

BRILLIANT BALLYBUNION LEARNING BRIEF DECEMBER 2025



Brilliant Ballybunion was a creative climate action project based in Ballybunion town and hinterland, involving a creative artist working with 13 community collaborators. It was led by the Ballybunion Community Forum, in partnership with artist Lisa Fingleton and The Barna Way. The project ran from November 2023 until December 2025.

This learning brief was co-created by the project team, Lisa Fingleton, Gráinne Toomey, Rena Blake and Dr Joanne O'Brien and also includes the experiences of the 13 community collaborators who participated in the project over the two years. The reflective learning and evaluation process was led by Dr Clare Watson and involved individual interviews, group discussions, analysis and collation of responses, with follow-on reviews and additional contributions by team members.



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SECTION 1: Background

Ballybunion is a seaside town on the northwest coast of County Kerry, situated at the mouth of the Shannon estuary which is a Special Area of Conservation and home to a large group of resident bottlenose dolphins. With its beautiful coastline and four sandy beaches, Ballybunion is a popular destination for holiday makers.

It is also known for its impressive cliff walk and golf course. The resident population is 1,168 (2022 census) but this can rise to 4,500 during the summer months. Ballybunion has a very creative community with artists, wellness practitioners, chefs, historians and writers. It also has an open welcoming spirit and most recently invited Ukrainian arrivals to join in and become part of the diverse community through dance, opera singing, church and schools.

PROJECT VISION

The overall vision for Brilliant Ballybunion was that it would engage the community to grow food, protect nature and be creative in terms of protecting biodiversity, ensuring food security and addressing climate change. It would work inclusively with our diverse community to explore solutions for long term sustainability. Once a leading Irish seaside destination, the town has been left behind in a globalised holiday market, and we wanted to explore how we might be brilliant in the face of the climate and biodiversity crisis.

PROJECT GOVERNANCE

The project was led by Ballybunion Community Forum, in partnership with artist Lisa Fingleton and The Barna Way.

Ballybunion Community Forum has a specific remit in relation to the promotion of Ballybunion community and tourism and is responsible for managing a number of large-scale community events, the Tourist Office, the MOYA Festival as well as supporting many grant applications, marketing plans and studies. The Forum has a particular interest in supporting biodiversity and climate action projects in the town and was instrumental in working with Kerry County Council and Tidy Towns to install a water station, bike stands and initiatives to encourage beach clean ups. In 2020, the Forum completed a biodiversity study¹, funded by Community Foundation Ireland and, in 2022, a chough survey², funded through the Leader Programme 2014-2022.

The Barna Way is an eco-social arts project, 19-acre organic farm and woodland near Ballybunion. It is co-ordinated by photographer Rena Blake and artist Lisa Fingleton. The house and lands are steeped in history, song and tradition.

Both Rena's mother and grandmother were born there. Lisa and Rena are Farming for Nature Ambassadors and members of Talamh Beo. A new woodland was established in 2020 with over 10,000 trees (Oak, Birch, Scots pine, Rowan, Hawthorne and Holly), supported by Greenbelt, Supervalu and the Native Irish Woodland Scheme. From here Rena and Lisa engage with diverse community groups through live food and cultural events, while protecting habitats for wildlife. This long-term project is propelled by an accelerated sense of urgency around food insecurity, the climate crisis, biodiversity loss and forced migration.

PROJECT TEAM

Lisa Fingleton, Artist

Lisa is the embedded artist with Brilliant Ballybunion. She is fascinated by how drawing and art can act as transformative catalysts for change. Her large-scale projects with Creative Ireland, The Arts Council and the Irish Museum of Modern Art explore how communities can be brilliant, not brutal, in the face of the climate, migration and biodiversity crises. Grounded on a nineteen-acre organic farm and woodlands, she and her partner Rena Blake run The Barna Way, an eco-social arts project. Lisa's recent exhibition with Brilliant Ballybunion called 'The Square Tomato' at Siamsa Tíre, Tralee attracted thousands of visitors and was named as one of the top ten exhibitions of the year by the Irish Times. Lisa has an MA in documentary film (Goldsmiths College, London) and a degree in Fine Art (NCAD). Her work is in the National and State collections of Ireland. www.lisafingleton.com

Gráinne Toomey, Project manager

Gráinne is a passionate community leader from Ballybunion, with a deep commitment to wellbeing, creativity, and local development. For 18 years, she managed a community childcare centre serving over 100 families before turning her lifelong love of photography into a profession. In July 2023, she co-founded Beach Hive, a gift and coffee shop in Ballybunion, where creativity and community meet. As Secretary of the Ballybunion Community Forum and co-founder of the acclaimed MOYA Festival (Meditation, Ocean, Yoga & Art), Gráinne continues to promote wellness, mindfulness, and artistic expression along the Wild Atlantic Way. www.moyaballybunion.ie

¹ Ballybunion Community Forum (2020). *Ballybunion Biodiversity Project. Report prepared by Joanne O'Brien for Ballybunion Community Forum. Report to Community Foundation Ireland. 70pp.*

² Ballybunion Community Forum (2022). *Ballybunion Chough Survey. Report prepared by Kenneally Wildlife & Ecological Services for Ballybunion Community Forum.*



Project Team: Rena, Joanne, Gráinne and Lisa

Rena is the photographer with Brilliant Ballybunion and co-founder of The Barna Way. She is an organic grower and a Farming for Nature Ambassador. She is a passionate community activist and the Chair of Ballybunion Tidy Towns. Rena is recipient of a Creative Work Bursary 2025 from Kerry County Council. Earlier this year she had a solo exhibition called *The Rings of Kerry* at Siamsa Tíre Tralee, celebrating the 10-year anniversary of the marriage referendum. Rena ran a number of LGBTQI cafes in New York and Cork before returning to her hometown of Ballybunion. www.renablakephotography.com

Dr Joanne O'Brien, Biodiversity lead

Joanne's work as an ecologist spans marine, freshwater and terrestrial conservation, focusing on how animals interact with their environment and how human activity influences natural soundscapes. Central to her interests is the study of animal behaviour, habitat use and biodiversity, particularly through acoustic ecology, using sound to detect species, monitor movements and reveal ecological patterns. As the biodiversity lead on the project, she raised awareness on the local natural heritage, how to identify protected habitats and species, and ensured that biodiversity and sustainability were embedded in the group's ethos.

COMMUNITY COLLABORATORS

Karen Costello; Seán Culhane; Daniel Hayes; Aoife Hederman; Danny Houlihan; Oleksandr Levochko; Caroline McAuliffe; George Nolan; Antoinette O'Sullivan; Marta O'Connor; Áine O'Farrell Hellard; Patricia Pienaar; and Polina Serohina.

CREATIVE COLLABORATORS

Dr Lily Toomey

Lily is an environmental historian and vegan chef from Ballybunion. Her work is situated at the intersections of land and community, with a particular focus on beans and bogs. Through her research and culinary practices, she is working towards imagined futures of sustainable food production and consumption, and more equitable human-nature relationships.

Steph Sheahan

Steph is a designer, artist, cook and yoga teacher. Under the name Rituals of Plate, she cooks seasonal and colourful food in a mindful and sensory way. Her intention is to create food experiences that nourish bellies, inspire aliveness and connection, while honouring slow food systems and connection to nature.

Sailhymn

Sailhymn is a singer-songwriter from Ballybunion. They have been on the original music scene since 2011, creating and showcasing their work at home and abroad under 'Katie O'Connor'. Early 2025 illuminated Sailhymn's sense of self as transgender and with it a desire to come back to their roots in North Kerry. Their residency at The Barna Way documented and explored the journey of returning to the land of body and the land of upbringing. By means of music, Sailhymn documented their soulful reconnection with the generous, bold spirit of living heritage and shared this impression at the Ballybunion Bean Festival on the very same land it sprung from.



REFLECTIVE LEARNING AND EVALUATION LEAD

Dr Clare Watson

Clare lives in Ballydehob, West Cork. She has a background in social work, community-based social and environmental projects and a PHD on community engagement in climate action. From 2018 to 2023, she led the MaREI engaged research team in Dingle Peninsula 2030, supporting the sustainable transition on the peninsula. She established a process of reflective learning within the partnership and co-created a series of learning briefs, which tracked the benefits, challenges, experiences, learnings and achievements. Clare now works on a freelance basis. www.clarewatson.ie

EXPECTED PROJECT OUTCOMES

- The community collaborators will have a better understanding of:
 - The causes of climate change, its impacts and what they can do about it.
 - The importance of biodiversity, the causes and impacts of biodiversity loss and what they can do to protect it.
 - The impact of the current food system on biodiversity and climate change and what they can do to support more sustainable practices.
- The community collaborators will have the creative, practical and experiential tools and the enthusiasm to make real changes in their own behaviour and actions, particularly around the growing of local food and protection of local habitats.
- The community collaborators will have become champions for the growing of local food and protection of local habitats throughout the Ballybunion community.
- This project will have sparked the imagination of the local community to create a longer-term vision and plan for the Ballybunion area around biodiversity protection and climate action, and it will have contributed to the building of local resilience and capacity to deal with a changing and uncertain future.
- The lead artist and support artists will have responded creatively throughout the project and deepened their practice, with the potential for carrying this experience forward to other projects.

OUR APPROACH

Based on experience gleaned from working with a group of ten farm families in the *Corca Dhuibhne Inbhuanaithe* creative climate action project in 2022, we wanted to work intensively with a group of community collaborators, chosen through a public call. We were looking for applicants from Ballybunion town and the surrounding hinterland with an interest in growing food, protecting habitats and creating a vision for the future in the context of climate change and biodiversity loss, who would also enjoy being part of a creative process involving drawing, filming and taking photographs. We wanted the group to reflect the diversity of our community and, as this project was about being a catalyst for change in the wider community, we were interested in working with people who are engaged, or would like to be more engaged, in local community groups or businesses. We also wanted the project to be as inclusive as possible and actively encouraged the participation of people with disabilities, LGBTQI and the local Ukrainian community.

Activities in the first year were largely focused on the collaborator group and, in the second year, the focus shifted outwards into the broader community of Ballybunion.

In the first year, the activities and events were prepared in advance, but the second year was left open, so that it could be guided by the collaborator group. We were keen to empower them to come up with ideas and to take some responsibility in deciding which direction the project would take, and to look more long-term. We were very keen that there would be a lasting legacy in the area from Brilliant Ballybunion (i.e. that activities would not end when the project funded ended)



FUNDING

The project was funded by the Creative Climate Action Fund, a joint initiative of the Creative Ireland Programme and the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications which supports creative, cultural and artistic projects that build awareness around climate change and empower citizens to make meaningful behavioural transformations. It was one of 19 successful two-year large scale Ignite projects. The amount received was €250,000³.

BREAKDOWN OF KEY EXPENDITURE

WHAT WAS FUNDED	AMOUNT	TOTAL	% OVERALL BUDGET
PEOPLE/TEAM COSTS			
Project Management	€37,500		
Lead Artist	€45,000		
Reflective Learning/Evaluation	€20,000		
Collaborators Stipends	€26,500		
Mentors	€4,245		
Total		€133,245	53%
DOCUMENTATION			
Film & Drone	€3,243		
Editing, Music & Grading	€4,800		
Graphic Design & Printing	€6,315		
Photography	€10,250		
Web Design	€3,744		
Social Media	€6,356		
PR	€2,000		
Total		€36,708	15%
RUNNING COSTS			
Book-keeping/Accounts	€8,000		
Insurance	€2,000		
Team Travel Subsistence	€1,152		
Office Contributions	€2,866		
Accessibility Supports	~377		
Total		€18,395	7%
PROGRAMME COSTS			
Imagineate incl Square Tomato	€2,295		
Fridays on the Farm x 10	€5,750		
Meetings			
Launch evening	€545		
Collabs meetings	€1,063		
Collabs Project Planning	€2,183		
Fact Finding Days incl NK Biodiversity Day	€7,961		
Exploration			
4 trips away	€3,239		
Inspiration			
Drawing Materials	€1,354		
Bean Festival	€14,889		
Wild About Life	€2,863		
The Barna Way incl facilitator, growing, venue, materials	€10,650		
Contingency	€8,860		
Total		€61,652	25%

³ Towards the end of the project, an additional amount of €35,100 was granted by Creative Ireland to fund the production of a book on Brilliant Ballybunion, a professional recording of Sailhymn's music from their residency at The Barna Way, and signage and professional fees for the Ballybunion Nature Group.

SECTION 2: What Happened

Brilliant Ballybunion began with a simple but ambitious idea: what if food, biodiversity, creativity and science could come together to imagine a more sustainable future?

PROJECT RUNDOWN

In early February 2024, a public call was sent out through local networks and social media looking for members of the local community to participate in the project and this was followed by an information meeting in the town on the evening of Thursday 8th February 2024.

Initially it was planned to select ten collaborators but 30 people applied and the calibre was very high. In the end 14 were chosen, but one person had to pull back a bit in the first year due to personal reasons (but continued to attend most events). So, a group of 13 community collaborators were a key part of the project over the two years. They were each paid a stipend for taking part. All activities, trips and food were provided by the project.

During the first year, the collaborators participated in hands-on activity and learning events, including six days from March to September at The Barna Way: *Fridays on the Farm* - going through the season of planting, growing, preserving and harvesting, and *Imagine* - drawing with nature, journaling and documentation. On the seventh day the group visited Gortbrack Farm and Íon Organics. They had two *Wild About Life* sessions, where they learnt about the water quality of our local streams and rivers and how to identify local insects, flowers, grasses, trees, and birds. Two site visits were also organised, the first to Ballymaloe Festival of Food and the second to Brookfield Farm, Nenagh and the Urban Co-op, Limerick. Events open to the public in the first year included: *Brilliant Ballybunion Goes Wild!* (evening of radical hospitality with food artist, Jennie Moran), Dawn Chorus (as part of the Moya Festival), *Sing for your Supper* (as part of the Ballybunion Arts Festival). All were held at The Barna Way.

The second year was more outward facing, broadening into the wider community. The community collaborators had a more hands-on role, contributing ideas for activities and assisting in their planning, organisation and execution. They were each involved in different ways, depending on their time availability and interests. Events included the North Kerry Sustainability Day in the Tinteán Theatre, Ballybunion in February, the Dawn Chorus during MOYA

2025 and the Ballybunion Bean Festival in The Barna Way in August. The collaborators' help was invaluable, for example, an average of four collaborators participated in three planning meetings and two meitheals to prepare the Tinteán Theatre for the Sustainability Day and an average of four collaborators participated in twenty planning meetings and eight meitheals for the Bean Festival.

