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2022 EVALUATION OF THE IMPACT INITIATIVE - MEASURE TO SUPPORT PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

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2022 EVALUATION OF THE IMPACT INITIATIVE - MEASURE TO SUPPORT PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

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Contents

Executive summary

Research methods and sample size.....5

A review of the literature: good practice and evidence base.....6

Background to BAP, the Consortium, and the IMPACT Initiative.....10

Client profile, outputs, referrals, and service partnerships.....13

Findings: learnings and themes from consultation with key stakeholders.....16

Pointers and recommendations.....21

Conclusions

Bibliography

Executive Summary

The population of Co. Wicklow according to the 2022 preliminary Census results is 155,258. This is an increase of just over 13,000 people since 2016. According to the CSO Yearbook of 2018, 13.5% (19,244 people) of the population of County Wicklow reported having a disability with over a third of that figure being over the age of 65. In 2016, the population of Bray was 32,600. For the same period, Greystones had 18,140 people residing in the area, Kilmacanogue had 14,706, Enniskerry 2,910, and Delgany 5,980. According to figures taken from the 2016 Census, over 6,000 people living in these areas collectively reported having some form of disability.

The Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration, and Youth (2021) aims to support 35% of people with a disability into the labour market by 2024, up from 15% in 2011. The 2016 Census showed that the 'principle economic status' of 30.2% of people with a disability are employed in Ireland in comparison to 72.8% of those without a disability. This drive to support people with disabilities toward securing employment is being guided by The Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities (2021) which has been developed to meet the 2024 targets.

The implications of being unemployed for any person has been found to have a substantial negative impact on a person's life outcomes. This includes poverty challenges, housing challenges, mental health difficulties, physical health difficulties, and in turn a person's overall connection to the world around them. According to Herbig et al., (2013), the burden of disease increases with the duration of unemployment. Nicolas et al (2013) noted that the lack of employment is not only a contributor to mental health issues but it could be the cause of them. It is for these reasons that initiatives such as IMPACT are vital. They support people to progress toward employment and help to bridge that gap between unemployment and employment in a person-centred way to improve a person's outcomes and in turn decrease any negative effects on the person's overall well-being.

The IMPACT Initiative was established in 2022 as part of the Measure to Support People with Disabilities to gain employment and it sought to

service Bray and North Wicklow, an area with over 70,000 people residing there. Funded by the Dormant Account Funds, IMPACT is led by Bray Area Partnership but consists of a Consortium of local disability organisations, which include Bray Community Enterprise, Autism Initiatives Ireland, Lakers Social and Recreational Club, RehabCare Bray, Eve Cairdeas Clubhouse, Kildare and Wicklow Education and Training Board, the National Learning Network and St. Margaret's Irl-IASD. They identified a service gap in Bray and North Wicklow and came together to fill this gap with the proposal to the Dormant Accounts Fund.

The IMPACT Initiative provides

'tailored interventions to participants using individualised 'wraparound' supports that empower job seekers who are in receipt of Disability Allowance to avail of employment supports' (IMPACT, 2022).

It also aims to support employers to engage with the available talent in the area. A Bray Area Partnership led action to support people with disabilities into paid employment, IMPACT has supported 122 people to fulfil employment activation activities. This includes professional CV writing, career planning, job coaching, job matching, interview techniques and preparation, accredited and non-accredited but certified skills-based training, work experience opportunities as well as in-work support.

IMPACT was established in January 2022 and began to see clients in early February. This research was carried out in November 2022. In this very short period of just 10 months, IMPACT has exceeded its targets significantly. For example, Action 2 of the initiative sought to 'increase employment skills/employability of those with disabilities'. IMPACT's target for employment activation activities was 25 people but in this period they have supported 122 people to achieve this. As a team, they have supported 21 people (target of 20) of the 122 people with disabilities into paid employment, a further 14 people (target of 5) into voluntary employment and 69 people (target of 10) to engage in /complete non-accredited training courses. In this period IMPACT has engaged 36 employers overall (target of 10) of which 13 have provided work experience opportunities for people with disabilities.

To say that IMPACT has been a major success would be an understatement. IMPACT has not only supported many people with a disability to progress towards employment, but they have also added significantly and enhanced service provision in Bray and North Wicklow.

In late October 2022, IMPACT contracted an independent evaluator to conduct the end-of-year evaluation as part of the funding criteria. Through consultations with 35 stakeholders, including participants/clients using the initiative, IMPACT staff, Bray Area Partnership Staff, Consortium members, and other services who have either referred to or used the service in some way. After a thematic analysis of the descriptive data, 15 themes were identified. These themes are evidence of the good practice and the overall high-quality of this service.

Themes found through consultation with 35 stakeholders:

1. IMPACT provided wrap around support for people with disabilities.
2. The approach used was person-centred and tailored to meet the needs of people individually.
3. A Personal Action Plan was developed with each client in collaboration with the employment facilitator.
4. The project was comprehensive in its approach to working with people with disabilities in that it provided access to professional CV writers, jobs coaches, and on-site skills-based training, provided by professionals.
5. IMPACT had the capacity to support any person with any disability on a disability payment that had been infringing on their ability to work.
6. IMPACT supported people to build confidence and increase their motivation by supporting them to reach small goals that led to their career goals. This was done through their Personal Action Plan.
7. The initiative targets, though significantly exceeded, were set to be achievable with the right support and because of this IMPACT could provide people with a high-quality high-intensive service.
8. Participants were able to work at a pace that suited them and their needs.
9. Staff members were 'patient', 'understanding', 'caring', 'motivating', 'helpful', and 'approachable' and this was shown to be important to project participants.
10. Life-long learning was encouraged by staff and using a strengths-based approach staff supported participants to see their potential.
11. IMPACT worked closely with Consortium members in particular with RehabCare Bray.
12. IMPACT provided people with skills-based training and when complete participants were given a certificate. This supported confidence building in the participant and built up motivation over time.
13. IMPACT matched people to positions and experiences that best suited them and their career goals.
14. IMPACT has engaged employers and has built strong relationships with them which they have maintained.
15. IMPACT has promoted awareness and advocated on behalf of people with disabilities at a local level.

