker by other agencies’.

Of particular note is the success and positive impact of the FRCs in both Granard (Lús na Gréine) and Ballymahon (Bridgeways). These FRCs have had a transformative impact on their communities, in terms of how they address local needs with the range of programmes and services they offer, including the range of therapeutic services available there. The hope of replicating these services in Longford town, with a potential outreach service to Edgeworthstown was expressed by the vast majority of informants. Not only would this directly benefit the population of Longford town and Edgeworthstown, but it would also lessen the ever-increasing strain on the services of the FRCs in both Granard and Ballymahon. It was also recommended that the three services could collaborate to ensure an effective and efficient response to the needs in the county.

‘An FRC could bring a more cohesive and integrated approach for all of the services in the area’.

4.13 Recommendations with regard to the Physical Building and its Location

The vast majority of respondents stated that any building housing the FRC would need to be centrally located, easily visible, warm, and welcoming, universally accessible, and free from any stigma in relation to accessing services. One of the key strengths of FRCs is the universal nature of the service and the fact that anyone can access an FRC for a range of reasons, free from any concerns about public perception. The fact that sometimes, people are reluctant to seek help, but could use the FRC to do so in a safe and confidential way was viewed as an enormous benefit.

‘A building taking account of the lived experience of people with life challenges’.

‘Sitting with engineers and architects to do this’.

‘Bring in an occupational therapist to advise on the building’.

The following recommendations were made with regard to the building:

- A universally designed and future proofed space taking account of the additional needs of various cohorts

‘People need a space with an assumption of trust...an FRC would provide that’



of the population, in terms of physical, intellectual, and sensory needs among others.

- A neurodivergent friendly space, including a sensory room equipped with relevant resources such as weighted vests, blankets, sensory tags, speech tablets etc. which parents and children can access at suitable times, thereby acting as a support for both children and parents.
- A building large enough to facilitate the range of families, groups and individuals requiring access to the range of services and facilities, with meeting/training rooms and with the possibility of extending the building in the future.
- The provision of a coffee shop within the building
- Access to IT facilities and a quiet space for students to study.
- A space with a garden... where children can play.

‘It has to be vibrant and open to everyone’.

‘The symbolism of hope that an FRC can provide to a community – building people’s confidence to do things for themselves and to access help when needed’.

4.14 Recommendations with regard to the Service and Staffing

The following recommendations were made by the key informants with regard to the service and the staff:

- A manager that is vested in the area, with excellent networking skills.
- Staff from a range of backgrounds with training in community development and cultural awareness
- Staff who are willing to go out and make links with all of the related services that impact and support the work of an FRC.
- A service that takes a strengths-based approach based on people’s needs and interests and welcomes all communities.
- A signposting hub
- The provision of a range of prevention and early intervention initiatives
- The provision of a comprehensive programme of family support services
- The provision of accessible counselling and psychotherapy services. While therapy is not the remit of FRC staff, it was seen as important that a therapeutic service, delivered by appropriately trained (trauma informed) therapists, is provided within the FRC, where it would be easily accessible and devoid of any stigma.



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- A visiting advocate for people with disabilities
- A visiting Speech and Language Therapist, Occupational Therapist and a range of other health professionals who could hold clinics in the FRC to make their services more accessible to the community.
- A service that has adequate administrative support and can assist people to access other relevant services, rights, and entitlements, training, and education, help with completing various forms, etc.
- The provision of a range of training programmes, including a Level 5 qualification in Childcare
- The provision of hot meals for those who need it.
- Flexible opening hours to enable the space to be used by community groups on evenings and weekends.

‘FRCs are in a position to triage issues and then provide sign posting to the appropriate services, thereby ensuring that referrals are more efficient, saving other services time and money.’

‘Where do you go to get the overview of what’s available in Longford? An FRC could provide this’.

Challenges in relation to accessing public transport were highlighted across the consultations and one of the recommendations was that the FRC could

act as a conduit for community transport to ensure more equitable access and/or the FRC could have a community bus.

‘As a county town without an FRC, this has to be provided.... It’s the minimum required’.

The need for clarity on the role of an FRC was also stressed and the need for ‘genuine collaboration’ with other services was emphasised, in order to avoid duplication and to ensure an effective and efficient use of resources throughout the community. It was also noted that this is a specific and discrete piece of work, which will not happen by accident, but rather is something that needs to be strategically identified and practically timetabled for. Additionally, the role of the voluntary board of management of the FRC was seen as critical and the need for an open and transparent process with regard to appointments to the Board was emphasised, as well as the need for ‘parity of power and parity of esteem’. The need for people from the community to be on the Board was also highlighted, as well as the need for the work of the FRC to be linked to existing strategies and plans in the area, such as the Town Centre First Plan.

‘The County Council and the HSE need to be on board’.

‘Harness the grassroots’.