Members of the collaborator group were instrumental in establishing the Ballybunion Nature Group in March 2025 (which now has over 70 members from the local community) and in running the ringed plover survey and campaign on local beaches over the summer. This initiative has proven to be a very important part of the legacy of Brilliant Ballybunion. Three collaborators, Seán, George and Áine are now members of the steering group, alongside Joanne, Rena and Gráinne and two members of the public.

Brilliant Ballybunion was proud to be one of four Ignite projects to exhibit at the Earth Rising Festival in IMMA, Dublin in early September and five collaborators and the three creative collaborators participated in the event with the project team.

The importance of locally produced, seasonal organic food and food security were key themes in the project, so from the beginning it was important that we walked our talk and provided local nutritious food for our collaborators and guests at all events. Although it hadn't been written into the initial project proposal, we quickly realised that this was a highly skilled job in itself so we were delighted that Lily and Steph were able to join us and ensure that such food was always provided. In fact, the meals were so good, this hospitality became a critical part of the project and its success. You can't beat the power of sharing good food to help bond a group and also to demonstrate how it is possible to eat so well, sustainably.

For details, please see Food Table
<https://brilliantballybunion.com/learning/>

BRILLIANT BALLYBUNION KEY EVENTS

DATE	EVENT	VENUE	DESCRIPTION	ATTENDEES <i>(members of public and/or community collaborators)</i>
Weds 31 Jan- Fri 2 Feb 2024	Creative Ireland Residential Programme for IGNITE projects	Borris House, Borris, Co. Carlow	A three-day residential programme to facilitate learning and exchange, connection and collaboration, attended by Gráinne, Lisa and Rena. The three days included presentations, discussion, creative and practical exercises, time for exchange and reflection, a chance to get out in nature, as well as time for socialising and networking with representatives from other IGNITE projects and Creative Ireland.	
Thurs 8 Feb 2024	Introduction to Brilliant Ballybunion	Coast Cafe, Ballybunion	Information evening about the project. Presentation on the project and call for community collaborator applicants. Food by Coast Café, locally sourced ingredients.	50 (public)
Mon 4 March 2024, 7-9pm	Welcome Night for Collaborators	The Barna Way	The collaborators met with the project team. Food by Lily.	14 (collabs)
Fri 15 March 2024, 4-6pm	Friday on the Farm & Imagine 1	The Barna Way	Introduction to the potting shed, learning about seeds and soil with Rena. Drew portraits of each other with charcoal, pencil, crayon and pastels with Lisa. Food by Coast Café, delivered.	11 (collabs)
Fri 22 March 2024, 11am-4pm	Wild About Life 1	Kilconly river & The Barna Way	Small stream sampling & risk scoring, presentation and findings with Joanne. Food by Rena.	12 (collabs)
Fri 12 April 2024 11am-4pm	Friday on the Farm & Imagine 2	The Barna Way	Created land art/a willow dome/bird hide with magical portholes with Lisa. Busy in the potting shed and polytunnels planting and transplanting baby plants. Food by Rena & Lisa.	9 (collabs)
Fri 3 May 2024 2-4pm	Food Stories	The Barna Way	Workshop with artist, Jennie Moran on hospitality and badgemaking. Food by Lily.	11 (collabs)
Fri 3 May 2024 6-8pm	Brilliant Ballybunion Goes Wild!	The Barna Way	An evening of radical hospitality with Jennie Moran <i>(public event as part of Moya Festival)</i> Food by Lily & Jennie Moran.	25 (public) 9 (collabs)
Sat 4 May 2024 5-7am	The Dawn Chorus	The Barna Way	Dawn chorus walk with local wildlife expert, Barry O'Donoghue, followed by breakfast prepared by Jennie Moran. <i>(public event as part of Moya Festival)</i>	10 (public) 4 (collabs)
Fri 10 May 2024 11am-4pm	Friday on the Farm & Imagine 3	The Barna Way	Made mini meadows from recycled paper, soil and organic meadow seed with Lisa. Farming with Rena. Prepared and set the bean bed in glorious sunshine. Food by Mona, Caroline & Áine.	11 (collabs)
Sat 18 May 2024 7am-7pm	Site Visit 1	Ballymaloe, Shanagarry, Co. Cork	A bus trip to Ballymaloe Festival of Food. Presented our project on stage.	11 (collabs) 33 (public attended presentation)

DATE	EVENT	VENUE	DESCRIPTION	ATTENDEES <i>(members of public and/or community collaborators)</i>
Fri 7 June 2024 11am-4pm	Friday on the Farm & Imagine 4	The Barna Way	Reflections and journaling with Lisa, followed by gardening and pizza making, using produce from the farm, with Rena.	11 (collabs)
Fri 14 June 2024 11am-4pm	Wild About Life 2	The Barna Way	Monitored biodiversity at The Barna Way. Split into groups and recorded insects, flowers, grasses, trees, birds. Joanne helped show us how to record. Food by Steph.	9 (collabs)
Fri 5 July 2024 11am-4pm	Friday on the Farm & Imagine 5	The Barna Way	A mindful ContemPLATE workshop with Steph from Rituals of Plate including a mindful walk to the polytunnel, connecting with plants through drawing and inviting us to reflect on not just what we eat, but how we eat.	9 (collabs)
Fri 19 July 2024 4-6pm	Sing for your Supper	Ahafona to The Barna Way	Guided walk from Ahafona to The Barna Way led by collaborator, Danny Houlihan, followed by songs, music, poetry, chanting and great craic. Food by Lily. (public event for Ballybunion Arts Festival)	16 (public) 10 (collabs)
Fri 2 Aug 2024 9am-4pm	Friday on the Farm & Imagine 6	Gortbrack Organic Farm, Ballyseedy & Íon Organics, Ballyduff	Bus trip to visit Gortbrack Farm where Ian discussed problems in our food systems and ways to build more sustainable, nature-friendly ones & to Íon Organics where they create products using organic flowers, medicinal herbs, and Atlantic seaweed. Liz showed us her gardens and shop, while John shared his handmade seaweed bath house built with the ancient wattle and daub technique. With lunch at the Little Cheese Shop in Tralee.	12 (collabs)
Sat 31 Aug 2024 9am-6pm	Site Visit 2	Brookfield Farm, Nenagh, Co Tipp & Urban Co-op, Limerick	A bus trip to visit another IGNITE group, Field Exchange, at Brookfield Farm. Stopped at the Urban Co-Op for a tour with Anne and to enjoy her lovely scones.	9 (collabs) 6 (public)
Fri 6 Sept 2024 11am-4pm	Friday on the Farm & Imagine 7	The Barna Way	A film screening by Lisa. We also learned about seed saving, winter garden preparation with Rena and explored the woods and buzzing meadows. Food by Steph.	10 (collabs)
Mon 21 Oct 2024	The Gathering, organised by Creative Ireland	Aviva Stadium, Dublin	A one-day conference showcasing a selection of Ignite and Spark projects, and sharing learnings amongst fellow grantees and Department officials. Attended by Lisa, Rena, Clare, Karen and George.	2 (collabs)
Sat 2 Nov 2024 10am-1pm	Organic Gardening Course 1	The Barna Way	Organic gardening course run in partnership with KETB, NEWKD and Brilliant Ballybunion. Week 1: Seed saving, seed sowing, planting a variety of salad leaves, and creating homemade rooting gel. An introduction to stem cuttings.	1 (public) 2 (collabs)
Sat 9 Nov 2024 10am-1pm	Organic Gardening Course 2	The Barna Way	Week 2: Planted legumes & broad beans and peas for sprouting shoots. Sowed companion plants like calendula. Hardwood cuttings, blackcurrants	12 (public) 2 (collabs)

DATE	EVENT	VENUE	DESCRIPTION	ATTENDEES <i>(members of public and/or community collaborators)</i>
Sat 16 Nov 2024 10am-1pm	Organic Gardening Course 3	The Barna Way	Week 3: Sowed alliums like garlic & onions, hardwood cuttings. Continued the willow arch. Transplanted seedlings from week one and sowed more salad seeds.	12 (public) 4 (collabs)
Fri 22 Nov 2024 6-9pm	End of Year Gathering	The Convent, Ballybunion	Discussion with collaborators on the year gone by and what they would like to prioritise in the year to come. Creative mind mapping and visualisation with Lisa. Food by Lily.	10 (collabs)
Sat 14 Dec 2024 10am-1pm	Organic Gardening Course 4	The Barna Way	Week 4: Made homemade pest mixture from rhubarb. Made liquid feeds, Christmas wreaths, hardwood cutting of elder and buddleia.	12 (public) 4 (collabs)
Thurs 16 Jan 2025, 5-7pm	Start of Year Gathering with collaborators	Coast Cafe, Ballybunion	Discussion with collaborators to pin down plans for the year ahead. Food by Coast Café & cake by Áine.	11 (collabs)
Thurs 30 Jan 2025, 4.30-6pm	Gathering and Planning Meeting with collaborators	The Barna Way	Discussions on: The Square Tomato exhibition, The North Kerry Sustainability Day & The Ringed Plover project.	10 (collabs)
Sat 1 Feb 2025 3-5pm	Launch of The Square Tomato Exhibition	Siamsa Tíre, Tralee	Lisa's exhibition drew from her experiences as embedded artist with Corca Dhuibhne Inbhuanaithe (2022), Brilliant Ballybunion and a trip to Navdanya in India. Work included the Monto Man, drawings and short films and ran for two months with thousands of visitors. Many school and community workshops were organised as part of Lisa's role as Kerry Visual Artist in Residence with Kerry County Council. <i>For review, please see essay by Gemma Tipton https://brilliantballybunion.com/learning/</i>	110 (public) 6 (collabs) There were thousands of visitors to the exhibition, which ran until 22 March
Weds 12 Feb 2025, 5pm	Meeting with Eleanor Turner, Biodiversity Officer, Kerry County Council	Online	Collaborator, Seán Culhane gave a presentation about the Ringed Plover.	4 (collabs)
Thurs 13 Feb 2025 4.30-7.30pm	Wild About Life 3	The Barna Way	Joanne showed us how to set up and download the AudioMoths that we will have recording in The Barna Way and Ballybunion. Food by Steph.	8 (collabs)
Fri 14 Feb 2025	Drawing with 6th class children	Scoil Íosagáin, Ballybunion	Lisa and Daniel, teacher and collaborator worked with the children to make a large drawing on <i>The Future We Want to Be</i> . This was installed at the Tinteán Theatre for the Sustainability Day.	20 (children)
Weds 19 Feb 2025, 5-6.30pm	Meeting with Wynona Ryder, Royal Society for the Protection of Birds	Online	Presentation from Seán followed by Q&A with Wynona.	1 (public) 5 (collabs)

DATE	EVENT	VENUE	DESCRIPTION	ATTENDEES <i>(members of public and/or community collaborators)</i>
Sun 23 Feb 2025 10.30-4.30pm	North Kerry Sustainability Day	Tintéan Theatre	We hosted a North Kerry Sustainability Day with various topics for speakers, and an area for information stands. Food by Steph for 150 people. <i>For details, please see NK Sustainability Day report https://brilliantballybunion.com/learning/</i>	149 (public) 55 (stallholders and panellists) 4 (project team) 9 (collabs)
Mon 3 March 2025, 6-7.30pm	Ringed Plover meeting	Online	Meeting to get started on the Ringed Plover Project.	4 (collabs)
Sat 8 March 2025, 10am-1pm	The Art of Sustenance, Sisterhood and Solidarity	Siamsa Tíre, Tralee	Lisa joined artists Silke Michels, Zoë Uí Fhaoláin and Zoë Rush (from Ignite project Neart na Machairí), Amelia Caulfield and Bernadette Kiely for this International Women's Day event, exploring the role of artists in creative climate action and protecting mother eARTH.	c.30 (public) 2 (collabs)
Fri 21 March 2025, 6-8pm	Launch of Ballybunion Nature Group	Coast Cafe, Ballybunion	We launched the first Ballybunion Nature Group with an open meeting at Coast Café. <i>For details, please see Ballybunion Nature Group report https://brilliantballybunion.com/learning/</i>	15 (public) 5 (collabs)
Thurs 10 April 2025, 5-7pm	Wild About Life 4	The Barna Way	Water sampling and uploading the audiomoth files. Food by Lily.	8 (collabs)
Sat 3 May 2025 5-7am	The Dawn Chorus	The Barna Way	Dawn visit to The Barna Way to listen to the Dawn Chorus led by collaborator, Seán Culhane & Rena. (as part of the Moya Festival)	15 (public) 1 (collab)
Sat 3 May 2025 7-8.30pm	Launch of The Bean Festival	Coast Cafe, Ballybunion	The Bean Team met the public to encourage them to grow beans for the Festival in August. There were Bean Birth Certificates, demonstrations, information, and music by Sailhymn. Bean treats by Lily.	50 (public) 5 (collabs)
Thurs 5 June 2025, 6-8pm	Wild About Life 5	Bromore Cliffs, Ballybunion	Dolphin Watch with Dr Joanne O'Brien and tour of the cliffs with landowner, Mike Flahive.	6 (collabs)
Weds 11 June 2025, 7-8pm	Bean Survival Training	Online	A session with local organic grower, Billy Jo O'Connor about how to grow beans successfully. <i>For recording, please see https://brilliantballybunion.com/ballybunion-bean-festival-saturday-16th-august-2025/</i>	12 (public) 3 (collabs)
Sat 28 June 2025, 8am-6pm	Site Visit 3 World Sand Dune Day, on the Maharees	Maharees, Dingle Peninsula	We participated in activities organised by fellow Ignite project, Neart na Machairí, including biodiversity walk, cyanotype printing and lunch.	6 (collabs)
July & August 2025	Songwriting residency	The Barna Way	Sailhymn and the beings at The Barna Way, co-created a time capsule of music to showcase at the Ballybunion Bean Festival in August 2025. The residency documented Sailhymn's journey of returning to the land of body, and the land of upbringing through conscious attunement and entrainment with place and presence. Through the daily rituals of the farm, Sailhymn deepened their relationship with the land. Developing deep listening was central in attuning to the subtle pulse of nature.	