This evaluation has found that IMPACT has been effective because of the approaches used and because of the sheer determination of the staff and services involved with it to improve the lives of people with disabilities and support them towards employment. This report will give a breakdown of the initiative's achievements and outputs up to the point of writing the report. It also gives reasons and indicators for the success of the initiative.

IMPACT was a pilot programme with initial funding for 12 months. In December 2022, the initiative received confirmation that this funding will be extended for a further 12 months. Regarding the success of this programme, it has been shown to have developed a set of approaches that support people towards paid employment. IMPACT has undoubtedly been 'impactful' and this initiative, as it has been developed, is worth considering as a long-term service concreated into the service structure of Bray and North Wicklow. Its effectiveness has been so significant that its approach to practice has the potential of being streamlined at a national level.

Research methods and sample size

In October 2022, Bray Area Partnership contracted an independent evaluator to evaluate the IMPACT Initiative. Clients who were supported by the project, project staff, Consortium members including those working within BAP, other external referring services, and business owners/managers were invited to take part in the evaluation. In total, **35 inputs informed this evaluation**. These included inputs from the following;

- **16** clients who have been supported by IMPACT. This included eight online and in-person interviews and two in-person focus groups where eight clients participated overall.
- **16** service inputs including inputs from BAP staff, IMPACT Staff, Consortium members, and referral agents. This included seven online interviews, three in-person interviews, and six online surveys.
- **3** business owners who provided work experience for IMPACT clients. This included two telephone interviews and one online survey.

The time frame for the evaluation was only six weeks. This meant that a sample population had to be selected, as not all stakeholders could have been consulted in this time frame. At the point of identifying potential evaluation participants, IMPACT staff, with the guidance of the evaluator, identified a number of stakeholders. 36 of those contacted consented to take part. Of the clients and services who consented, all took part. Focus groups allowed other participants to take part. Three additional clients then took part in the focus groups in line with GDPR and consent protocols who were not originally on the consent list. In regards to business owners, even though seven were invited, only three participated in the research. The uptake rate overall for participation was 97%.

Data was collected through interviews, descriptive surveys, and focus groups. Clients were given the option of an in-person interview or an online Zoom interview. Services and business owners were given the option of an online interview or descriptive survey. If required, or if more convenient for people, in-person interviews were also accommodated. In some instances, in-person interviews were conducted with IMPACT staff and service providers.

The data gained through interviews, surveys and focus groups are largely descriptive. IMPACT has provided the evaluator with anonymous numerical data sets for 106 clients that include data such as client age, sex, disability, and supports received, which has been gathered throughout the year. Together, they will inform the findings. A thematic analysis will be applied to the findings and key messages will present the learnings from this evaluation.

This evaluation report will seek to:

1. Identify elements of good practice and quality indicators in the project delivery.
2. Measure the overall outputs achieved against the project work plan.
3. Identify what the key outcomes, outputs and achievements are, and what has been successful and why.
4. Explore any challenges the initiative faced and the effects of these on the outcomes.
5. Determine if anything could have been done differently and how.
6. Provide recommendations on how the project could be improved upon and developed.

A review of the literature: good practice and evidence base

National policy and frameworks

The collaboration between Bray Area Partnership (BAP) and the Consortium members is an example of a broader national policy to increase employment among people with disabilities.

In 2019, the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration, and Youth (DCEDIY) published *The Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities*. It outlines their aims to increase employment and employment opportunities among people with disabilities. These aims include *building skills, capacity and independence among people with disabilities, providing bridges and support for them to work, ensuring that their work pays, promoting job retention and re-entry to work, providing co-ordinated and seamless support both to employers and employees, as well as incentivising employers to provide employment and work experience to people with disabilities* (DCEDIY, 2021).

The national report also aims to increase the employment level of people with disabilities from its 2011 level of 15% to 33%-38% by 2024 (DCEDIY, 2021). It seeks to include people with a wide variety of disabilities including people with physical, sensory, intellectual or mental health disabilities as well as autism. The report seeks to increase employment by focusing on both sides of the market, including the potential employee and employer. On the demand side of the labour market, it focuses on encouraging and supporting people with disabilities into employment and on the supply side it seeks to engage with employers and incentivise them to employ people with disabilities.

On a local level, the work carried out by Bray Area Partnership with people with disabilities is guided by this framework and the work they do with SICAP (the Social Inclusion Community Activation Programme), which aims to address high and persistent levels of deprivation by providing support to marginalised groups including people with disabilities. As part of their remit, this includes providing support and opportunities for people to gain employment, upskill and be active citizens in the world around them.

Our vision is a strong, vibrant, and inclusive society where everyone has an equal chance to achieve their potential and participate in the social, cultural, and economic life of the community (BAP, 2022).

Our mission is to work in partnership with all sectors of the local community to achieve a more fair and inclusive society by increasing equal access to basic services, education, training, and employment for marginalised individuals and groups. We will work collaboratively to empower local people and communities to have a say on the issues that affect them, identify their own needs, and make positive changes in their lives (BAP, 2022).

The IMPACT Initiative brings together a wide range of expertise that seeks to complement each other rather than duplicate each other. Consortium members have a similar vision of inclusion to BAP. Each supports the IMPACT Initiative in a way that only enhances the service offered to people with disabilities, which in turn increases their potential in obtaining paid employment.