‘The people at the front door are incredibly important....to welcome people in’.

‘An FRC could help address food poverty with access to a Food Cloud and a Community Kitchen’



4.15 The Need for Provision of a Service to Edgeworthstown

Edgeworthstown, with a population of 2,199 has the second biggest population in the county, of which 31% of the population are non-Irish residents (CSO 2022). This town has experienced a rapid increase in the overall population over the last number of years, as well as having one of the most diverse populations in the country. A number of positive developments have also taken place, with the opening of a number of new facilities, including a school (with the second highest pupil numbers in the county), a crèche, a library, and St Mary's Community Campus Sports Hall.

Key informants in the focus groups were asked a number of supplementary questions in relation to Edgeworthstown in terms of the issues/needs presenting and their thoughts on the usefulness of an FRC in Longford town providing an outreach service to Edgeworthstown on the one day a week basis.

The issues and needs presenting in Edgeworthstown were very similar to those highlighted in relation to Longford town. These included:

- A growing youth population with no local youth service (there is limited outreach provision)
- The need to support and services for the increasing numbers of people from new communities.

- The need for family support
- High rates of poverty and deprivation in the area
- Concerns about issues related to supply and use of drugs.
- Concerns about personal and community safety

Currently, some people in Edgeworthstown (who have access to transport) are using the services of either Lús na Gréine or Bridgeways FRCs. The majority of informants stated that they believed that an outreach service from an FRC in Longford would be extremely useful. A very small number of informants expressed some concerns that the provision of such a service, albeit limited, would damage the chances of Edgeworthstown in securing its own FRC at some stage in the future. In contrast, the view was expressed that having an FRC in Longford town would facilitate joint planning between Longford, Lús na Gréine and Bridgeways, leading to a more effective and efficient service for the wider hinterlands, including Edgeworthstown. This view was endorsed by the managers in the two existing FRCs. It was also suggested that if it was possible to provide some transport to enable service users in Edgeworthstown to travel into the Longford FRC, that would also be extremely beneficial to the area.



A photograph of two male coaches interacting with a group of young football players on a green artificial turf field. The coach on the left is wearing a blue Longford United training shirt with white stripes on the sleeves and an Adidas logo. The coach on the right is wearing a green Umbro training jacket with a Longford United crest. They are both gesturing with their hands while talking to the players, who are wearing white and blue training kits. In the background, there are goalposts, a fence, and trees. The word "Conclusion" is overlaid in large white text in the center of the image.

Conclusion

Section 5: Conclusion

Longford faces a range of complex and intertwined issues, including gaps in services for children, young people, families and older people, people with disabilities, travellers, refugees, and asylum seekers. The key issues impacting these groups include concerns about mental health, a lack of family support services, poverty, substance and safety related challenges and the need for more inclusive, accessible services for vulnerable communities. There was practically unanimous agreement for the need for a Family Resource Centre in Longford. It was felt that the provision of a Family Resource Centre could play a crucial role in providing a much-needed family support service, as well as supporting integration, providing educational resources, and offering essential support networks.

The establishment of an FRC in Longford town, with outreach services to Edgeworthstown, located within a prevention and early intervention model, would provide a central hub for individuals and families to access support services, information, and resources, in a safe, inclusive, and stigma-free environment. This would foster a more connected, integrated, and supportive community,

benefiting people across all age groups and backgrounds. This would significantly improve access to essential services and support for individuals and families across the region. Key recommendations emphasise the importance of a central, accessible, and inclusive physical space, a strengths-based service approach, and collaborative, community-driven service delivery. By addressing these needs, the FRC would become a crucial resource for the people of Longford and its surrounding areas, promoting well-being and empowering individuals to thrive.

We envisage that an FRC in Longford town would provide far-reaching benefits for individuals, families, and the broader community, in a cost-effective manner. The benefits would include:

Supporting families at the right time

- The delivery of family support services and parenting supports help parents build strong foundations for their children, reducing stress and fostering positive relationships.



- Targeted interventions, such as play therapy and counselling for children address emotional and developmental challenges before, they escalate.

Reducing Health Inequalities

- Preventative strategies reduce the burden on healthcare, education, and justice systems. For example, timely mental health support decreases the risk of young people disengaging from school and can support the transition into adulthood and employment.
- By addressing poverty-related challenges, such as access to childcare or housing advice, families are empowered to create more stable environments.

Building Resilient Communities

- Early intervention programmes and ongoing capacity building foster stronger community networks, promoting inclusion, integration, and collaboration among diverse groups.
- Preventing crises reduces community tension and improves overall quality of life.

Impact on Longford Town

- **Economic Benefits:** Early intervention and support reduce dependency on crisis driven services, leading to long-term savings for public systems.
- **Educational Outcomes:** Children and young people benefit from stable support structures, improving school engagement and future employability.
- **Social Cohesion:** Strengthening family and community ties reduces social isolation, creating a safer and more vibrant town.