DATE	EVENT	VENUE	DESCRIPTION	ATTENDEES <i>(members of public and/or community collaborators)</i>
Sat 16 Aug 2025 9am-8pm	Ballybunion Bean Festival	The Barna Way	A brilliant day of celebration at The Barna Way with food, music, walks, workshops and community. <i>For details, please see Ballybunion Bean Festival report: https://brilliantballybunion.com/ballybunion-bean-festival-saturday-16th-august-2025/</i>	80 (public) 7 (collabs)
Fri 13, Sat 14, Sun 15 Sept 2025	Earth Rising Festival at IMMA	Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin	Brilliant Ballybunion had an exhibition space, which included drawings, films and Monto Man. Collaborators, Antoinette, Seán and Karen, participated in a panel discussion with Lisa, Gráinne and Joanne. Sailhymn gave a concert. <i>For details, please see Event Breakdown https://brilliantballybunion.com/learning/</i>	c. 500 (public) 5 (collabs)
Sat 20 Sept 2025 9.45am-5.30pm	Wild About Life 6 Bus trip to Kilrush and Scattery Island	Scattery Island and Kilrush	We were supposed to take our final trip together to The Blaskets and to watch out for whales and dolphins, but the swells were too dangerous. Instead, we went to Co. Clare, stopping at Vandelour Gardens, followed by lunch at JellyFish in Kilrush and then a guided boat trip to Scattery Island.	9 (collabs)



SHORT FILMS

We produced nine short films over the course of the project. They were directed by Lisa Fingleton, filmed by Chris Garrett and edited by Clint Fitzgerald and can be viewed here <https://brilliantballybunion.com/films/>

Antoinette O'Sullivan - Our community collaborator, Antoinette, warmly reflects on her hopes for Brilliant Ballybunion and her aspirations for the future.

Marta O'Connor - Our community collaborator, Marta, shares her excitement at beginning the Brilliant Ballybunion journey and celebrates the return of her creative spark.

Seán Culhane - Our community collaborator, Seán, shares his lifelong love of birdwatching and connecting to nature. He talks about his commitment to local conservation efforts and his hopes for the ringed plover project in Ballybunion.

Brilliant Ballybunion Goes Wild - Documents the *Sing for Your Supper* event at The Barna Way in May 2024 with artist Jennie Moran, accompanied by the atmospheric voice of singer-songwriter, Sailhymn.

North Kerry Sustainability Day - A snapshot of the *North Kerry Sustainability Day* at the Tinteán Theatre in February 2025, highlighting creative community participation and engagement around biodiversity and climate action.

Brilliant Ballybunion 'Wild and Wonderful Panel' at the *North Kerry Sustainability Day* - Features contributors discussing biodiversity, coastline challenges, conservation, water quality, and ecosystems, while sharing insights and environmental concerns.

E.L.M. Every Loss Matters - A poem by Gráinne Toomey exploring the grief felt for the loss of the elm trees. She offers a gentle plea to remember that every loss - however small it may seem - matters.

Ballybunion Bean Festival - Documents Brilliant Ballybunion's focus on local food, creativity, and community engagement. Highlights the people, activities and collaborations that shaped our successful Festival at The Barna Way in August 2025.

The Square Tomato - Showcases the exhibition opening by embedded artist Lisa Fingleton with films and drawings from Brilliant Ballybunion.

MEDIA COVERAGE

Over the two years, various aspects of Brilliant Ballybunion were covered by local and mainstream media. Coverage included slots on 'Nationwide' and 'Homegrown' (RTE 1), 'Morning Ireland' (RTE Radio 1) and Radio Kerry. Newspaper coverage included articles/items in The Irish Times, Irish

Examiner, Farmers' Journal, Agriland, The Kerryman and Ballybunion News. A visit to The Barna Way by actor, Cynthia Nixon (Miranda in 'Sex and the City'), also created a bit of a splash!

Since its launch on Instagram and Facebook in January 2024, Brilliant Ballybunion built a lively online presence celebrating creativity, local biodiversity, community climate action, and local food. Posts and stories shared behind-the-scenes glimpses, advertised upcoming events, and kept followers up to date with what the team and collaborators were creating and getting involved in. Each post highlighted the people and places that made the project special, with regular thanks to the chefs, the venues, Creative Ireland, and other partners, and included a link to the Brilliant Ballybunion website for further information. With average monthly engagement around 15,000-20,000, engagement peaked at 72,000 interactions on Instagram and 22,000 on Facebook in July/August 2025 during the Ballybunion Bean Festival.

For details, please see Media Report <https://brilliantballybunion.com/learning/>

AUXILIARY ACTIVITIES

Over the two years, our community collaborators and members of the project team have been involved in many other community activities, not directly organised by Brilliant Ballybunion. These include: a children's art workshop in the library; a community dolphin walk along the cliffs; a podcast capturing local voices; local beach cleans; supporting Tidy Towns initiatives; contributing to LAWPRO's water quality efforts; a stand at the Fossa Community Sustainability Fair; helping at the Ballybunion Run; and rallying together for flood relief collections.

REFLECTIVE LEARNING AND EVALUATION

Over the course of the two years, Clare held four rounds of individual reflective interviews (online and recorded) with the collaborators (in March 2024, September 2024, April 2025 and September 2025) and then shared their feedback in writing with the project team. Similarly, she held four rounds of individual reflective interviews (online and recorded) with the project team (in November 2023, March 2024, October 2024 and April 2025, with written feedback in September 2025) and shared the feedback in writing with the team. This was followed by online discussions to discuss the points, draw out learnings and agree any follow-up actions. In the first year, Clare also led monthly online review meetings with the team and in the second year these were held less frequently, as required. At the end of the project, Clare distilled and collated all the feedback into this learning brief, with follow-on reviews and additional contributions by team members. Each community collaborator reviewed their own profile in advance of publication.



CARBON FOOTPRINT STATEMENT

The Brilliant Ballybunion project was delivered with a strong commitment to environmental sustainability and reducing its carbon footprint at every stage. We tried to make good environmental choices in everything we did, from materials and transport to food and everyday activities.

Reusable and recyclable materials were chosen for signage and displays, and local suppliers were engaged to minimise transport emissions and support the regional economy. Recycled and upcycled paper notebooks were sourced from Badly Made Books, and unnecessary printing was avoided wherever possible.

Participants were encouraged to bring keep cups and reusable water bottles to further reduce waste. Transport for meetings and events at The Barna Way was encouraged by walking, cycling or shared drives. For trips further away, we used a local bus company or public

transport, to cut down on individual car journeys. In addition, the collaborators supported sustainable food systems by growing their own produce, both at The Barna Way and in several of their own gardens, and by consciously choosing locally grown food and local suppliers when dining or catering.

At our public events, chefs Steph and Lily used local seasonal produce, mainly organic, and designed the menus so that there was little to no waste left. We used delph and cutlery that could be washed and re-used. There was no single use plastic at events.

The Brilliant Ballybunion project showed how simple, achievable actions can reduce environmental impact and build community spirit. We were transparent about the work behind the scenes but focused on keeping it easy and enjoyable for everyone to take part.



SECTION 3: What we achieved

Brilliant Ballybunion has projected Ballybunion to the wider world in a new and positive way, bringing the idea of community within the environment to the fore

“ This has been really interesting to watch. I always knew that people loved Ballybunion for the beauty, the fun and the emotional side of it, how it makes them feel, the memories that it brings to their minds, etc. So, by promoting that aspect of connection with the earth, we have been sincere and touched peoples' lives in a way that has opened up this lovely energy which I think comes from the creative side. **Gráinne, September 2025** ”

The project has raised awareness of the unique value of Ballybunion's natural environment, and it built pride and ownership within our group

People now better understand that Ballybunion is not just a beautiful place to live and visit, it is also part of a wider Special Area of Conservation and Special Protected Areas, with responsibilities to safeguard species such as bottlenose dolphins and ringed plovers. That awareness has already inspired action, and it will continue to guide us into the future.

“ Watching people discover the richness of what we have right on our doorstep, and the pride that came with that, was one of the most rewarding aspects for me. **Joanne, September 2025** ”

The project has strengthened the environmental resilience of Ballybunion

We have delivered real value from a nature and biodiversity perspective, as all collaborators are now more informed and aware of the importance of enhancing natural habitats and conserving our local wildlife. This collective knowledge and their actions strengthen the town's environmental resilience. Importantly, this education and awareness not only safeguards biodiversity but also fosters a healthier, more attractive environment for both residents and visitors.

We built capacity and empowered people to act

We brought our collaborators on a journey, which involved visiting interesting places and projects, attending events, learning from experts and practitioners, experiencing the benefits of wonderful local food and having fun creatively. We gave them the knowledge and skills to be able to take action, whether that was by growing vegetables, organising events, journalling, writing, speaking in public, testing water quality, acoustically monitoring birds, recording native plants and animals, or recognising the impacts of invasive species.

“ We have shown people that they can get involved at their own level - whether it's joining others to help protect a small bird, grow their own food, support a more sustainable town, eat local, or simply reconnect with nature. The impact is wide-ranging and deeply personal, and has been shaped by the collaborators' individual lives, their needs, the time they have to contribute, and their passions. **Gráinne, September 2025** ”

“ People are no longer passive observers of their environment, they are equipped, informed, and motivated to be active stewards of it. **Joanne, September 2025** ”

We provided routes to action at many levels

“ Many local people share a deep concern for the world and want to feel that they are making a difference. This project has given some of them that opportunity, whether by volunteering their time for the ringed plover surveys, helping to spread the word about events, joining the Tidy Towns or a future SEC, or simply showing up with enthusiasm and curiosity. **Gráinne, September 2025** ”

We have created a strong network of active, committed and interested people

We initially had fears that it would be hard to keep the group of collaborators together for the two years. One collaborator had to pull back a bit during the first year for personal reasons (but she maintained connections with the project and attended all the second year's events). Rather than losing people, the project solidified connections, created friendships, developed long term bonds and has built a cohesive network of people who want to contribute.

“ What we have now, what we didn't have a year and a half ago, is we have a core group of committed people who have looked at the issues, and who are not afraid to look at them, and can work together to work on something. That's pretty powerful, and they're great, and none of them are going anywhere. **Rena, April 2025** ”

“ The core group has pretty much started and finished together strong, which is very, very good. We're all together and we're all still standing. **Rena, September 2025** ”



The Ballybunion Nature Group was born

From a biodiversity perspective, this is the project’s most significant achievement. It ensures that the work will not end with the close of the project but will be carried on by local people who are committed, skilled, and passionate about conservation. The group’s early success in protecting the ringed plover is proof of what can be achieved when knowledge, community spirit, and a shared vision come together.

“ When we set out, the aim and the objective was to have a community that was interested in biodiversity and art and growing. Now we have that. I think we've captured them, and they're not just interested, but they're now involved. That really shows with the plover project, how people are out and about, and how they have engaged. They are all out watching and walking, we've covered from Ballylongford all the way down to Ballybunion. **Joanne, April 2025** ”

“ I'm doing research on EU projects every day, but to be honest, when I come back into this small-scale stuff, in the local patch with people who have a genuine interest, it just gives you a good feeling again, especially because in conservation now it's all negative. It's very hard, every day you're getting beaten down. It's rare that we have these feel-good moments like I get from this and that really excites me, because if you don't have that within the local area that you live, it's very hard to think about the wider aspect of things. **Joanne, April 2025** ”

The Ballybunion Sustainable Energy Community (SEC) is soon to be activated

While a number of efforts have previously been made to set up an SEC in the town, following on from our Sustainability Day in the Tinteán Theatre, interest was re-ignited to get it up and actively running. A steering committee has been established, and they had an initial meeting with the SEAI mentor for the North Kerry region in November 2025.

We have built awareness about the project around town

“ You go to the pool, you go here, you go there, and people know about it. **Rena, April 2025** ”

“ People are talking about it now and it helps to be on Nationwide and Homegrown as well, and the Sustainability Day that we had. They know Brilliant Ballybunion is all about growing food and doing it together and it is a rooted kind of project. We're involved in the school, we're involved in MOYA, we're involved in so many different ways through our collaborators. **Gráinne, April 2025** ”

The project has touched the hearts of many people

“ I see it every day through conversations on the street and in my shop, where people are praising the work and eager to support it. They come to public events not just to watch, but because they want to take part, to learn more about biodiversity or sustainability, and to bring that knowledge into their own community. **Gráinne, Sept 2025** ”



We fed people with local, seasonal and organic food at every event

We provided about 450 local organic meals over the two years, feeding the collaborators on Friday on the Farm and Imagine days and all attendees at public events.

“ This was a massive achievement considering that only a tiny percentage of our farms grow vegetables and so little of our land is organic in Ireland.

Lisa, September 2025

All the collaborators have made some behavioural changes within their homes

The changes include choosing to buy organic and/or local food where possible, eating a more plant-based diet, supporting farmers' markets, avoiding plastic, and buying more natural eco-friendly products. Lots of the collaborators are also growing some of their own food (for more see collaborator profiles).

We had a huge media reach

The Barna Way and Brilliant Ballybunion featured on Nationwide (RTE 1) in May 2024, on Homegrown (RTE 1) in April 2025, on Ours to Protect (Radio Kerry) in early August 2025, and on Morning Ireland (RTE Radio 1) in advance of the Bean Festival. These pieces were so important in telling the story and building awareness about the issues and the project both locally and nationally.

“ Being on Nationwide and being on Homegrown - they're really well watched, and it's going around, people are seeing the town in a new light, with new eyes, new energy. And I suppose if you've got people with a bit of a momentum or a bit of energy, they feed off each other. **Rena, April 2025**

An ongoing relationship has been developed with Kerry County Council

“ The relationship with the County Council, through the Arts Office and the Biodiversity Officer is really exciting. Rena and Gráinne are in contact with the County Council regularly now about issues relating to Ballybunion and seem to be building strong relationships. Rena, Karen and I are also doing the Community Climate Programme with MTU which is supported by Kerry County Council and includes all the relevant KCC staff. **Lisa, April 2025**

“ We walked into the course last Monday, and three of the County Council staff came right up to us and said, it's brilliant everything you're doing. The CEO of Kerry County Council is very supportive too, so that is good. **Rena, September 2025**

Did we meet our Expectations?

<https://brilliantballybunion.com/learning/>



SECTION 4:

Learning - What worked

Being part of a two-year, well-funded project

The funding for this project over two years gave us the capacity and space to empower our collaborators, to spread awareness within the local community and to build a strong foundation for on-going work. What it has shown us is how much we can achieve with the necessary support, and we really want to build on the momentum we have created. This is exemplified, in particular, by the success of the Ballybunion Nature Group, and the development of a local network of active and enthusiastic people.