Programmes that engage people with disabilities and support them towards the labour market

In Ireland, there are many national and local programmes that support people with disabilities participating in the labour market. In contrast, some programmes encourage higher employment through the demand side of the labour market while others encourage it through the supply side.

One national service that seeks to include both sides of the market is the EmployAbility programme. Funded and operated by local partnerships on behalf of the Department of Social Protection (DSP), the EmployAbility programme provides an employment support service for people with a health condition, injury, illness, and disability (Citizens Information, 2022).

EmployAbility provides help with applying for jobs as well as finding jobs, matching skills with employers' needs and supporting people as they enter the workplace and after they get the job. They also provide advice on employment benefits and entitlements. For people with disabilities who are on a disability payment, there is a fear of losing the payment that in some instances has taken them some time to obtain and this can sometimes be a barrier for some people. Having the knowledge of their rights regarding employment and their payment is critical for some people with disabilities. On the other side of the market, EmployAbility provides employers with services such as a free recruitment and employment service, a database of skilled jobseekers, advice on employment grants and supports as well as continued support from a professional team of job coaches (Citizens Information, 2022).

The Department of Social Protection also provides further incentives for employers to provide employment to people with disabilities using the Wage Subsidy Scheme (WSS). The WSS gives financial support to employers who employ people with disabilities under the assumption that employing someone with a disability could lead to decreased production in comparison to someone with no disability. Therefore employers who employ people with disabilities with proven productivity rates of 50-80% will be compensated with the WSS (Citizens Information, 2022).

Pobal also plays an important role in increasing employment among people with disabilities, working on behalf of the government to support communities and local agencies toward improving social inclusion and development (Pobal, 2022). Pobal does this through many programmes including SICAP which aims to "address high and persistent levels of deprivation through targeted and innovative locally-led approaches" as well as the Community Services Programme, which supports jobs in community businesses that deliver services and create employment for people from disadvantaged groups (Pobal, 2020).

The importance of employment socially, psychologically, and physically

Much of the literature discussing what works best when engaging people with disabilities in employment notes the importance of what employment brings not only to people with disabilities but to society in general. It's often argued that being employed or part of the world of work in some way has a central role in most people's lives - work offers meaning, purpose, social contacts, and support as well as a sense of personal achievement (DCEDIY, 2021). Furthermore, engaging in work can facilitate continuous learning, engagement, a sense of belonging in society (National Disability Authority, 2021) as well as providing a source of

finance/income (Tasiak and Krolak, 2018). Many also argue that staying in work comes with many health benefits. Mental health has been found to worsen considerably when people leave employment while it tends to improve for those who become employed (National Disability Authority, 2021).

The Disability Federation of Ireland (2022) suggests a link between depression rates and unemployment. Employment is also an important factor in preventing poverty among people with disabilities. Research carried out by the ESRI shows a strong link between disability, joblessness, and a risk of poverty with over 80% of people who were ill/disabled and at risk of poverty living in a household where nobody was employed. On the contrary, over 80% of those who were ill/disabled but not at risk from poverty received income from employment (67%) or a private pension from employment (DCEDIY, 2021).

What works when engaging people with disabilities in employment initiatives?

When reviewing the literature in terms of what works when engaging people with disabilities in employment initiatives, commonly seen approaches can be divided between those that are concerned with the issue by looking at the supply side of the labour market (encouraging and supporting people with disabilities into employment) and those that are concerned with it by looking at the demand side of the labour market (engaging with and incentivising employers to employ people with disabilities).

A widely used approach for engaging people with disabilities into employment is supported employment, sometimes referred to as “place and train and maintain,” models (DCEDIY, 2021) that prepares, places, and supports people with disabilities to obtain and remain in mainstream employment (DCEDIY, 2021). It usually involves vocational profiling, a jobs coach to guide the individual, job matching, and continued support while in work. This is similar to what’s known as sheltered employment which is a system whereby the job is created specifically for people with disabilities rather than being available on the open market. While sheltered employment has been shown to have typically low transition rates into the open market, as people with disabilities often become stuck in sheltered employment (Department for Work and Pensions, 2013; National Disability Authority, 2006), supported employment programmes have been shown to have positive results (DCEDIY, 2021). However, it should be emphasised that various factors influence the success of these approaches. These included the role of the “job coach,” who provides intensive personalised support for individuals as well as keeping close personal ties with employers with regard to recruitment (Department of Work and Pensions, 2013).

Beyer and Robinson (2009) argue that when job coaches are making progression plans with individuals they need the most training in behavioural management techniques - to make sure the employees stay on task during the process. Other skills noted by them include independence training, identifying good work tasks for the individual, and in-depth knowledge of various learning disabilities. Beyer and Robinson (2009) also stress the importance of considering the work culture when finding a job for a person and the effect of teamwork and team inclusivity on the person. These findings allude to the potential benefits of social interactions and teamwork. Having this opportunity to build relationships in the workplace can help to enhance the social skills of a person which in turn will connect them more to the world around them.

Over the last few years, there has been a drive in Ireland to include and engage the employer in the process more and that is largely because policy around this is changing. This can be seen in a more evident way through the incentives mentioned above that are currently being offered to businesses.

In a study reviewing international evidence from the EU and OECD, it was found that legislative approaches such as anti-discrimination legislation or quotas showed no strong evidence in helping disabled people into jobs. The study found that it could sometimes be counter-productive as it could lead to employers anticipating additional costs and stringent employment protection requirements as well as meeting quotas by taking on disabled people whose impairments pose few personal barriers to employment (Department of Social Protection, 2013). Financial incentives to employ people with disabilities (such as the Flexijobs scheme in Denmark or the WSS in Ireland) have been shown to stimulate employment among people with disabilities. However, financial incentives for employers to make the workplace more accessible to people with disabilities (through flexible work schedules, modified work and hours, more inclusive work culture) was found to have even more positive effects on the employment of people with disabilities than anything else which is worth taking note of on a national level and considering.

