

Leeds Irish Health and Homes reflect on 25 years of service but with a clear vision for the future.

Gerry Molumby joined in with their online anniversary party and heard from volunteers, trustees' staff and community.

The 80's and 90's were a different and often difficult times for the Irish in Britain. Internet was in its absolute infancy, there was renewed immigration from Ireland, 'the troubles' in Northern Ireland were beginning to find their embryonic road to peace and Irish emigrants who came to northern England in the 60'70's, keen willing and able to work, were aging. It was the era of a plethora of new Irish health, welfare, studies and housing association growth, in the midst of all this Leeds Irish Health and Homes (LIHH) was born as a steering group in 1992. When you speak of LIHH you speak of Ant Hanlon, man and boy he has been with them from the beginning and has steered this community to being firmly rooted in meeting the varied needs of people of Irish origin, in the city. A qualified social worker with parents from Co. Wexford. Ant attended the early meetings where four areas of concern were agreed to be their raison d'être: Housing, Psychological Well Being, Women's Needs and Cultural Affirmation. The charity today

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meets all these needs but set out to focus on supported housing. So, working initially with the local Riding Housing Association and nationally alongside sister Irish Housing Associations such as CARA and Innisfree, this has evolved into LIHH having management of 51 homes for Irish people who live independently but have access to housing support workers. The support staff and volunteers have evolved in a positive direction over the years to a compliment of 16 staff and 48 volunteers providing a wide range of community services such as outreach, luncheon clubs, tea dances. All this is part of the concept of 'social prescribing' where a 3rd sector agency such as LIHH operates from a GP surgery and talks to the individual about getting them hooked into social activities (walks, exercise, luncheon groups) in the local area, sometimes in place of mental health medication. Staff and volunteers help people by accompanying them to their first few events until they feel confident to join in themselves. It has transformed both GP services and also those patients lives who take part. The benefit is in money saved on medical prescriptions especially anti-depressants. LIHH have been part of two consortiums providing this innovation since 2015. It's actually what Irish welfare groups have been doing by default since they were formed.

and social prescribing. All these people have to be trained, managed and supported and this is done by the senior team who share longevity as many staff and volunteers have as Ant told me "been with us a while".

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With good partnership with the Michael Davitt Trust in 2003 LIHH were gifted 'Davitt House' which they own and has been renovated to decent home standards with 'en suite' facilities for up to 10 residents. Davitt (1846 – 1906), one-time Haslingden resident, where there is a museum to him today. His towering thirst for social justice for the poor and oppressed became a restless but focussed energy which changed the course of Irish and British histories.

One outstanding goodwill gesture LIHH has done every year is to send birthday cards to everyone. Karen Mallon, from Co. Down started off as a housing support worker in 1998 and is now part of the Senior Team as Director of Operations, told me "An example of our complex and often intensive support could involve helping a tenant to move in for the first time to his own home, helping with decorating, furnishings setting up and maintaining utility bills, council tax etc. Followed by regular visits and telephone support in the hope of helping him to break the lifestyle of moving from bedsit to hostel, in other words to settle down in his own home for once".

Sarah McBride joined as a volunteer in 2003 and is now Support Services Manager. with parents from Mayo and Derry, reiterated that when she told me "many people we support have addiction and mental health issues and access to our cultural activities helps to lessen sometimes these stresses. We endeavour to supply an holistic service not just bricks and

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mortar. To achieve this our volunteers, who are mostly fellow Irish people, are essential to our services”.

Speaking on the 25th Anniversary Zoom on May 12th , Rachael Loftus ,the current chair of Trustees picked a number of highlights in their 25 years starting off as all organisations have to do , a survey or some research to justify their need for funding; for LIHH it was the 1997 report ‘Green White And Invisible’, 1999 appointment of their first Elders Outreach Worker, 2001 Annual Holidays to Ireland started, 2002 Leeds Irish Film Festival, 2004 Irish Post National Community Award, 2006 publication of Róisín Bán exhibition and book which celebrated and highlights the story of the Irish community in Leeds , 2008 appointment of their volunteer manager, 2010 chosen as the Mayor of Leeds Charity, 2017 address to the Global Irish Civic Conference by Ant, 2020 the pandemic ‘Craic Packs’ delivered to so many people shielding . Rachael put it well when she said, “We are blessed with the holy trinity of giving our work involvement three things, time, secure finance, and goodwill”. Ambassador Adrian O’Neill read a letter from the President Michael D Higgins in which he commended LIHH for their “compassion and lifeline of friendship and hope offered to isolated Irish people” and he emphasised the collaboration of all the Irish groups in Leeds who helped out in the preparation and delivery of the Craic Packs, calling it “all that is best in Irish people “. Tom Riordan (Chief Exec Leeds City Council) recorded a message to highlight “the great difference LIHH offers to so many in the city “. There were beautiful testimonies from people who attend the music, poetry

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clubs. Charles spoke of Irish people's love to get together with their own people "for the love of clever talk". Helena complimented everyone who helps her mental health and Tom spoke of the day centre he goes to for "my only decent meal in the week". There was a lot of gratitude shown to staff and volunteers who are helping older people to stay in touch with family at home and abroad using zoom proficiently, and during the Covid pandemic shopping online, signposting to other Irish Media for news and tv, and even quizzes; but most of all a guaranteed regular contact. The poetry by Ian Duhig and Teresa O'Driscoll was a unique and lovely touch at the party, as Ian calls it, 'a poetic response to the pandemic' – which included poems from the new Corona Ceoil book.

Ant asked me to include his thanks to all of the trustees, staff and everyone living and passed for supporting LIHH and for entrusting LIHH with their care and dignity over the years.

Like many community groups that have evolved in the voluntary charity sector LIHH are freed up to not have to use terms such as service users/clients etc. Still adhering to good public service, they focus more on the collective. They spell it out clearly in their brand-new website "We believe that everyone should feel a sense of safety, belonging and connection within their community, and we are here to support this". Having listened to testimonies recently I can concur with that. Some

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people came along to the club activities and then became a volunteer, some volunteers becoming staff members and trustees. LIHH is a model of mutual affirmation, so many in the interviews referred to “our own people”. Delivering support with an empathy and cultural awareness of being Irish abroad.

I asked Ant and the Senior Team of plans for the future. All agreed that their current workload shows no sign of decreasing. Ant confirmed that LIHH would continue to adapt to the changing needs of the community, one area he indicated they may wish to pursue may be Extra Care of Older People or even Nursing Care.

Finally, my main reflection on the past twenty-five years of Leeds Irish Health and Homes is that through their three core values of care, culture and community; that have literally saved lives and will continue to do.

Gerry Molumby

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