The fact that the members of the project team were paid for their input (although of course the active hours far outweighed the paid hours!) was extremely important. Too often climate action projects are expected to be run by volunteers, which does not do justice or give value to the level of expertise required.

The level of funding also allowed us to give a stipend to our collaborators to compensate them in a small way for expenses they incurred while participating (e.g. child-care, time off work).

“ Literally being embedded, paid and allowed to work in our own community where we have invested so much energy, is such a privilege. **Lisa, November 2023** ”

“ Everything I've done so far has been voluntary so it's really interesting for me to think that I can charge for time. It's a new respect. It makes me value my own time and myself a little bit more. **Gráinne, November 2023** ”

“ Having two years, till the end of 2025. It just feels like there's breathing space. **Lisa, November 2023** ”

A love of Ballybunion and positive sense of place

A very clear common thread running through all the project team members and community collaborators is their pride in Ballybunion, their pride in the community, and their passionate desire to help ensure that it flourishes and thrives well into the future. While not everyone is born and bred in the area, they have all chosen to live here and to get involved in community activities. This commitment added immensely to the project and will help ensure it leaves an active legacy.

An inclusive, respectful and gentle approach

Throughout the two years, we were keen to avoid blaming or shaming people. For instance, a soft, respectful tone was very evident in the ringed plover campaign, where the volunteers surveying on the beach were keen to bring people (particularly dog walkers) on side, rather than getting their backs up. Some signs did need to go up close to a nesting area, but these were small and carefully worded. People saw them and responded well.

A very strong project team

Lisa and Gráinne have a great balance of personality and energy, so were able to get a lot done. They were able to talk openly, solve problems together, and make sure that all bases were covered. Joanne's easy-going temperament and can-do attitude ensured that her input was effective and inspiring. Rena was more in the background (taking photographs, managing the gardens at The Barna Way, working with the community in her new role as Chair of Ballybunion Tidy Towns and making scones!). She was the solid person who kept everything level as much as possible. She observed and was there when needed.

Other key ingredients for this successful collaboration included: loving Ballybunion; being active in the local community; being passionate and like-minded; listening to and respecting each other's opinions; having different skill sets; and dovetailing very well together, lifting each other up when necessary.

“ I think we have a really powerful team, it's brilliant, and the fact that it all came together to produce a proposal like this I think shows how strong it is. We all get on really well together. And I think we'll be able to do something really good with this. **Joanne, November 2023** ”

“ I don't want to work on my own ever again, I love this collaboration. My brain is sparked in a million different directions. **Lisa, March 2024** ”

Working with a fixed group of community collaborators

We had high expectations for them from the beginning!

“The community collaborators will become ambassadors, a knowledgeable core group of people that will come from different areas and different interests. I think that they will be very important going forward, especially if we're looking at it from a climate change perspective. Because if they've gone through the various different trainings, and experiences with us as part of this, then they're going to be able to make their own decisions and bring that out into the community, and they'll be able to initiate actions and take action themselves.

Joanne, November 2023

And they didn't disappoint.

“We couldn't have wished for a nicer group of people, and a more engaged, interested, passionate and honest group. **Lisa, March 2024**

“It's a very unique group, it's very tuned in. **Rena, March 2024**

The connections and relationship-building were also of huge benefit to the project team.

“It's amazing to be living in an area where you know that there's people around with similar attitudes, that they are aware of all of these problems and threats in the environment, and that they're trying to make differences in their everyday lives, and that they have this understanding and want to enlighten the other people in the community and to get support.

Joanne, October 2024

Bringing in four extra collaborators on day one

The initial plan was to select ten collaborators but following the enthusiastic response to our call we took in fourteen people (one of whom had to pull back in year one because of personal reasons). This meant we had an average of 8-10 collaborators at scheduled events and activities in the first year.

The group of collaborators gelled very quickly

This culminated in the development of strong trusting relationships and the creation of an ongoing network. But why did the group work so well?

While Lisa, Rena and Gráinne encouraged people who they thought would be interested to apply, going for a public call rather than direct selection left the choice up to people themselves and gave others who weren't on anyone's radar the opportunity to apply. The format of the Open Night was carefully planned to enthuse, and to give prospective applicants a sense of the project and why it was important to get involved. 30 people applied and the selection process ensured that a range of people from different backgrounds,

interests and experience were selected. The following factors also helped: the collaborators were keen to connect with kindred spirits; most of them wanted to become more integrated into the local community; they all love Ballybunion; they are open-minded and were willing to give it a go; there was a relatively good mix of men (5) and women (8); no one was too pushy or domineering; they were respectful of each other; and they were good at helping each other out.

“Sometimes you live in rural Ireland, and you live in a small community, and you do these individual actions all the time, but you're not getting anywhere and you're sometimes feeling like you're on your own. I think we got together, and then realised that there are more people who think the same way as you do. The collaborators all found each other at the same time, and they didn't even know that they were looking for it. **Rena, March 2024**

“I think the Brilliant Ballybunion name captured them. It just tickles the imagination of the people who were on their own, trying to do something and for some reason it just grabbed them. They just got it, they got the irony and they got the potential. **Lisa, March 2024**

Encouraging and supporting collaborators to branch out in the second year

Following the round of reflective interviews with the collaborators in September 2024, it was obvious that some of them were very keen to take more responsibility in developing off-shoots from the project, most notably, Seán, whose vision, passion and love of birds drove the creation of the Ballybunion Nature Group and the ringed plover survey.

The ripple effect

Bringing the collaborators on board at the start and working intensively with them in the first year has resulted in awareness spreading from them to their family, friends and other contacts. This broadened the reach of the project and ensured that when we were ready to involve more people, some were ready and waiting.

“I'm surprised at the amount of people that have engaged with the Nature Group outside of the collaborators. So, obviously, that had been filtering out for people to come on board so easily. Usually, you'd have a string of events to try and bring people in, but one night and everyone's in and committed. It's brilliant. **Joanne, April 2025**

Using the The Barna Way as homebase

Rena and Lisa's farm was the base for the growing and creative workshops and for other events, such as Sing for Your Supper, the Dawn Chorus and the Ballybunion Bean Festival. Project planning meetings and meitheals were also held there over the two years.

“ I'm excited about bringing people here to Barna, I realise what a beautiful place we have and it's nice to be able to share it and have more people interact with the trees and stuff that we could do art-wise around the place. That would be good for us, but also good for the community. **Rena, November 2023** ”

“ It really gives us a chance here at The Barna Way to think about how this land can be a hub for the type of changes and actions that we want to see and how its role might evolve into something totally different. **Lisa, November 2023** ”

“ I'm really glad that we chose to base the project at The Barna Way. It is so special, it's the perfect place to connect people with nature and community and to inspire them to protect the planet in any way, large or small. **Gráinne, September 2025** ”

“ It was great to get help at The Barna Way to keep the gardens going and the woodland walk open. It was important to make it more accessible and do some work around the community kitchen and seating in the forest area. Everywhere looked so beautiful and magical for the Ballybunion Bean Festival and it felt like all the work paid off. **Lisa, September 2025** ”

Creativity and art

Creativity played a central role in achieving our project outcomes. Issues such as climate change, biodiversity loss and food insecurity can be heavy and disempowering and they require us to think differently about how to engage people. Facts and figures on their own don't work. Creative approaches are relevant and accessible, engaging and exciting and they can be great fun. Creativity can by-pass the rational brain and spark us into action. Expression can also be an important antidote to depression related to environmental degradation.

“ I feel the creative element was really integral to everything and to how we co-created and imagined everything together. I loved how the Bean Festival evolved in such an imaginative way. **Lisa, September 2025** ”

“ It wasn't just about collecting data or delivering information, it was about presenting ideas in creative, engaging ways that sparked curiosity and pride. Lisa was really able to get people to connect with conservation issues through her drawings and it was a very unique way to experience mind shifts that I'm not used to. It was very exciting. **Joanne, September 2025** ”

“ It's another vehicle for delivering a message that a lot of people wouldn't have been exposed to. It just made it a little bit lighter and fun, because they're heavy topics. Lisa's drawings can be heavy too, but when you see them in a mind map, it just gives you a different dimension, a different insight. **Rena, September 2025** ”

“ Creativity was at the heart of everything we achieved. It wasn't just about art or drawing, but about imagination, playfulness, and having the freedom to try things without worrying about getting it wrong. Lisa's gifts as both an artist and communicator helped people picture what was possible. She had a way of encouraging, asking the right questions, and drawing out ideas that allowed everyone to share in the vision and feel part of the process. **Gráinne, September 2025** ”

Linking with other artists

One of the hopes of the project was to link with other artists, especially those interested in eco-social arts practices and climate action. A number of artists and creative collaborators came on board and greatly enriched the experience. Lisa, as well as being the embedded artist with Brilliant Ballybunion, is the Kerry County Council Visual Artist in Residence and was able to bring other artists into the conversation through this role.

“ It was wonderful to work with Sailhymn and to have them on residency at The Barna Way as part of Brilliant Ballybunion. The songs they co-created with the land were incredibly powerful. The artist, Jennie Moran, brought a huge amount of learning to the project in terms of how creative food can be and the importance of radical hospitality. It was also great to connect with other artists at the Earth Rising Festival in IMMA. **Lisa, September 2025** ”

Additionally, a workshop was hosted in Siamsa Tíre on International Women's Day by Lisa, in collaboration with three artists from our sister Ignite project, Neart na Machairí (Zoë Uí Fhaoláin Green, Silke Michels and Emer Fallon) and Bernadette Kiely. This was a really powerful event and provided great learning.

Bringing in young, fresh energy

Lily and Sailhymn both moved back home to Ballybunion during the second year of the project, and they were well able to dig in and get involved when necessary.

“ Bringing in young energy is good for any project, because that's the thing you need to sustain something going forward. **Rena, April 2025** ”

“ If I was to think about the future of Ballybunion, it has to be in the hands of younger people. Intergenerational learning and collaboration is key. **Lisa, April 2025** ”

Fridays on the Farm

The collaborators spent six days at The Barna Way during the first year, mixing vegetable growing with creative activities. While some learnt a lot about growing, and others really benefitted from the drawing and creative aspects, all of them were very appreciative of the social side, the relationship building, the connections with like-minded people, the fun and the chance to eat such wonderful local food. These days were so important in building a sense of connection and community.



Wild About Life

The collaborators loved these sessions. Wild About Life allowed us to really focus on the habitats and species surrounding our unique area. We initially focused on testing water quality and carrying out kick-samples to assess the macroinvertebrate communities in local streams, using them as bioindicators of water quality. We also spent a beautiful day in glorious sunshine exploring the various habitats along The Barna Way, recording plants, insects, and birds. During the project, we learned how to use bioacoustic equipment such as Audiomoths, how to set them up, download data, and begin identifying which birds were present, how frequently they occurred, and how to recognise rare or elusive species. Once the weather finally cooperated, we also learned how to conduct systematic, effort-based headland watches for whales and dolphins in our area. These activities not only built our knowledge and skills but also deepened our collective appreciation of Ballybunion's unique setting for a diverse range of species and habitats. This ignited the drive to protect them and from this the Ballybunion Nature Group and the breeding survey to protect the ringed plover were born.

Focusing more on broader community activities in the second year

While it was great to have the base at The Barna Way, we were always conscious of keeping the connection with Ballybunion town in order to raise awareness locally and to draw in the wider community. The North Kerry Sustainability Day in the Tinteán Theatre in February, the Bean Festival Launch outside Coast café in May and the development of

the Nature Group and ringed plover surveying on the beaches really contributed to this.

The North Kerry Sustainability Day, Tinteán Theatre, Ballybunion

The Sustainability Day was a very interactive and relaxed event, with local children, firefighters, sea rescue volunteers, biodiversity experts and collaborators each spending time on the stage. The children had worked on a large drawing with Lisa and their teacher (and one of our collaborators) Daniel at school, depicting their vision for the future, and this was displayed in the Theatre. The event was very informative, interactive and conversational. Over 147 members of the public attended. 23 people signed up to be part of five suggested spin-off local groups. This helped kick-start the Ballybunion Nature Group which launched a month later and the Ballybunion Sustainable Energy Community (SEC) which launched in November.

The Square Tomato Exhibition, Siamsa Tíre, Tralee

The exhibition was a great success. There was a large turnout at the opening and thousands of people engaged with it over the two months. It was wonderful that the Ballybunion National School art group got the Local Link bus into the exhibition and were so passionate about it (as well as lots of other schools through the Kerry Visual Artist in Residence programme). It was great to build on the relationship with Siamsa Tíre. Lisa's two new large drawings *Carnivorous Capitalism* and *What if the Humpback Came to Talk?* generated a lot of interest and conversation.

Ballybunion Bean Festival, The Barna Way

The Bean Festival was a unique, some thought crazy, idea which grew legs as the creative juices flowed. Planning the Festival was great fun for all involved.

It worked really well to concentrate on beans, one food instead of all food. That clear focus helped people take the seeds and plants seriously. The launch, giving out bean certificates and encouraging people to save a third for seed and a third for the festival. All worked really well. 80 people booked in, paid for and attended the day.

“ I love the idea of the Bean Festival. I love the way we're getting together every week, it just turns into a barrel of laughs really, because somebody comes up with another pun and we've had really interesting conversations from it. **Gráinne, April 2025** ”

“ I'm very excited about the Bean Festival. I think that's going to be great. There's a great buzz about it. It's good. It's really exciting and it's really fun. It's hilariously funny and dead serious at the same time. **Lisa, April 2025** ”

“ I felt it was brilliant from start to finish, I loved everything about it and felt so proud of us all. The food, the venues, the programme, the speakers, the energy all worked so well. Our collaborator, Marta, presented a play *The Bean Chronicles*, which was amazing, both fun and informative. **Lisa, September 2025** ”

‘What if we were Brilliant?’ installation at Earth Rising Festival, IMMA, Dublin

It was a real privilege to be one of the four projects selected nationally and it was lovely to have so many interested visitors in our base in studios 9 and 10. The Brilliant Ballybunion team worked very well together. We felt the audience really appreciated our work and there was a very positive response.

Short films

We produced nine short films over the course of the project. These were an important source of storytelling, documentation and also a catalyst for change and engagement (e.g. Seán's little film helped to explain the ringed plover project). It was great to work with such skilled people as Chris Garrett, videographer and and Clint Fitzgerald, editor. The films enabled us to relate more of the heart and energy of the project.