From a national perspective, the EmployAbility programme is a well evidenced effective strategy when supporting people with disabilities to gain employment, but because of funding parameters that incur high yearly targets, it may not have the capacity to work with people who require greater support. Some people require very intensive and longer supports until they have built the confidence up to even start thinking about getting a job or upskilling. This is perhaps where the gap lies in Ireland regarding service provision. The IMPACT Initiative filled that gap in Bray and North Wicklow.

Bray Area Partnership, the Consortium, and the IMPACT Initiative

Background to Bray Area Partnership and how they support people with disabilities

Bray Area Partnership (BAP) is one of the 49 local area development companies (Irish local Authority Network GLC, 2022) in Ireland. Set up as part of a government strategy to address exclusion, disadvantage, poverty, and discrimination experienced by key target groups and communities locally, these companies use an area-based approach in collaboration with other relevant bodies. BAP has over 25 years of experience working collaboratively with national and local agencies to address instances of exclusion, discrimination, poverty, and disadvantage as experienced by vulnerable and marginalised groups and communities.

People with disabilities are one of their main target groups and BAP provides varying supports including

- empowerment and confidence-building activities
- personal development and assertiveness programmes
- advocacy support service
- progression-related learning & development courses
- pathways to employment support and services
- health and well-being initiatives
- networking and input to policy matters associated with local service provision

Over the years BAP has provided and supported several services that work with people with disabilities, including:

- *The Bray Advocacy Service*
- *ASPIRE Social Prescribing Initiative*
- *The Disability Network*
- *Education/training/employment/self-employment services*
- *Accessible transport service*

Through continuous links with the services in Bray and North Wicklow that work with people with disabilities, BAP and the related services could see a need for a bespoke, tailored programme that would provide high-intensity support, skills-based training and routes to employment through building strong relationships with employers. This service also needed to have the capacity to support people with disabilities while in employment and support them to stay in employment.

In 2021, BAP, as the lead in a local Consortium, applied for funding under the Measure to Support the Employment of People with Disabilities, a Department of Social Protection programme resourced by the Dormant Accounts Funds. BAP was successful in gaining funding to develop a tailored programme of wraparound support for people with disabilities that would support them to progress toward the labour market and gain paid employment. Using a consortium-led approach that was made up of partnering services all offering a different set of expertise, IMPACT was established in January 2022.

Background to the Consortium

The IMPACT programme, led by Bray Area Partnership, was developed with a Consortium of eight member services, all bringing a different set of experiences, expertise and practices. BAP is one of these members. The Consortium includes

- **Bray Community Enterprise** provide inclusive wraparound self-employment supports for individuals from early-stage business development to post-set-up supports for those who are in the early stages of trading.
- **Autism Initiatives Ireland** provide a range of services for adults with autism. In line with the HSE's New Directions Bray Springs (day service) supports individuals to maximise independence, integrate into their community and engage in meaningful social roles.
- **Lakers Social and Recreational Club CLG** have been in operation for over 30 years beginning as a sports club for children with an intellectual disability and now offers over 40 different activities to 350 members aged from 5 to 70+. People are supported through Lakers to enhance their unique talents, participate in sports, social activities, recreation, and development, and to work with participants to become part of the wider community.
- **Eve Cairdeas Clubhouse Bray** operates under the governance of the EVE network of HSE mental health services www.eve.ie and provides recovery-based and person-centred community programmes.
- **Kildare and Wicklow Education and Training Board** provides a comprehensive range of education and training services throughout Kildare/Wicklow to a diverse group of learners. Many KWETB FET programmes target learners who are long-term unemployed and those who have less than upper second-level education.
- **National Learning Network** is part of the Rehab Group. It is contracted by the HSE and KWETB as a Specialist Training Provider for people with disabilities. Offering educational programmes at QQI levels 3 to 5, it also has programmes specifically designed for those with additional support needs to find open market employment.
- **RehabCare Bray** offers social, recreational, and skill-building opportunities to adults with a disability diagnosis. Promoting independence, valuing individuality and meaningful community roles, and creating an environment that allows each individual to reach their full potential.
- **St Margaret's Irl-IASD** is a human rights-based service, working with adults with disabilities and their families, to empower them to have more choices and control in their life. St. Margaret's is a leader in supporting individuals to move from institutions to live in their own homes to experience an ordinary life in their community.

Background to the IMPACT Initiative

The IMPACT Initiative was established in January 2022. IMPACT is a bespoke tailored initiative that has been developed to provide the area with a service that does not duplicate other work being carried out but instead complements the work and fills the identified service gap.

IMPACT has four staff members consisting of a full-time project Coordinator, two part-time Employment Facilitators and one part-time Administrator employed by BAP.

'IMPACT provides tailored interventions to participants using individualised 'wraparound' supports that empower job seekers who are in receipt of Disability Allowance to avail of employment supports'.

The initiative also supports employers to engage with the available talent in the area. A collective action to support people with disabilities in Bray and North Wicklow, IMPACT combines new and existing resources, aimed at achieving sustainable routes to employment. This includes self-employment and employment progression. The approach of the project is rooted in person-centred engagements involving training, competency building, mentoring and in-work supports in collaboration with local employers. The target population for IMPACT is individuals with a disability living in the area and individuals attending services operating in the area. Participants must also be in receipt of a disability payment.

The IMPACT Initiative has four main aims. These include

1. To support people with disabilities to access employment
2. To support people with disabilities to improve their career progression opportunities
3. To support people with disabilities to improve their employment outcomes through training, education, work placements, and voluntary work opportunities
4. To support employers to build an inclusive workforce and establish good practices around this.