While the aspirations for, and expectations of an FRC for the town are huge, this needs to be tempered with the reality involved in establishing a new service and building it up over a number of years. In addition, many of the identified gaps in the area will require the expansion of existing community-based services.

Therefore, an FRC cannot address all of the issues raised in this research, but as one informant noted.

‘The symbolism of having an FRC can build confidence for people to try new things and to get help when they need it’.

‘An FRC could give people from new communities a sense of belonging’





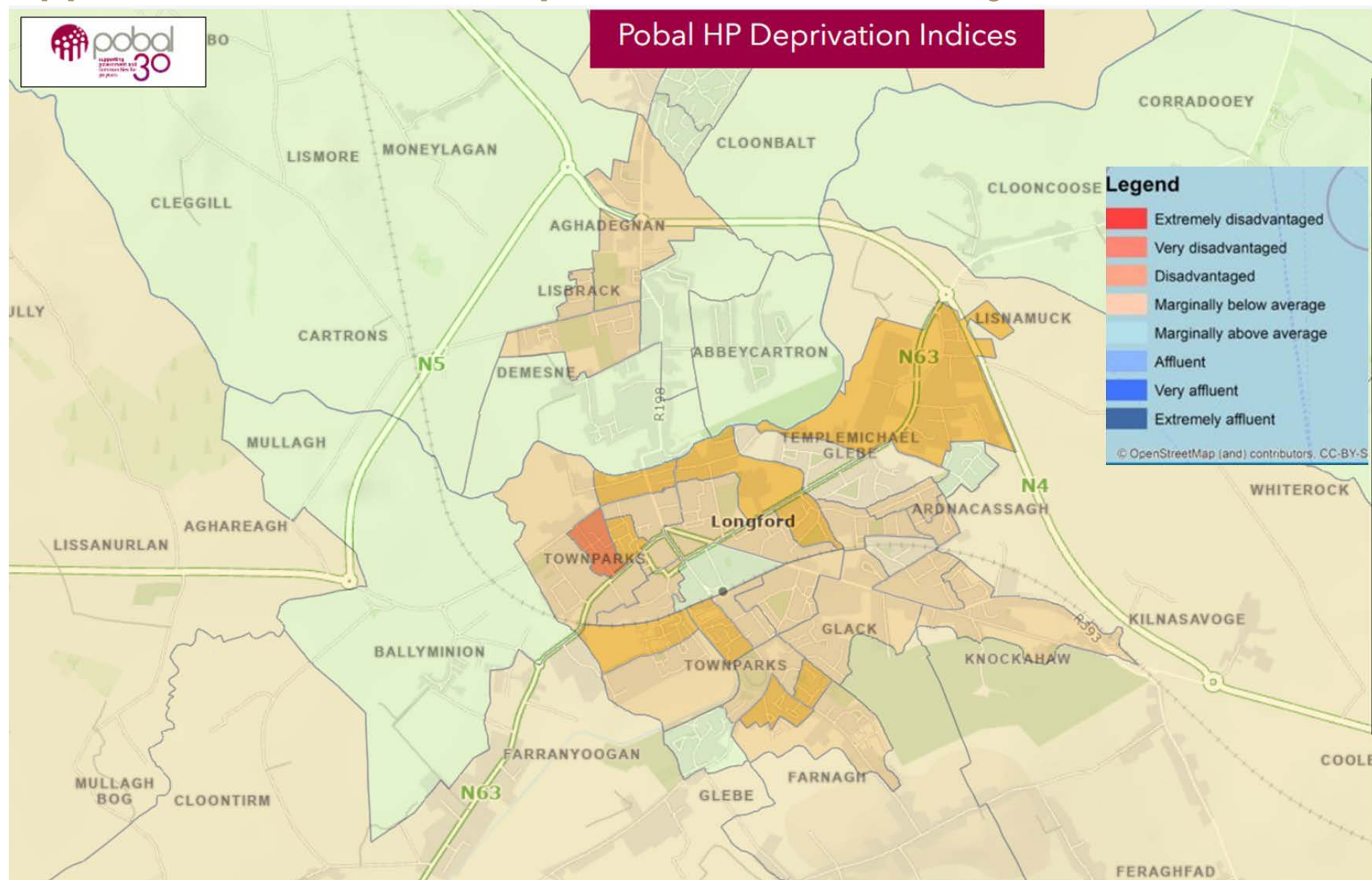
A large group of people, including children and adults, are seated in a hall, clapping. The word "Appendices" is overlaid in white text. The background shows various banners, including one for "LEAP" and another for "ICO". The floor is wooden with green and white markings.

Appendices

Appendix 1 – Map of Longford



Appendix 2 – Pobal HP Deprivation Index 2022 by Electoral District



Working in partnership



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**Healthy
Communities**



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Longford