Paying chefs to cook locally sourced food for Fridays on the Farm and all events

It was very important that we walked our talk and provided local nutritious food for our collaborators and guests at events.

“ That was an element that we hadn't factored into the initial plan and it really lifted the experience into a whole other realm in terms of hospitality and nourishment. The food became such a highlight of the project and made people feel valued and cared for. **Lisa, October 2024** ”

“ Steph and Lily were brilliant. I think they really added to the whole dynamic of the two years. And they have two different skill sets. Lily is very much the vegan chef and Steph's very local and uses everything and is very gentle in her approach, it's all about mindfulness. **Rena, September 2025** ”

Don't underestimate the benefits of a good bus trip

Taking people away from their normal surroundings (a day out!), bringing them to see interesting things, feeding them well, and also spending time together in the bus (a school trip!), is great for relationship building and group bonding. It is also good fun, especially if there are some characters on board.

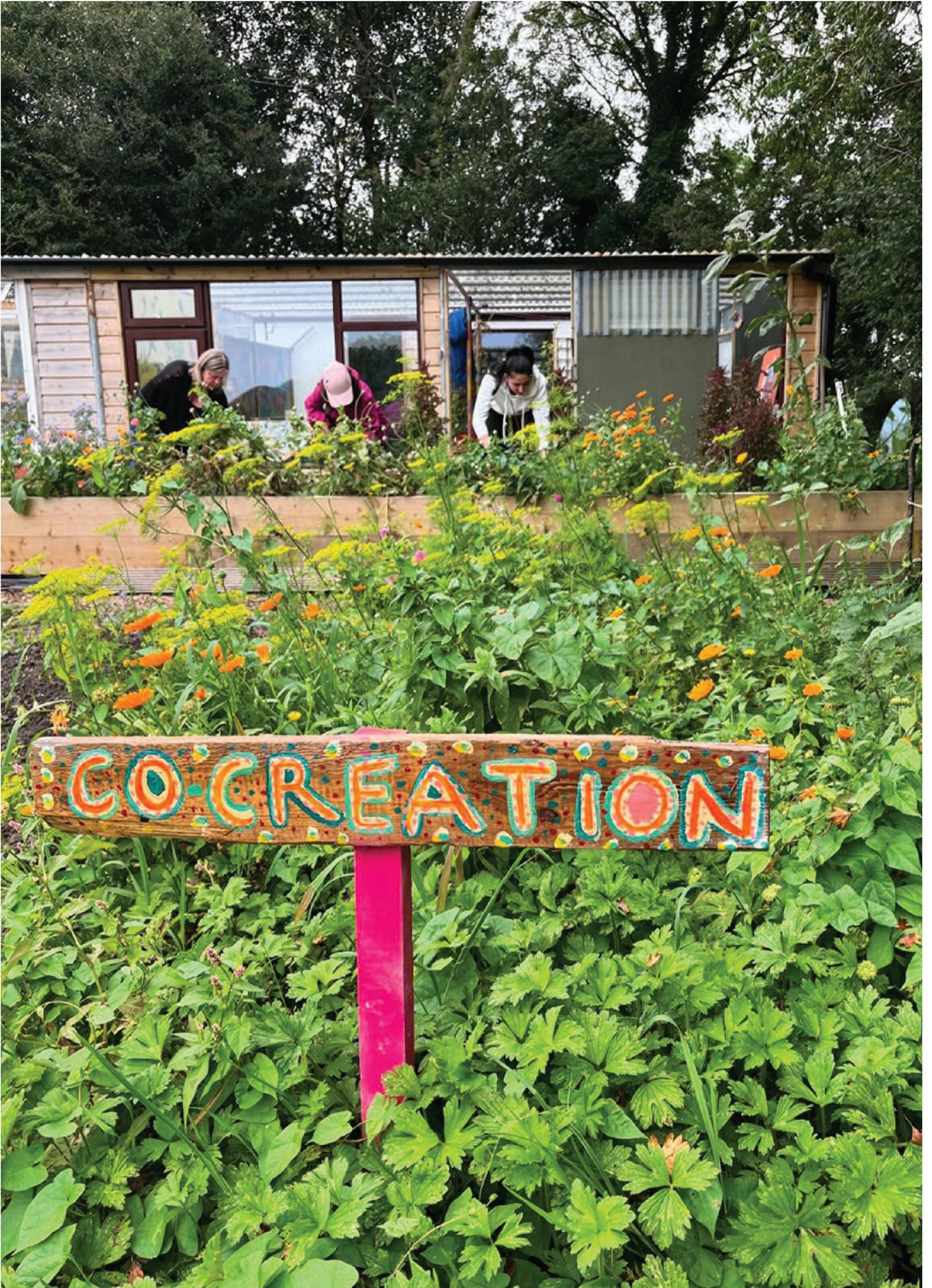
Creative Ireland support

Creative Ireland was very supportive throughout. Gráinne had initial concerns about the responsibility of managing the financial side of the project. But these were allayed, largely because of the excellent support provided by Anne-Marie in Creative Ireland and the back-up expertise of Conor, treasurer of the Community Forum.

Reflective learning and evaluation

The reflective learning and evaluation process ran from the beginning of the project and has culminated in this learning brief. The benefits of incorporating it into our work from the beginning were as follows: it was an essential part of the co-creative process to ensure that voices are heard and valued; it allowed for more inclusive, collective decision-making and helped deflect potential conflict; it was not a shock to the system as it might have been if it only happened at the end; for some of us this was a new experience, so we all got used to reflecting and doing it more effectively over the timespan; being asked to reflect and do a reflective interview meant that important feedback came out which otherwise may not have surfaced; reflecting in real time ensured that feedback, whether from collaborators or project team members influenced the direction of the project, mistakes were rectified and wrong roads avoided; interviews at the beginning of the project and shared discussion enabled project team members to be open with each other from the outset and express their expectations, hopes and concerns for the project; with this understanding we then put effective channels of communication and decision-making structures in place, to mitigate any potential problems.

“ It was invaluable to have someone with the level of Clare's expertise and experience to guide the process. **Gráinne, September 2025** ”



SECTION 5: Challenges

‘The regular challenges will always be, did I get the shopping? Have they enough wellington boots to wear? But I love those little challenges. That's why I always get involved in different things, because I like organising things, and seeing how they go.’

Gráinne, March 2024

The pressure of hosting the project in The Barna Way

While there is no doubt that the project benefitted from having The Barna Way as a base for the growing and creative activities, events and meetings, there was a lot of work involved in initially adjusting and preparing the indoor and outdoor spaces for groups of people, in making places more accessible and in tidying up before and after activities. The weather at times didn't help.

“ The biggest challenge is that it is a bit of a building site up there, the mud is just ferocious, so I need to sort that. And I have to move the sink. And I have a lot of plumbing issues - the water heater hasn't worked since the beginning of the year. **Rena, March 2024** ”

“ Being the host is just hours of extra work. Delighted to do it. It's great learning and it's what the dream was, to do this, and we'll give it the best shot, but it does require more work, so you're not just being the artist, you're actually the host as well. **Lisa, March 2024** ”

Raising awareness and shifting mindsets about biodiversity, conservation and climate action takes time

“ While great progress was made, it also showed us where continued effort and patience will be needed. The positive side is that the foundation has now been laid, people are more informed and engaged than before, and this momentum can only grow. **Joanne, Sept 2025** ”

Balancing ambition with resources

“ I feel like we have achieved so much and have the most amazing team, so it is shocking to think that this hugely successful project has ended without further funding (yet). **Lisa, Sept 2025** ”

“ We had many exciting ideas, but not all could be realised within the timeframe or with the capacity available. Rather than viewing this as a limitation though, I think it highlighted the areas where extra support, funding, and structure could make the greatest difference in future projects. **Joanne, Sept 2025** ”

“ I feel that the collaborators are just getting their independence or just getting their feet under them, but you feel like they still need an input, or they still need something to come back to. It's like we're on the cusp of something. I do think if there was another year of the project it would really become completely community focused, which I think would be lovely. **Rena, Sept 2025** ”

Managing time and workload

“ There were moments when organising events under pressure felt really demanding, especially while trying to balance different roles and responsibilities. I remember when we got approval for the IGNITE funding and we had our first ‘interview/meeting’ with Creative Ireland, they were encouraging us to reduce the number of events and activities we had planned. Now I understand why and I'm glad we did. It was often a rollercoaster, trying to organise event after event, ensuring the paperwork and insurance was in order, transport, speakers, printing, website, food, venues, media consent etc, etc. Especially in the first year. **Gráinne, Sept 2025** ”

Balancing team expectations with collaborators' different capacities to get involved

Some collaborators were frustrated that due to their own time or family constraints they couldn't get involved in all the activities. At times, this left them feeling guilty that they were letting people down or that they were missing out. On the other side, members of the project team sometimes felt a bit disappointed when people didn't show up or were unable to commit in advance.

Co-ordinating, and communicating with the collaborators

“ It takes a lot of communication to make sure everyone is on the same page, and at times this was a little difficult. Multiple personalities can be hard to control and for me (a people pleaser), I was always aware that I had to be reassuring and comforting, but also a little insistent! **Gráinne, Sept 2025** ”



Photo by Domnick Walsh at The Square Tomato exhibition, Siamsa Tíre

Lack of quiet creative time for Lisa

Lisa felt that she had very little time to draw, think and reflect.

“Most of my time was dedicated to working in Barna (growing food and keeping the spaces open and accessible), doing PR, the films and events. I took very little time for drawing, writing and quiet studio time, compared to the previous creative climate action project with the Dingle farmers (but I felt more part of a collective creative project this time which was fabulous, and different, and I really enjoyed that). Perhaps I needed to go on an off-farm residency to find quiet time away from the daily jobs.

Lisa, September 2025

The amount of work involved in growing food

We had hoped that more of our collaborators would have been successful in growing food in their own gardens, but the barriers are understandable, including exposure to the harsh salty sea winds, bindweed, lack of time to develop and maintain a garden, physical problems and work or family commitments.

“Growing food is so hard in an increasingly challenging climate environment. Also when supermarkets are selling vegetables below cost, it is hard to justify growing it yourself. The level of work is still shocking to me and that it takes growing months in advance to just cook a meal.

Lisa, September 2025

Is there enough energy to develop a community garden?

Quite a few of the collaborators want to see a community garden in Ballybunion, but as yet, no-one has the time or the drive to set it up and ensure that it runs smoothly. Will that emerge?

Community engagement was a learning curve

While we had excellent involvement from the collaborators, reaching a wider audience across the town was achieved to a degree with the Sustainability Day but that remains a goal and will hopefully be achieved through the Nature Group and the SEC. Would it have been good to build in more time and resources for wider community engagement earlier in the project? We’re not sure. The experience of working on a one-year creative climate action project, with a group of Dingle farmers in 2022, indicated that it was very difficult to build capacity within the farmers’ group and engage the wider public, all in the one year. This is why, in this project, we decided to focus on the group of collaborators for the first year, to build that foundation, and to then branch out into the broader community in the second year.

Lack of national print media interest in the project

There was a disappointing lack of interest in the project from the national print media despite many press releases. There was more interest in an unplanned visit by a well-known actor to The Barna Way, than two years of transformative change by our small community. This is frustrating and concerning. How do we get the positive messages about climate action out in a world consumed by fear, warmongering and negativity? Maybe future projects could work with media partners or access more dedicated, strategic media support from Creative Ireland.



Using keep cups

It was very difficult for people involved in the project to get used to bringing their own cups or bottles. Old habits definitely die hard!

“ Maybe people get tired, I don't know. But that's probably the simplest thing for us to do, not just our group, but as a nation, as an individual, to start using a bottle and a keep cup.

Rena, Sept 2025

Creative flexibility versus structure

A small number of collaborators found the fluid nature of the Friday on the Farm and Imagine days difficult, especially those who had limited time to give, or who had taken days off work to be there. They wanted to maximise their involvement, learning and contribution as much as possible and to understand what they were expected to do. A clearer plan and outline of the day's activities and objectives circulated in advance would have helped to meet this challenge. Additionally, some 'fact' sheets or a list of useful contacts might have been useful. Feedback also indicated that impromptu meetings that weren't previously in the diary were difficult for those who had to plan ahead.

Maintaining momentum over the two years

There is no doubt that a number of collaborators flagged in the second year, and some dipped towards the end. This was due to personal reasons and time availability, but it does beg the question as to whether it is reasonable to expect such a high level of commitment by all collaborators, essentially volunteers, over the space of two years.

The pace of the action

In the second year, the pace was sometimes too fast for some of the collaborators, particularly those with limited time. They found it difficult to keep up with what was happening. While it involves more work, written updates, even just bullet points, would have helped to keep everyone up to speed.

Obtaining feedback after activities and events

After the Friday on the Farm and Imagine sessions and site visits, we asked collaborators to fill out an evaluation form. While this worked well initially and the feedback was useful, it became increasingly hard to get people to fill them in before they rushed off! We checked with the collaborators to see if there was an easier way of doing it, but the answers were too varied, so we decided to drop the forms altogether. Also, we realised that people didn't want to be totally honest with any negative feedback as they had built such good relationships with the project team, who they could see making such an effort, and they didn't want to be critical. People were more willing to be open in the interview process.

We also had problems securing feedback from members of the public attending our two main events. Using Google Forms, we looked for feedback from attendees after the North Kerry Sustainability Day and only nine people, out of an e-mail list of 147, responded. Similarly, after the Ballybunion Bean Festival, we asked 80 people for online feedback and only three people responded. However, a Comment Book on a table at the back of the festival tent attracted a much better response (26 people).