The IMPACT Initiative supports employers by engaging with them to develop work placement opportunities for people with disabilities. This support includes advice regarding available government grants and schemes which could make their business more accessible for people with disabilities. One key feature of the support IMPACT offers employers is that IMPACT staff provide ongoing support during all work placements and, if a challenge does arise, IMPACT will support the employer as well the person on a work placement. IMPACT acts as a point of contact for both parties and seeks to achieve the best outcome for all involved.

IMPACT supports clients and assists them to identify their employment and career goals. In collaboration with an IMPACT staff member, the client and staff member develop a Personal Action Plan (PAP). Using a strengths-based approach, the client and staff member establish the skills the person has and the skills and training required to progress the person. IMPACT offers a comprehensive suite of supports that the client can avail of. These include

- Professionally developed CV
- Career guidance
- Career-centred job seeking
- Interview techniques and interview practice
- Job testing through voluntary employment
- Skills-based training opportunities
- Person-centred support right throughout the processes

IMPACT was established in January 2022. Client engagement commenced in early February. This next section shows the output of the project from February to November 2022. In just 10 months, the IMPACT team has supported 122 people with disabilities in their progression toward employment.

Client Profile, project outputs, referrals, and service partnerships

This section has been informed by data from the IMPACT project which was gathered throughout the year. In total, IMPACT supported 122 people up to the point of the evaluation. Data provided to the evaluator upon commissioning included anonymised data sets representing 106 of these clients.

Client profile

IMPACT offered support to many people with a disability in Bray, North Wicklow and surrounding areas. 63.2% of clients were male and 36.8% were female.

Client	% of clients
Male	63.2%
Female	36.8%

Clients ranged from 19 years of age to 63 years of age. Nearly two-thirds of all clients were under the age of 35. Of the 106 data sets, only 104 of them have been counted here as for two clients their age was unknown. The figures for all age groups are shown in the table below.

Age	No. of clients	% of clients
18-25	37	34.9%
25-35	33	31.1%
35-45	14	13.2%
45-55	12	11.3%
55 plus	8	7.5%

Clients presented with intellectual disabilities, physical disabilities and others with mental health challenges. 80.2% of clients have an intellectual disability. 10.4% of clients have a physical disability. 9.4 % of clients had mental health diagnoses including Bi-Polar disorder and Schizophrenia.

Total output for IMPACT and the types of support provided

In total, 122 people have been supported by IMPACT in just 10 months of engaging clients. This does not include the first month of the project as the team did not meet any clients until early February. Of these 122 people engaged to date, the IMPACT team has supported 21 people to secure paid employment and a further 14 to secure voluntary employment. The table on the following page shows the target number of clients for the five actions set out by IMPACT compared to the actual number of clients supported. All targets have been exceeded and in some instances by nearly 500%.

Actions and target headings	Target	Actual figures
ACTION 1: Increased labour market participation of people with disabilities		
Number of people with disabilities progressing to paid employment	20	21
Number of people with disabilities progressing to voluntary employment	5	14
Total	25	35
ACTION 2: Increase in employment skills/employability of people with disabilities		
Number of people with disabilities engaged in employment activation activities	25	122
Number of people with disabilities who have engaged in/completed non-accredited training courses	10	69
Total	35	191
ACTION 3: Increased opportunities for career progression of people with disabilities		
Number of people with disabilities benefitting from progression in employment	5	9
Number of people with a disability engaged in employment skills training	10	13
Total	15	22
ACTION 4: Increase in employers establishing good practices and supportive workplaces for people with disabilities		
Number of employers providing work experience opportunities for people with disabilities	10	13
Number of employers engaged to create opportunities, establish good practices and promote accessible, supportive workplaces for people with disabilities	10	23
Total	20	36
ACTION 5: Increased opportunities for career progressions of people with disabilities		
Number of people with disabilities progressing to paid employment		Output target based on a general increase in numbers
Number of people with disabilities benefitting from progressions in employment		

The type of support required by clients varied. IMPACT sought to provide skills-based training, career guidance, CV and Interview preparation and in-work supports. As can be seen from the table above, all 122 clients engaged in some type of employment activation activity.

The data in the table on the next page represents statistics from the 106 data sets given to the evaluator at the beginning of the research. As is quite evident, IMPACT has exceeded its targets significantly.

Support provided by IMPACT	No. of participants	% of participants to participate
Training Workshops	66	62.3%
Career Guidance	36	34%
Professional CV writing	25	23.6%
Interview Skills and Techniques	17	16%
In-work supports	13	12.3%

Referrals and service partnerships

The IMPACT Initiative was built around a consortium of members as shown in the previous section. From the data provided by IMPACT to the evaluator, it appears that some consortium members referred more than others. Sunbeam House and RehabCare made up 76% of all referrals from external services, for instance. Self-referral also showed significance with just under one-fifth of all referrals self-referring. The table below shows the figures and percentages of those who self-referred and those referred through other agencies including consortium members.

Referral type/service	No of people	% of all referrals
Self-referral	21	19.8%
Referral from a service/ consortium member		
Sunbeam House	35	33.1%
RehabCare Bray	30	28.3%
Eve Cairdeas Clubhouse	6	5.6%
Lakers Social and Recreational Club	4	3.8%
National Learning Network Wicklow	3	2.8%
HSE	2	1.9%
Kildare and Wicklow Education and Training Board	2	1.9%
Dyspraxia Ireland	1	.9%
Autism Initiatives Ireland	1	.9%
Local Employment Service	1	.9%

The targets and key outputs of IMPACT have been exceeded remarkably in only 11 months of operating and 10 months of working with clients. This success shows the impact that a project like this can have on individuals, the workforce and on society as a whole.

Findings: Learnings and themes from consultation with key stakeholders

The key outputs and achievements are shown in the previous section. This section will therefore seek to:

- Identify elements of good practice and quality indicators in the project delivery.
- Explore what has been successful and why.
- Explore the challenges, if any, that the initiative faced and the effects of these on the outcomes.
- Determine if anything could have been done differently and how.

Good practice and quality indicators of IMPACT which have directly contributed to the success of the initiative

The IMPACT Initiative has been very successful in its short duration. Through consultation with 35 key stakeholders, it has been found that IMPACT provides an effective suite of supports that have shown to benefit many people with disabilities, with some 122 people engaged in employment activation activities in just 10 months of working with clients (11 months of operating). This support has resulted in 21 people securing paid employment, 14 people progressing to voluntary employment, and 69 people receiving and completing skills-based training that could enhance their chances of finding employment. IMPACT has also engaged 36 employers overall, 13 of which have provided work experience to some of IMPACT's clients.

The reason IMPACT has been so successful, and in such a short space of time, can be attributed to the team's approach to working with people with disabilities, the team members who all have a different set of life experiences and professional backgrounds, and the collaboration between it and other consortium members. Through consultation, 15 key themes were found. These themes represent the good practice and the quality of the work carried out by IMPACT as well as the features of the initiative that have led to its success.

Themes found through consultation with key stakeholders

1. IMPACT provided wraparound support for people with disabilities.

The consortium included disability services, educational representatives, a mental health service, and a human-rights service working directly with people with disabilities. Having such a broad range of services and supports in the consortium meant that IMPACT had access to a wide range of expertise. This connection also directly enhanced referral rates and ease of access for clients from service to service. This collective approach also allowed strategic partnering with individual consortium members, information sharing in line with GDPR and professional support.

2. The approach used was person-centred and tailored to meet the individual needs of each client.

All clients felt that the support offered to them was centred on them and their goals. Participants said that staff listened to them and that they felt 'heard'. It was also noted by participants and service providers that IMPACT staff were very approachable and that participants had the opportunity to change their plans if and when they wanted to. As one

participant stated *'They really do listen to you and do what they can to support you to find and get your dream job – they believe in you'*. Another said *'They see you and not your disability'*.

3. A Personal Action Plan was developed with each client in collaboration with the Employment Facilitator.

Participants were invited to create their Personal Action Plan with an Employment Facilitator at IMPACT. This was the first time some of the participants had ever done such a plan concerning employment. It was found that participants really appreciated the time spent on this with the facilitator. In one instance during a consultation, a participant said that *'writing it down and going through it with the facilitator helped me to see what I could do whereas before I had not thought I could do so much'*.

4. The project was comprehensive in its approach to working with people with disabilities in that it provided access to professional CV writers and on-site skills-based training, provided by professionals.

A key feature of IMPACT was the provision of training facilitated by external professionals in skills-based training including Barista training and Manual Handling. This added massive benefits to the project and the participant. The level of training received was of a professional standard, certified and it *'provided people with something extra to put on their CV which was attractive to employers'*. This enhanced their skills-base which in turn would help them to gain employment or work experience. Another key feature was the use of a professional CV writer. Having their CV developed using searchable keywords and words that employers look for in online searches enhanced people's possibility of finding a job. One participant who was assisted to develop their CV professionally with IMPACT was supported to apply for paid employment. This participant at the time had been long-term unemployed. He was successful in gaining a part-time role. At the time, he was also assisted to put his CV online and on job-related platforms such as LinkedIn. In recent weeks that participant has been 'headhunted' through an online platform and will begin a full-time role in a new company in the New Year. They accredited this to be a direct result of their professionally developed CV.

5. IMPACT had the capacity to support any person with any disability on a disability payment that had been infringing on their ability to work.

This included people with mental health challenges, long-term injury, and who were long-term unemployed. The project had the capacity to work with people in this high-need group and support them back to or towards employment, thus filling a service gap.

6. IMPACT supported people to build confidence and increase their motivation by supporting them to reach small goals that led to their career goals. This was done through their Personal Action Plan.

For many people with disabilities, confidence is a major issue. By providing people with opportunities that allowed them to see their potential and increase their self-esteem, IMPACT supported people in a way that helped them to build up their confidence so they had the capacity to begin to think about a career plan. This included providing certified training courses and one-to-one person-centred, strengths-based approaches to working.

7. The initiatives targets, though significantly exceeded, were set to be achievable with the right support and because of this IMPACT could provide people with high-quality high-intensive support.

IMPACT sought to support people intensively. Participants were provided with supports that would enhance their skills set, build their confidence and improve their chances of employment. Firstly, by collaborating with the participant to develop a PAP that staff would support the person to fulfil, and secondly by providing professional skills-based training, professional CV writing, job coaching, job matching, and interview techniques and preparation.

Another feature of the initiative was that participants were provided with in-work support for as long as they required it. This intensive support did not end with the participant. According to business owners consulted, they felt supported by the team and knew that if they had any challenges they could contact IMPACT at any point.

While targets were perhaps lower than other services of this nature, this allowed the team to fully support an individual and get to know them. Having the time to get to know participants was important as it allowed staff to understand the person's needs as well as the type of team or environment that might suit the client. This is critical for job retention. If a person is not right for the environment and the environment is not right for the person, the person will not stay in the post. With all of this in mind, IMPACT exceeded every target and was still able to provide each person with the same support without a loss to the quality of the work. This is attributed to the work of the team and the collaborations they have harnessed and built upon.

8. Participants were able to work at a pace that suited them and their needs.

For those consulted, being able to work at their own pace showed importance. One participant noted that at times their mental health was not in a good place and they needed to step back but knew that IMPACT was there and that they could reach out to them again when they felt more able. Another participant noted that they felt like they had the time and space to really think about what they wanted to do and how they might go about it.