SECTION 6: Recommendations

For similar projects

- Pick a good interdisciplinary project team. Try to get like-minded people with different skills that balance each other out.
- Start off with a group of interested collaborators. They will become the heart of the project, and the foundation for future action when the project ends.
- Encourage collaboration and co-creation from the start. Involving local experts, community members, and partner organisations early helps build trust and shares responsibility.
- Focus on accessibility and inclusivity. Make it easy for people to get involved, regardless of age, background, or experience, so that the project truly benefits the wider community, and nobody feels left out.
- Put as much emphasis on community engagement as on conservation outcomes. The scientific work, monitoring, data collection, and habitat protection is essential, but what really creates lasting change is when people feel part of it.
- Combine science and creativity from the very beginning, as this builds pride, ownership, and momentum. Creativity, beauty and fun are key to sparking imagination.
- Allow flexibility in planning. Be prepared to adjust the number of activities or events based on capacity, resources, and feedback. Quality over quantity is key and don't be too rigid. Sometimes you just have to go with it and see where it takes you.
- Build in reflective evaluation. Having someone objective to offer guidance and feedback, like Clare did with us, can help projects stay on track and improve as they develop.
- Celebrate the successes. Celebrate the time spent with other like-minded people and the fun that comes with that.
- Keep the focus on food and what you serve at events. Think LOAF (local, organic, animal friendly and fairtrade). There is no such thing as cheap food. What are you serving from your local community? Acknowledge where the food comes from.
- Encourage creativity in all its forms. It may appear in the form of a song, a drawing, a poem or a play. Trust the process and leave room for fun!
- Recognise and pay for the labour that normally goes unpaid (particularly in the home and garden)
- Place the marine environment at the heart of similar projects in coastal communities. Other towns with a coastal identity could benefit from blending land and marine based conservation, highlighting how interconnected these systems are.

For policy makers

- Increased investment in the Arts is essential. Arts projects like Brilliant Ballybunion have a unique ability to draw people in, spark their creativity, and create genuine connections with nature and the world. The most effective outcomes come from talking to each other, hanging out, growing food and eating together. This empowers communities at grassroots level, just like Brilliant Ballybunion has. A sense of pride comes from participating and feeling like you can make a change, no matter how small. Creativity allows this to happen more easily than filling in long, laborious forms and sitting at long-winded meetings. Trust the people who know and love their own place and community.
- Recognise the importance of integrating creativity and education into biodiversity policy. Facts and figures are vital, but it is storytelling, art, and community pride that inspire people to act.
- Ensure that community-led conservation is given the long-term support it needs. Projects like this one can spark incredible change but they need structures, funding, and recognition to grow and prosper. Supporting local groups like the Ballybunion Nature Group ensures that conservation is not a one-off project but an ongoing, embedded practice.
- Given the proposed developments in the Shannon Estuary region, marine biodiversity needs to be placed at the centre of planning and policy. Protecting habitats for dolphins, seabirds, and coastal species must go hand in hand with development, so that communities like Ballybunion can thrive both environmentally and economically. Special Areas of Conservation, etc, need to be respected otherwise they lose their meaning.
- Change food procurement rules to prioritise organic and locally grown food. This would provide a real incentive for growers to grow food and would provide healthy and seasonal food for communities.
- Provide more long-term support for horticulture and plant-based diets.
- Take a lead and ban glyphosate in Ireland, given its detrimental impact on human health and biodiversity.
- Provide funding for more creative climate action projects and for periods of five years.
- Provide long-term support and a proper income to avoid precarity of existence for artists embedded in communities so real transformative change can happen.
- Come out to communities and see and learn from what's happening on the ground.

SECTION 7: The Experience of the Community Collaborators



Karen Costello

Background

Karen was born in Dublin and her grandmother's house, opposite the old cattle market on Prussia Street, currently has a protective order on it, the last house standing.

“ When she passed away the cattle men from all over Ireland came up and did a guard of honour from the church down to Glasnevin. **March 2024** ”

Karen was brought up in Jersey, but she feels very connected to Kerry. Her grandmother was a Galvin from Finuge, outside Listowel, so she has cousins in the area. Over twenty years ago, Karen's mother bought a holiday home in Ballybunion.

“ From the first time I came here I felt at home and at peace and swore to myself this is where I want to be. **March 2024** ”

Karen has lived in many countries from the Dominican Republic to the Canary Islands, but she always loved coming to Ballybunion on holidays. In 2019, she left mainland Spain and moved over permanently. Karen has worked as an English teacher and trainer for many years. She loves photography and enjoys making things out of driftwood and rocks collected from the beach.

Reasons for applying

Karen joined the project to learn, to help and to get involved. She was brought up to respect nature and is very interested in biodiversity. She is also very proud of Ballybunion.

“ Who can't be proud of Ballybunion, it's a brilliant place to live. You just step out and you're stepping out into nature, it's not just the beach, it's the surrounding areas. I love going down to the Cashen and you see the wildlife down there, the birds, the walks and everything, you can't beat it. Go down to the Virgin Rock and see the colours of the sea. I know it's a dolphin day because it's quiet and it's calm and I know I can go down and will see dolphins. **March 2024** ”

From living in the Costa del Sol, Karen has seen how built-up tourist areas can become and she is concerned that Ballybunion might go down the same route.

“ We're lucky so far in Ballybunion. We've got a chance to save it. Because we're not built up, we can actually rectify what's happening. Other places have to really go back. That's one of the reasons why I'm so interested in this project, there is positivity, the chance to reverse the effect before it's too late. **March 2024** ”

For most of her adult life, Karen has lived in apartments, so when she moved to Ballybunion she was all fired up to grow her own vegetables. During the Covid lockdown she gave it a go and did manage to produce some lovely baby salad leaves but she soon realised that she needed some professional advice. Karen knew that Brilliant Ballybunion was for her.

“ I was completely converted on the opening night. I left and went straight home and applied. Because I knew in my heart this was for me, and that I would be dedicated to it, that it's something I can actually do, just the positivity of it. **March 2024** ”

“ I'm thrilled to be on board. Absolutely delighted. And when I told people I was in, they said it's just right up your tree, literally. **March 2024** ”

Concerns about climate change

“ It's hard. I'm in my 60's, so I have seen changes through my life, in the seasons - the basic things, you knew when it was winter, when it was autumn, spring and summer. They were defined. And that's, I think, gone. You're not guaranteed anything. Also, the strength of the summers, when it's hot, it's very, very hot, when it's cold, it's exceptionally cold and when it's wet, it's extremely wet. In Spain, temperatures used to be in the high 30's, now they're hitting the high 40's. **March 2024** ”

Karen has noticed how the cliffs are being eroded, even over the few years she has been living in Ballybunion. She is also concerned about the erosion on the beaches, the movement of the sand and the long-term impact this could have.

“ I've seen beaches disappear in other places. That has huge implications on everything, sea life, wildlife. It's very detrimental. **March 2024** ”

Involvement in the project has meant that, while she is still worried, Karen now has a better knowledge and understanding of climate change.

“ I'm much more conscious of it now than I ever was before. All I read before was headlines in the newspapers, nothing on a one-to-one basis, and with all the workshops we've done and everything, I've learned so much more. **April 2025** ”

Concerns about the loss of biodiversity

Karen loves nature and is very saddened by the loss of biodiversity.

“ When I was a child, everything just seemed prettier in a sense, the wildflowers, the bumble bees, the bees, everything was so much more natural. Now we're trying to make it natural by buying these wildflower seeds that we can throw into the garden. I just remember them always being there. **March 2024** ”

When Karen was in Jersey she often visited Jersey Zoo and got to know the conservationist, Gerald Durrell, who taught schoolchildren about the extinct bird Dodo and the importance of preserving species. This left a lasting impression on her.

Bio-invasion and the movement of species because of climate change is also a concern.

“ I saw it more in the Mediterranean, there's a beetle that came over from Africa. It came because it got hotter in Spain, and it got into the palm trees, so they were being cut down everywhere. **March 2024** ”

Food and growing aspects of project

Karen has a passion for natural food, so she really enjoyed the food side of the project.

“ I wanted to be a chef when I was younger, so I'm interested in food and how it tastes. So, for me, Lily and Stephanie's food was fascinating, and their culinary skills were just wonderful. I'm one of those people that will eat very slowly and savour it, and want to know exactly, you get a hint of this and get a hint of that. It's wonderful to know that it's just come across from the field, it's near you. **September 2025** ”

Bearing in mind our carbon footprint, Karen feels we should be growing what we can at home. Her mother was a big gardener, which rubbed off on her. When she lived in apartments, she always had some plants and herbs. Since moving to Ireland, she has tried to grow vegetables without huge success, so she joined the project keen to learn more.

Karen has spondylitis in her back which means she has to be careful what she does physically. However, it didn't stop her participating in the Fridays on the Farm and other growing days at The Barna Way, she used her stool and avoided heavy lifting. The experience helped her gain confidence.



“ In my garden at home, I've sowed some wildflowers for the bees, the things I can do, I've got mint growing, which is very easy, herbs, chives, coriander, so the little things I've done in pots, which are easier for me than digging and weeding. **April 2024**

Karen grew beans for the Bean Festival in pots in her sun lounge. The experience was calming and she was delighted with her crop.

“ I'd sit in my chair and just watch my beans. Mentally, it was very stabilising. It was very good for mental awareness as well. There was a very soothing effect. I found it very peaceful. Many an afternoon I had my siesta out there looking at my beans.

September 2025

“ I've always been a frustrated grower, but I now know I'm successful with beans, so I will go forward with them. The national dish in Jersey is the bean crock, and the people are known as Jersey beans, so it's interlinked!

September 2025

Karen really enjoyed the visits to other places, particularly the Ballymaloe Festival of Food, Gortbrack Farm and Íon Organics.

“ When we were in Ballymaloe, there was the lady that gave the talk on the seeds and it's interesting, going back and thinking about how the seeds have changed, and she's trying to save the seeds. **September 2024**

“ We went to Gortbrack farm with Ian McGregor. That was like going into a Harry Potter land. I thought it was beautiful, absolutely stunning and his talk was amazing as well, and the enthusiasm he had, and his humour. I'd go there again and again and again. I was enthralled by it. **September 2024**

“ Liz and John in Ballyduff, she grows a lot of lavender and makes natural creams. I've always been into that, so that was fascinating. Also, John had built little outhouses and barbecue and seating areas using clay, mud and straw. It's something that I've seen on TV, that they do in Devon, and that was quite fascinating too. **September 2024**

Nature and biodiversity aspects of project

Karen has always had an interest in plants, trees and wildlife and she was very keen to learn more.

“ When the whale watching opportunity came up, I was like, oh, please, please, please, let there be a place, please. And when it came up, it was the best day they'd had for over two years. We saw everything, and it was just magical. **September 2024**

“ I've learned a lot from Seán, because he's great with the birds and the lack of wildlife and how the numbers have diminished. **September 2024**

“ Wild about Life was fascinating because I learnt a lot about the local habitats. Joanne was brilliant, taking us out and teaching about the rivers, the coastline. And that led to the Nature Group, which I follow, but physically I haven't taken part. It's fascinating how it's growing. I just like to support them and know what the other collaborators have branched off to do.

September 2025

Karen wouldn't have been used to hedgerows where she lived before moving to Ballybunion, so she was particularly interested in learning about their value for biodiversity and the importance of maintaining them.

Creative aspects of the project

While Karen is passionate about photography, she always felt she wasn't artistic in other conventional ways.

“ I remember my first art teacher, she says, Karen, I will never make an artist out of you. But at least I tried, I'm always a trier, I try so hard. I think that's the reason why I got into photography at a very early age, because I couldn't draw, couldn't paint. **March 2024**

But she gave the creative activities a go and before long realised that she really enjoyed them and was able to shake off the past.

“ My inhibitions of drawing and everything have completely gone. One day we were sitting in the polytunnel drawing plants and I really loved it. I enjoy it so much now I've drawn sketches and things like that away from the farm. My confidence has grown completely. **September 2024**

“ Lisa puts words into art. You could be talking about something, and then she says, just draw it and then you start, and the idea grows. Then she says, put that aside for a while and then go back to it and see what's feasible. I suppose that's how the Bean Festival grew.

September 2025

Karen helped Lisa install the Square Tomato exhibition in Siamsa Tíre, she attended the launch and then came back again with her son.

“ He's the one who said, 'oh, you know, in Japan they've got square watermelons'. They did it for packaging, but they were inedible, so now they're just used for decorations. We tend to feel that we've got this control of how things look and taste. Who are we to decide what things look like? **April 2025**

On the Sunday of the Earth Rising festival in IMMA, Karen watched people watching the films.

“ We got a real captive audience, the seats were full. People were watching them. So, if they're watching them, there's a message getting across to them. They were accessible. I think they come across very, very well.

September 2025

Creativity captures people's imagination

“ It's not just words, black and white writing or giving a spiel. **September 2025**

Karen has loved working on her journal, filling it with photo collages, and adding drawings, dates and what happened on project days. She put a slide presentation together highlighting project activities in the first year for the collaborators' gathering in November 2024 and it was also shown to the public at the Sustainability Day in February 2025 and at the Earth Rising festival, IMMA, in September.

“ My art is my photography, and I loved doing that presentation. They used it in the Tinteán, I was so proud.

April 2025

She is updating the slides and will give them to the collaborators as a memory of the two years.

Impact of project on Karen

At the beginning Karen didn't feel she knew enough. She also felt quite shy, and it took her a while to open up.

“ Some of the collaborators were more knowledgeable than me on wildlife and the history of Ballybunion, so it was initially a challenge to get involved and learn. But what was nice is that we were all like-minded people, so I could ask questions, and they could answer me. They taught me a lot as well.

September 2024

She feels much more confident in her knowledge and wants to learn more, so is currently completing the 'Climate Change within the Community' course run by MTU and Trinity College, with Lisa and Rena.

Despite her physical challenges, Karen now has more faith in her growing abilities. She understands the value of good local/homegrown food. She will definitely continue with art and has more confidence in her painting. She feels so much more integrated into the local community.

“ It was very good for me to meet like-minded people in Ballybunion. I'd call them my friends now. I can go down to the shop, and about an hour later I come home, I only went out for a few minutes. As one of our friends said, she's from Limerick, but, since a child, she's spent her summer holidays here, we went out for a walk, and she said, you know more people than me now!

September 2025

Karen has a lot of administrative experience, and she was keen to get involved in community activities locally. Following the second round of reflective interviews midway through the project, Rena asked if she would take on a part-time role with Tidy Towns, helping with admin and funding applications and spreading the word.

“ I couldn't believe it, and I said, oh yes, I grabbed it. It was perfect.

September 2025

“ I have learned a lot more about sustainability and the effect locally, and I've carried this over to Tidy Towns. For the funding applications I'm confident to say what we're doing, what we need in Ballybunion, and I understand what I'm saying, not just bluffing.

September 2024

Mentally for Karen, Brilliant Ballybunion was absolutely brilliant.

“ It was just what I needed. I think for anybody who might have any issues mentally, Barna is a grounding area. It's very secure, very safe, very beautiful, very peaceful and mind blowing. I think that's important.