9. Staff were 'patient', 'understanding', 'caring', 'motivating', 'helpful', and 'approachable' and this showed to be important to IMPACT participants.

Participants all reacted well to questions regarding the team at IMPACT. For some participants who were consulted, it was the willingness to support them in whatever way they could that was most beneficial for them. For others, it was the fact that they could call any member of the team if they needed advice or any kind of help regarding their progressions. These qualities were recognised by service providers too.

10. Life-long learning was encouraged by staff and using a strengths-based approach staff supported participants to see their potential.

Participants were encouraged to learn and given opportunities to take part in training that would add to their current skills set. IMPACT also supported people to enter part-time or full-time education. Using a strengths-based approach, staff helped people to see their potential and increase it. One participant had been previously struggling with a University course and had repeated exams a few years in a row. With the support of IMPACT and because of IMPACT using

a strengths-based approach, the participant was able to see their academic strengths, which led them to discover more options. They have recently received word that they have been accepted into another university programme, but this time in a programme that matched their current skills set, talents, and interests. According to this participant, *'I never would have thought of this programme if it was not for IMPACT and then I had a friend who studied it and after speaking with them, I knew that this could be something for me, so I applied'*. One other participant said that *'they really helped me see what I am capable of – before that, I don't think I knew'*.

11.IMPACT worked closely with Consortium members, in particular with RehabCare.

One service which IMPACT has added significantly to and vice-versa is RehabCare. 28% of referrals came from RehabCare Bray. RehabCare Bray provides an employability course for people with disabilities. In collaboration with IMPACT, the course was adapted to include the skills-based training provided by IMPACT. At the end of the course, RehabCare Bray and IMPACT organised a graduation ceremony for participants where each person was given their certificate for the non-accredited skills-based training. This was said to increase morale and motivation amongst other service users to engage with IMPACT and begin their own journey toward employment. It was also found to increase confidence and belief in participants.

12.IMPACT provided people with skills-based training and when completed participants were given a certificate. This supported confidence building in the participant and built up motivation over time.

Participants of IMPACT who were also participants in RehabCare Bray were presented with Certificates after they completed their training. This training included RehabCare Bray facilitated training with the addition of the skills-based training provided by IMPACT. Both services collaborated to hold a Graduation style event where each participant was presented with their Certificates. Participants who were part of this and who were consulted appear to have really got inspired by this event and according to a number of them, it increased their feeling of confidence and belief in themselves. Service providers stated that they noticed other service users who had not participated being inspired too and were motivated to begin the training themselves. As one service provider said *'seeing their friends do it, makes them want to do it – it makes them believe they can do it too'*.

13.IMPACT matched people to positions and experiences that best suited them and their career goals.

Matching a person to a job that suited them and their needs was at the forefront of this initiative. The Personal Action Plan gave participants the opportunity to think about the career they wanted and what they needed to do to attain it. This approach ensured that people were given the opportunity to dream and reach for the goals they may have thought they could not have previously. It disregarded the idea that 'one size fits all' and was a true 'person-centred' steered way of working. It also emphasised to participants that their disabilities were not seen as a barrier by staff and that regardless of any disabilities or life challenges, staff were going to help people attain their goals and find something that best suited them.

14.IMPACT has engaged employers and has built strong relationships with them which they have maintained.

IMPACT staff engaged 36 employers overall. 13 of these employers provided work experience for participants. This was achieved by building strong relationships with employers. This involved connecting with employers on a one-to-one basis and understanding their needs. It also involved advising employers and supporting them throughout the process including during and after placement. They also knew that for some employers, this may be the first time they have employed or given a person with a disability this type of opportunity. Staff established good practices with employers and have maintained relationships by keeping in contact with employers and by providing advice and on the job advice for employers as they induct their new staff member.

15.IMPACT has promoted awareness and advocated on behalf of people with disabilities at a local level.

The promotion work carried out by IMPACT was vital regarding the initiative's outcomes. Some employers needed reassurance that the person was able and capable while others needed reassurance that staff would stay with the person as they carried out their duties. Some employers did not have the resources within the company to do so themselves so this was a massive advantage. Staff had to first build strong relationships with employers and through doing this were able to promote and advocate on behalf of people with disabilities. The relationship was also crucial in regard to breaking down barriers or stereotypes that may have previously prevented employers from taking on a person with a disability.

Challenges for IMPACT

IMPACT as an initiative has appeared to run very fluidly with a consistent, accessible, equal opportunities service being offered to all participants. Minor challenges have arisen but none of them have reflected on the work IMPACT has achieved. One such issue was that some staff members of the IMPACT Initiative did not commence employment until mid-January and early March. Therefore, it was early February before the team was in a position to engage with clients which meant the programme had 11 months left to achieve targets. Also, as Covid guidelines were still being enforced it was March before IMPACT could meet clients in person. Not all clients could easily access Zoom etc. As can be seen from the actual numbers reached, this did not hinder IMPACT from reaching its targets in any way.

Working from a consortium approach was beneficial to IMPACT in regard to expertise. However, referral rates and inputs from a number of consortium members, with the capacity to refer and be more involved, appeared very low in comparison to other services. It was echoed that some services may not have wanted to refer as they may have felt they offer similar services. However, IMPACT was bespoke in many ways and their supports, while similar to what others offered, were different because of the amount of time and level of support staff could offer participants. The level of professional opportunities that participants could avail of was also different. This capacity and ability to provide high-intensity support was not something other services could offer and this is one of the reasons the proposal for the initiative was developed. The consortium envisaged an initiative that complemented what other services offered and if introduced, would add substantially to the provision of services in Bray and North Wicklow. This is exactly what IMPACT has done and succeeded at doing very well. The work IMPACT carried out with RehabCare is a perfect example of this.

Pointers and recommendations

IMPACT has been a model initiative in regard to good practice and quality. From a review of the literature, IMPACT has been shown to use an approach based on evidence and as a programme, it is very much guided by the DCEDYI (2021) Measure to Support People with Disabilities. As a result of such a robust approach, very few changes need to be made to this programme. However, with this in mind, the challenge with any pilot, especially one which has made such a mark and added so well to the provision of services, is that pilots have an end date. An initiative of this calibre should not be at risk of ending and perhaps this is a national policy concern that really does need to be responded to.

Recommendations offered here would not alter how the initiative works with their clients in any way but if taken into consideration would build upon what has been learned through this evaluation and enhance what already is a very impactful service.

1. Greater resources need to be allocated to advertising the initiative and funding promotional campaigns.

With respect to disability awareness in general, it was suggested that greater awareness could have been generated if there was an advertising budget. Local newspapers and radio stations supported the initiative. However, the resources available for advertising were not enough to develop a campaign that would use local media realms to target those even more excluded and not engaged with a service in training, or working voluntary.

Promotional campaigns could include participants' and employers' stories and experiences with IMPACT to promote the employment of people with disabilities. It could also include awareness events where employers who have provided work experience or employed a person through IMPACT are invited to speak to other employers about their experiences. These events would also give employers on a larger scale the opportunity to ask questions and get advice about how they can become more inclusive.

2. Opening up the programme to people in a position where they are in receipt of a jobseekers payment but have some disability, certified or not, that is preventing them from entering the labour market could be worth considering.

It is well known that there are many people in Ireland waiting for long periods for diagnosis. These people may be in receipt of a Jobseeker's Payment as they wait to be seen but at that point do not have the capacity to enter the labour market and over time due to disengagement have become demotivated and lack confidence. As a result of awaiting diagnosis, they cannot get a disability payment and perhaps fear saying they have a disability because it shows they are unable to work, thus risking their jobseeker's payment. It would be beneficial to reconsider who can be supported by IMPACT so as to not exclude those who have a disability but who may or may not have a diagnosis yet.

3. IMPACT's output has been significant given the number of staff they have and this could be increased further if there was another staff member with the role of attracting employers, building relationships with them, and maintaining relationships.

Currently, IMPACT has a full-time Coordinator, two part-time Employment Facilitators and one part-time administration staff member. The coordinator and the facilitators work directly with participants and employers. Having an extra staff member whose key role involves them

engaging with the employers, and finding opportunities for the initiative to collaborate with companies, would enrich the service offered to participants and employers alike.

4. The Bray Area Partnership-led consortium approach as adopted for the IMPACT Initiative has been beneficial for many reasons but collaborations could be enhanced.

Being led by Bray Area Partnership and part of a consortium, IMPACT has had the opportunity to access both experience and expertise. The approach has given the IMPACT Initiative access to collaborations which has given them a scaffolding to develop upon and while some members engaged more, if all members came together again to understand how they can help each other to help the participant, it would reinforce this scaffold and help IMPACT developed even further.

One other observation from a collaborations perspective is that Sunbeam House referred one-third of participants to IMPACT. There is a clear interest amongst their service users for this service and given their expertise with adults with intellectual disabilities, they are a perfect fit for the consortium.

5. Engaging larger companies means potentially more opportunities for people with disabilities and while this is likely a national challenge, IMPACT would benefit from having more larger-scale companies engaged with the initiative.

Smaller businesses were more likely to engage with IMPACT but could at most only provide experiences to one person at a time. While staff did try and engage larger companies, little interest was shown by the companies approached. This is a national concern and possibly has more to do with the Government's approach towards employers. To improve this, at a local level, IMPACT could focus on a sample number of large companies and really focus resources on those companies and building relationships with them. Attending Chamber of Commerce networking events, Enterprise Ireland events, County Council events, Big Tech events and other events that would give the staff the opportunity to meet managerial level staff face to face could help staff gain access to '*actual people*'. One difficulty engaging larger companies is that it is difficult to build that one-to-one relationship with decision-makers and often communications are with a different staff member each time you contact a HR department or an automated answering machines. This evaluation has shown that building relationships is a key part of engaging employers and this can only be done through a targeted approach. This requires great time and persistence and if this role was the role of one of the current staff members, it may take from their time to support clients. It is, for this reason, suggested that this is a separate role to the Employment Facilitator. Having both roles work alongside each other would open up and widen the career possibilities for people with disabilities by increasing the range of roles available to them.

Conclusions

In its first year, IMPACT has supported 122 people with employment activation opportunities, supported 21 people into paid employment, and a further 14 into voluntary employment. This evaluation has found 15 themes that represent why it has been so successful. As a project, it has filled a gap in Bray and North Wicklow and it has complemented service provision tremendously. The approach used by staff, the staff themselves, and the support of the consortium have all contributed to its achievements. The greatest potential of initiatives like this for people with disabilities is that it empowers other people with disabilities to explore their options and, most importantly, dream. As was witnessed by staff at the graduation ceremony, the more a person with disabilities sees another person with a disability connected to the world around them, the more inspired they become. This has a knock-on effect on the wider society too.

Ireland has come a long way with respect to how we now look at a person's ability rather than their disability. However, we still have some work to do regarding policy and infrastructure as to support the increase of the number of people with disabilities in the labour market in the future. This infrastructure is not only structural, but cultural, and the more we see workplace culture change, the greater opportunities that will present themselves for people with disabilities. This kind of change requires services on the ground to support this, promoting awareness and advocating on behalf of people with disabilities. We also need to give people with disabilities opportunities to inspire other people with disabilities. These opportunities often start with initiatives such as IMPACT that support people to firstly see their potential and secondly to seek their potential out rather than fit into a 'one size fits all' framework that will never truly allow their abilities to be fully shown.

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