September 2025

“ I still feel so privileged to have been chosen. I still remember the day when Lisa rang me in the gym, nearly falling off my bike. It's been a god save for me. It got me out there getting involved in the community.

April 2025

Karen was part of the group who participated in the Earth Rising festival in IMMA.

“ I think the pinnacle, for me, was probably IMMA because I was talking to the public about 'What if We Were Brilliant?' They were going, what's this all about, and I was able to tell them. The people went there for a specific reason, to learn about climate change, the effects of everything that's happening to our world, but I wasn't daunted, and they got it, they got the whole thing about it.

September 2025

Impact of project on local community

Karen believes that the project definitely caught the imagination of some people in the town.

“ On the day of the Tinteán, I just saw how we could reach even more people. It was just the enthusiasm of everybody and people going away cheerful. Some of them spent the whole day there, from ten in the morning to four in the afternoon. The food was excellent, it was spot on. It was just a lovely, enjoyable day.

April 2025

The tone of the project was important.

“ We didn't offend anybody. We weren't out screaming or shouting. We're just saying, you can do that this way, it's a fun way, and it's helping the climate.

September 2025

The Nature Group, the first new splinter group, is also a great way to include more interested people.

“ I think the success of the plover campaign was brilliant.

April 2025

Looking ahead

“ One thing I've learned with Tidy Towns is the amount of grants that are out there, and though we say that this has come to an end, all I keep thinking is that there's other things we can be doing. We just need to keep our fingers on the pulse and do it.

September 2025

“ I think there's some of us that are real core collaborators, because we have more time to dedicate to it, and we will probably evolve from there. There's always something out there to continue and there will be that ripple effect.

September 2025

“ I think with the Ballybunion Nature Group, we can forge ahead and look at other things. If they need help with funding, that's what I'm doing with Tidy Towns, so I could help out by doing application forms.

September 2025

“ What I've learned in Brilliant Ballybunion that I would bring into Tidy Towns, the schools and the youth clubs, is make it fun, fun and wacky.

September 2025

Have Karen's initial expectations for the project been met?

“ It's exactly how I imagined it, if not more. Working with Lisa, I know things can come out of the hat, be prepared for the unexpected, but everything, the growing, the learning about food, the learning about seeds, going on the dolphin watching, learning about the rivers, how to plant things, going out of my comfort zone with the art and doing the PowerPoint presentation that I did, just everything. **September 2025**

“ It's the perfect project for me. Absolutely perfect. **April 2025**

“ It's been a wild journey, and I'd love to go on it again. **September 2025**





Seán Culhane

Background

Seán has lived within the parish of Ballybunion all his life. He is now living with his partner on about three quarters of an acre on the seaward side of the Beale road. Since he was a small child, Seán has had an interest in nature and bio-diversity. Inspired by the diverse habitat within Ballybunion - estuary, rocky shore, cliffs, and hedgerows - he has been an avid birdwatcher since he was six years old. He is also passionate about photography and sketching. Seán works in electronic engineering which takes a lot of his time and energy, but he is a creative person without necessarily having the time to be creative.

“ I'm always trying to organise when exactly I'll have time for photography or bird watching and it can be quite frustrating when you're working and you're running and racing. I'll have more time now, because I started a new position after Christmas and I'll be able to work from home. **March 2024** ”

“ Everything can't be about work either, especially when you get into your fifties, especially if you want to do something for your community as well, you can't keep putting it off. **March 2024** ”

Reasons for applying

Seán applied for the project because he wanted to contribute to his local community. He also thought it was a very relevant project and sounded like a perfect fit and outlet for both his creative drive and life-long desire to document Ballybunion's biodiversity.

“ I wouldn't naturally have an engineering brain. I would be more of a creative person, I suppose an artist without having been formally trained, or even properly informally trained, but I still have a lot of passion for it. I see this project as something I couldn't miss really, because it does seem to have all the aspects. **March 2024** ”

“ I hope that it will sow seeds for longer term projects in Ballybunion, something tangible, maybe not that you're going to make any great civic project for the community going forward, but perhaps show that climate change and resilience doesn't have to be something that is talked about at governmental level, but it can happen and it can be spoken about constructively, and things can happen in your own community. **March 2024** ”

Concerns about climate change

Seán thinks climate change is ‘horrendous’ and he knows that when you ‘doomscroll’ you feel there's nothing you can do about it. Which is why he doesn't want to dwell on the negative and instead do something positive.

“ We are a windswept area here, and I think if we needed any reminder about climate change the sheer amount of water or rain we're getting is just that. In terms of the bigger picture, in terms of the planet, I can't say anything more profound that hasn't been said already, but in terms of our community here in Ballybunion, I would see us getting stronger and more frequent storms. If we can build some climate resilience in terms of that out of this project, then I think that's hopeful. **March 2024** ”



“ We're completely bombasted with statistics every day and news stories, so I don't think there's any point, because you could become debilitated by it. I think if you do, it all becomes a fuzzleball, and you don't have much clarity of thought. I've probably landed up in a place where I would say I'm happy enough to be constructive and focus on a single point of the overall climate issue, so I'm not focusing on the negative stuff. **September 2024** ”

Concerns about the loss of biodiversity

Seán is equally concerned and saddened by the loss of biodiversity. But, as above, he wants to contribute and be constructive.

“ When you are in a project, I find you're almost standing back looking. I'm not vexed, I'm not any more radicalized in terms of doing anything. I guess I'm just in a practical state of mind in terms of problem solving and finding that stimulating, and that in itself brings hope because you can see possibilities. **April 2025** ”

He is also aware that the dial is not fixed, and he doesn't want to be negatively talking about the age of extinction.

“ I live out in the countryside and I can see how intensive dairy farming has become, and I can see changes in the bird population. But not all for the bad. Since I was a kid, I have seen some bird species increase and some decrease. And some species coming to Ireland even locally that were not there when I was young, the little egret for example. I think bird numbers, particularly small bird numbers, have declined hugely. That's the most visible thing for me. **March 2024** ”

“ We have new species, and some birds have rebounded. It's incredible. There's a lot of strange things going on. We've had a big influx of Glossy Ibis in Cork and Kerry, who would normally be in Spain, and they're quite tropical looking. They definitely would stand out in an Irish estuary. They've landed here in their hundreds across Britain and Ireland, even in Tralee, in different parts of Kerry and West Cork. It's interesting, new species arriving, and there are good news stories about smaller passerine birds as well. **September 2025** ”

The direction Seán actively took in the project has helped him stay hopeful.

“ I'm not feeling very negative right now about it, possibly because, when you're actively involved in protection of your ecosystem, in a project or whatever, not saying it takes it away, but it does help. And I'm not inclined to doom scroll because it doesn't work. The reasons are there to be more negative, so it could be my mood that I'm more positive, and it mightn't make a whole pile of sense, but it's just the way I feel right now. **April 2025** ”

Food and growing aspects of project

Seán used to grow vegetables in the town as a child, but the soil was good, and the area was sheltered. Where he now lives the conditions are not so favourable.

“ I would love to learn because I think it's important that people learn to grow food because our futures are uncertain. The thing with me and growing food is that it always seems such a huge project. Where I live is quite exposed to the sea and it's not easy to get shelter from the wind. **March 2024** ”

He appreciated what the project had to offer.

“ There's a whole pile of knowledge and contacts through Barna, there's a huge amount of knowledge down there and I think if you were into gardening right now, at this moment, you couldn't be in a better place. Also, when we went to Ballymaloe, there were some very interesting people talking about the wider aspects, with soil and bees and honey. **September 2024** ”

And he was influenced to shop differently.

“ I'm definitely more focused on organic food now, it's emphasized that with me, and it's emphasized how bad what I might have been buying all along in the supermarket is. **September 2024** ”

But it didn't bring Seán back to growing at home, yet. As his spare time is limited, he had to make decisions around where to put his focus.

“ I've had a lot of hobbies in my life, and I'm torn between what to do and when, I have only so much time. When the spring will come, I know the instinct will be there to do it, but I would be hoping that there will be a later point in my life when I'll return to it. **September 2024** ”

*In terms of focusing on this project, it's a conservation thing I have in my head. So, I guess I can't be doing all the things, but I absolutely appreciate everything that's going on down there. **September 2024***

Nature and biodiversity aspects of project

Seán has been interested in birds since he was a small child.

“ There was an ornithologist in Tralee called Frank King. He used to be on Radio Kerry and he was Kerry's best-known ornithologist. I used to be writing to him as a kid, I still have some letters from the early 1980's. I'd write and he'd write back on his typewriter. He was always telling me how special Ballybunion was and how lucky I was to have such a variation within such a small space. We have estuary, we have sand dune, we have shingle, we have rocky shore, we have high cliffs, so we have a lot in terms of coastal aspects in one small area. It encompasses a lot. Okay, we don't have a sheltered harbour. But we have a lot of variation in marine habitat in one small area. **March 2024** ”

Seán was a member of the Irish Wildbird Conservancy (now Birdwatch Ireland) and he would head off to meetings with his dad. So, he would know the species and the trends in terms of bird populations, which birds have increased, which have declined, and the signature birds in the area.

“ I would be particularly passionate about our local estuary here, which was always important for holding huge curlew, lapwing and wigeon numbers and there's been a huge decline in those, particularly in waders so I think we can take from other projects across Ireland and help our own local estuary. **March 2024** ”

When he joined the project, Seán wanted to do something hopeful and constructive, but he needed to maximise the time he had available. Taking inspiration from the 4RPlanet Strategy developed by the UK based, Climate Crisis Advisory Group (CCAG), he felt that he could be effective in helping to 'rebuild ecosystems' and 'build resilience into the local ecology' around Ballybunion.

Throughout 2024, Seán developed the idea of setting up a campaign to protect the ringed plover on the local beaches.

*The ring plover nests on shingle, and it nests throughout the western seaboard, but it's facing some pressure. It's on the orange list in Ireland, it's on the red list in the UK, and we're lucky it's still there. **September 2024***

The little bird feigns a broken wing when it has a chick and Seán had noticed that when he visited the beach during the summer he wasn't seeing this signature sign, which indicated that the plovers may not be breeding successfully. The ringed plover, in itself, exposes three vulnerabilities in our coastline: the hardening of the coast (rock armour/boulders) and the subsequent disappearance of shingle; dogs running loose on beaches and frightening the birds; and sea level rise.

“ The little shingles and smaller stones, the rounded stones where it nested traditionally, where its evolution has allowed it to camouflage, along with its chick, that is reduced almost to nothing in Ballybunion. I think there's just two areas, but where it remains is a busy part of the beach, so it won't nest there but in the more remote area, the shingle is almost gone. **September 2024** ”

“ So, you have the lack of shingle, the dogs, and I think the rising tide is another thing, because it needs to nest on the higher side of the tide. So, in tackling those three elements, I think focusing on the ring plover in itself is good. **September 2024** ”

Seán did some research and gathered his ideas together. With his passion and drive, and the support from the Brilliant Ballybunion project team and collaborators, the Ballybunion Nature Group and the ringed plover surveying campaign were born in the spring of 2025.

“ I suppose I'm goal driven. I wanted something tangible. So, I saw the opportunity, I observed and observed and saw something tangible in the plover project and kept driving it. And it's kicked off now, it's initiated, and it's up and running. Some people who joined the Nature Group are carrying out the surveying on a daily basis. **April 2025** ”

The tone was important.

“ We did our own little local signs, and we tried to endear them, and we spoke to people, and we didn't lecture anyone with dogs, and I think most people were bought into it. Some people, they would have no idea about the birds, but I think we got the tone right. It's important to get people on board at the start, get that message in right. **September 2025** ”

“ The Golf Club has promised that they will help designate a little area to encourage birds next year, so that's fantastic to have them on board. Next year will be very interesting. **September 2025** ”

Creative aspects of project

While Seán appreciates art and creativity and he has always enjoyed sketching birds and nature, he felt that he was not always immediately there with the creative sides of the project and some of it went over his head. But he can certainly understand the importance of creativity in spreading the message.

“ Sometimes, in terms of the artistic points, when we're down at the Friday on the Farm, with the notebook, for example, I can't force myself to be instantly artistic, I'd feel the pressure a bit, so it doesn't happen like that for me. But in the wider creative sense, if you're trying to create something for ecology or for conservation, then I think I'm in a much happier place. **September 2024** ”

“ I don't always see a tangible connection, but I certainly understand that art can inspire in growing food and spreading the message about sustainability. I know with the Square Tomato, it does stick in my head, and what Lisa experienced in India, and the possibilities that there could be more extreme forms of processed food, and that would be around the corner if we allow it to go down that road. That picture definitely sticks in my head. **April 2025** ”

Seán also felt that the little films were powerful, they grabbed people's attention and encouraged them to get involved. And, for Seán, the link between art and nature is strong.

“ I think interest in nature always starts with art. Inspiration in whatever type of nature, like mammals or birds or dolphins, quite often starts with images you see as a child and drawings, and I think that continues into adulthood. **September 2025** ”

“ I think there's a child in all of us that never leaves when it comes to nature and you can certainly ignite or reignite passion in the environment and nature through art. I think it's always one of the main drivers, it has to be now anyway, because it can't be just bad news, we have to do something. **September 2025** ”

Impact of project on Seán

Seán was working very long hours over the last year and a half and he felt he had only so much time to give to the project, so he couldn't get involved in all aspects. He really enjoyed the 'Wild About Life sessions with Joanne, her breadth of knowledge on ecology and particularly the water testing day. He also found some of the talks in the Ballymaloe Festival of Food really interesting. Seán really enjoyed and valued the group and the trust they built up.

“ The camaraderie, meeting the people in the community that I wouldn't know and building up a relationship with them and the days out. Building community was important and enjoyable for me because I hadn't been involved in a local community group before. There's a network of people there now. So, it's great, absolutely They are all very nice people, without exception, you could meet and have a conflag with them. We all got on really well. There was no awkwardness, it's just very natural. **September 2025** ”

“ A specific Friday on the Farm when we sat down, talking openly about hearing about the project, I won't say there was a bit of soul bearing that day, but I thought it was very interesting, people's minds opened up probably more that day than any other day. Lisa said, look, let's just sit down and talk about what brought us in here. And people were quite open about their own feelings, and maybe not even knowing people in the community. I thought there was a great energy there that day. **September 2024** ”

“ I liked the days out, that was nice. I think that built a lot of bonds, especially eating lunch together. Then on the bus trip, whether you're in a school trip when you're younger, or you're in it when you're a senior, there's that same kind of expectation, we're all on this together, and it does bring people together. All the elements are there, Gráinne is the schoolteacher and there can be a lot of giggling and joking and that's nice. **September 2025** ”



Seán was part of the Brilliant Ballybunion team that travelled to the Earth Rising festival at IMMA.

“ I thought IMMA was good. I thought there was an element of possibly preaching to the converted a bit there, the people who attended, which is great too, because I guess you can build contacts and meet people and see possibilities from what other people are doing. The food was really, really nice. It was a very enjoyable weekend. **September 2025** ”

“ Even though I'm saying you're speaking to the converted, you're still learning something. You can take that experience and think deeper as to how you would engage people in Ballybunion who ordinarily wouldn't get involved, and how you can try and get people to visualise themselves or to become interested in groups like ours, or to make them know that they are part of whatever we're trying to do as well. **September 2025** ”

But the most stimulating aspect for Seán was driving the plover project.

“ The project has compelled me to do something. This project, isn't it called Ignite? So, it definitely ignited something in me. **September 2024** ”

Impact of project on local community

For Seán this project is important because it has shown that climate action is local and can be driven by local communities. It brings local awareness to what may seem like distant problems.

“ I think it's possible to show that ecologically driven projects can occur in your town as well, and they're not just some academic driven projects that are in other places, and it can be a little bit more democratic and inclusive. **April 2025** ”

“ I missed the Bean Festival, but I know it was fantastic. It has brought future food security to the fore in my mind, not just food miles, but also food supply security within your own area. They definitely demonstrated that on the day and it certainly keeps the topic going in the community. **September 2025** ”

Looking ahead

The project and its offshoots have opened up on-going routes of action for the community of Ballybunion.

“ For everyone, there is a framework there, through our Nature Group, for people to get involved. People are listening to ecological problems all the time, every day, on the news, and they probably get turned off it, but it became local for people who wanted to get involved. Even if you're not interested, people are aware now that there are ecological groups in the area, maybe they might get a spark someday and say, why don't I get involved in this? Anybody who wants something different can join a community and feel empowered. I think when you're doing something it's much easier, as opposed to being a bystander, just listening to the bad news. **September 2025** ”

Have Seán's initial expectations for the project been met?

“ I didn't initially have immediate expectations on seeing the poster but, a short bit in, I could see the possibilities. **September 2025** ”

“ At the start, I found some of the aims or what the project was about a little bit abstract. I'd say, if I was to go into another one now, it would probably be clearer. Like with anything else, you become more practiced, and I would understand better what the possible outcomes are, what the possibilities are and things would be less abstract for me. How you bring the art and creativity and food and biodiversity together to a single group and say, this is going to be a project. You don't know where you're going to land with it, but probably the whole project was set up to see what could happen and what could spark. **September 2025** ”

“ I've enjoyed it and being in Barna, just having the crack, I enjoyed that a lot. Of course, there's a bit of disappointment when it's over. **September 2025** ”



Daniel Hayes

Background

Daniel grew up in Ballybunion but left in 2009 to do a teaching degree in England and remained there for eight years. He returned in 2017 and is now the 6th class teacher at Scoil Iosagáin, a mixed primary school in the town with over 200 pupils. He recently completed a Master's Degree in education leadership. Daniel lives in Limerick with his wife, Nicole, and two young children.

Scoil Íosagáin was built in 2011 and has a large outside space, a concrete yard, a football pitch and a green area. Environmental awareness and care, both local and beyond, form major parts of the geography and science curriculum and Daniel has completed numerous projects with the children on these issues over the past number of years.

He is also developing a growing space in his own home garden and follows Charles Dowding's no dig method. Daniel has an increasing knowledge of native species of flora and fauna, and why they are so important to us. He sees growing food and paying attention to local biodiversity as two of the most important life skills for the future.

Reasons for applying

Daniel hoped the project would help with his own personal development and the development in his school practice. He also wanted to give something back, through the children in the school, to their 120 families and into the local community.

“ That web idea that one person shares it on to the next and the next and it becomes exponential. **March 2024** ”

When Daniel applied to participate in the project, he was in the process of setting up a school community committee, with parents and friends of the school, with the aims of developing an improved growing space at school, improving community links and realising the potential for an increase in the biodiversity of the school grounds and beyond. At the time, the school had a polytunnel and some raised beds in the concreted area. Daniel planned to move these out to a more natural area and develop an allotment garden where children could learn to grow and appreciate local biodiversity. He also hoped to develop the school grounds with the same idea in mind.

“ I'm not a virtue signaller, I have a very low profile on social media. I'm not that type of person. I'd rather just do the actions and get it done. I won't be out there spouting stuff out. But I can use the school platform as much as I can and do my actions to make the change. **March 2024** ”

Concerns about climate change

When joining the project Daniel was very aware and concerned, sometimes anxious, about climate change, the global scale of it and the impact. However, he still believed in the power of small actions and the ripple effect.

“ What's been done on a global scale, on a national scale, on an international scale, there's only so much we can do as people. A lot of it gets put back to the people, but it's not the person who generates a lot of the damage, on a personal scale. Yes, we all change our habits, but you're talking about nine billion or eight billion people. So, I suppose the anxiety is the biggest thing that comes with it. **March 2024** ”

“ But look, we can all make a difference. I'll hopefully make that difference through my teaching and the more people you can educate, I suppose, the more awareness you can raise, then the hope is that in the future those people will take that on as an important thing. **March 2024** ”

Daniel believes in positivity, bringing people with you and doing what you can.

“ I wouldn't be standing in a classroom saying things like, the end is near, the sky is falling if we don't do this. That is the wrong approach because it'll get people's backs up. It's about actually doing the positive things and doing the positive change and just focusing on the positive things. **March 2024** ”

“ I feel content and happy with my own lifestyle, regarding climate change and its impacts. I feel like I'm on top of everything from a personal level. I feel like I'm doing the things that I should do. And I feel like I'm having a positive influence on those around me at work, which is a broad outreach, if you think about it, you've got 200 plus children, you've got 30 staff, so I think that it is having an impact there as well. Just small things like compost, double bins in each classroom, all that kind of stuff. **September 2024** ”

Concerns about the loss of biodiversity

Again, Daniel is very aware of the importance of biodiversity and native species and the ramifications of their loss.

“ We can't survive without it. Diversity is the key. I think protecting what we have is important but also regenerating what used to be here. **March 2024** ”

While, as with climate change, the outlook can look grim, Daniel is keen to pick up on the positives. He keeps an eye on the Biodiversity Ireland website, where he sees the encouraging steps that are being taken.

“ What I've seen in the last few months would make me think that things aren't as bad as they might be. **April 2025** ”

“ And then the other positive side of that, there's a sighting of the plover down on the Cashen during the week. **April 2025** ”

Food and growing aspects of project

Daniel loved the Fridays on the Farm.

“ I like working and learning from doing, that's me, if I'm busy with my hands, I'm happy, while engaging with people with similar experience and similar interests. **September 2024** ”

“ I really enjoy learning from people who are, in my opinion, experts in their fields. They might not even feel it themselves, but sitting and listening to people like Rena, who just knows it, it's her second nature to know her stuff and know the land. I love listening to people like that. **September 2025** ”

He really enjoyed the day in Ballymaloe Festival of Food, particularly the presentations on soil and seed-saving.

“ It's interesting, our whole livelihood on earth depends on six feet of topsoil, that's all we've got. The seed saving was eye opening as well. I find it such a difficult skill, that is way beyond my capabilities at the moment, but it's something that you should aspire towards. Seed saving is free food next year, if you think about it that way. I think it's a skill that you need to get over time. **September 2024** ”

Daniel enjoyed the food experience and eating new things.

“ Lily was amazing. The food she cooked and food she made, it was inspirational and you'd love to take that on board and the fact that it's locally grown. Lily would go out there to the farm and come back an hour later and figure out what she's having. That's a skill. It's a gift to be able to do that. I like the idea of finding stuff that you can put into a meal. **September 2025** ”

In 2024, Daniel began the process of expanding the school's growing space, and as part of this he planned to move the polytunnel.

“ I reclaimed a plot of waste ground in school, maybe 200 square meters, mowed it down to nothing, and we put in 12 raised beds inside there, and the polytunnel's migrating there for next spring. The nine by four-meter polytunnel is in a concreted area in the school and has raised beds in it. But it just feels wrong. A nice polytunnel in a concrete jungle, surrounded by four walls, just didn't feel right. **September 2024** ”

He grew a range of vegetables with the kids but found it disheartening that they literally didn't see the 'fruits of their labour' because they were on holidays during the summer, and also because some plants failed. In the spring of 2025, Daniel tried a more focused approach, with a nod to the Bean Festival.

“ This year, we are focusing on beans, because of the festival. So, let's all grow two, three beds of beans and let's make it a thing that this year we grew beans, as opposed to, I won't say scatter gun approach because it was intentional, but when you try to do too much, nothing gets done really well. And we're coining this phrase this year - 'do less, better'. Whatever you're doing, do less of it, but do it much better. **April 2025** ”



“ So, I'm pulling it back a small bit, we're growing some beans, we're growing sunflowers, some pumpkins, a little bit of salad. We're trying to do a little bit of food and a little bit of biodiversity as well. Because one thing we saw with all the sunflowers last year was how it was so visual for kids, but also you could see the aphids, tens of ladybirds hanging around, and the kids love ladybirds and butterflies. **April 2025**

“ I've got my sixth class buddied up with the junior infants, and they're growing cress and sunflowers together. So, every morning it's up and down to the classrooms, watering the plants. And the sixth class are taking everything home for the Easter holidays to bring it back in, in two weeks' time. **April 2025**

“ Our beans were successful, just broad beans in a bed. But again, the success was towards the end of the summer, and I was up there tidying the garden up and thinking, if the kids were here now, this is an abundance. **September 2025**

“ I would continue to do beans because they're very visual and finding the pods of beans is exciting. I sent girls out who had nothing to do with gardening club and wouldn't normally be interested in the garden, and they loved it. They loved the picking. And I think that's the magic that you're trying to do, that joy of, we've planted something, it has grown, and there's something at the end of it for us. You'd hope they'll remember that growing food isn't actually difficult, per se, it takes management, but it can be done. All you need is good soil. **September 2025**

The frame of the polytunnel has now moved and will be wrapped in time for planting next spring.

At home, Daniel has about half an acre of land that he is reclaiming. He is planting trees and hopes to see a woodland there in 20 years' time. In 2023, he experimented with growing on eight beds.

“ I have an interest in growing, I grew loads last year that we didn't end up using just because I was trying to learn and trying to get this right. **March 2024**

Daniel and Nicole have two young children, the second was born in June 2024 which naturally affected Daniel's time availability!

“ It's just been crazy. I probably stopped two weeks into July properly looking after my vegetable garden and what will hopefully be some sort of biodiversity haven in the future. And I saw this at school as well, if you let things go it's amazing what happens, lady birds, butterflies, caterpillars, dragonflies, all around the garden, that weren't there before, from just leaving nature alone. **September 2024**

Daniel was given a small polytunnel which he erected in the spring of 2024, but it wasn't very strong and subsequently blew down in a winter storm. However, it was useful in that it gave him the chance to experiment with polytunnel growing.

“ I wanted to learn how to manage a polytunnel, what kind of time it needed. And I didn't touch it from maybe late July, early August, and there's tomatoes growing inside there. I left it, and they just grew away. So, it's a small bit of learning, but I will probably upgrade to a proper polytunnel and wrap it properly and have the space to do what I want.

September 2024

The home gardening had to take a back seat again in the summer of 2025, but Daniel's interest is long term.

“ I physically couldn't have gone up there at all, but the bed is there, and the tree nursery has come on. My compost heaps are flying. So, there is a long game there.

September 2025

“ I bring the kids out the back garden, and to the field beyond, picking blackberries. I just stood there and they sat down beside me. They're literally pulling and giving and pulling and giving. They love it, and I like them knowing that they can just eat from the land. And it's really, really important that they know that that's where food can come from. **September 2025**

Nature and biodiversity aspects of project

The best part of the project for Daniel has been Wild About Life and learning from Joanne.

“ I think she's an absolute wealth of information and such an asset to the group. Her knowledge, not only about whales and dolphins, but her knowledge of other things related all around the county and all around the country, is a great resource for us to have. I would just sit and listen to her talk. **April 2025**

However, time was not always on his side.

“ I really enjoyed the Wild About Life stuff but the way things worked out, I feel like that's the thing that I was least involved in, and probably the thing that I'm most interested in. I just missed days with school, and I couldn't make days, and I couldn't make this that and the other. **September 2025**

Daniel loved learning about monitoring and data gathering.

“ I am an absolute data fiend. I love looking at data, I love looking at trends, and I love finding trends within the data. We're going to take an audiomoth into school. It comes back into learning, it's just real, tangible maths that they can do, as well as just the fun, can we see if we can build an upward trend in the number of species recorded by planting certain things or by having certain areas, or by improving certain conditions around the school? If kids grow up with that hard data showing them that they have made a positive impact, that then has a positive impact on them. **April 2025** ”

Daniel is turning to ‘biodiversity friendly methods of living and existing’ at home too.

“ I put a hedge down here earlier in the year, and there was a choice process for us on what to put in. I was keen to get something native, so we put in some 180 native child-friendly hornbeams around the perimeter of the garden. It'll do what it's supposed to do with the screen. It'll brown in the winter, which isn't fantastic, but we'll get to see it again in the spring. It's small things like that. **September 2024** ”

“ I'm going to do recordings and make changes to my own piece of land and see if there is a trend in species increasing or decreasing because of certain actions that I'm doing, or certain things that are happening in my local vicinity. **April 2025** ”

Creative aspects of the project

While Daniel thinks creatively, art is not his thing, he is more hands on.

“ I know Lisa would hate me saying it, but I'm really poor at art. I'm an ideas person. I find it very hard to transfer through my hand and onto whatever medium I'm using, very hard. I can have an imagination, but I can't transfer it, never could. I've enjoyed exploring the different mediums, as a learning thing, like the charcoal. Lisa made charcoal, a piece of wood inside an old mathematical set, put into the fire overnight and pull out next day, and ready to go. That's so cool, I love it. But ask me to draw with it, I'll draw a tree that has three branches, a children's tree that stands beside the house. **September 2024** ”

“ That probably comes from restlessness more than anything. I'm always looking for something different. I like doing the thing that no one thought of. Some people might call it reimagining the wheel. I'm the most unconventional teacher you'll ever meet in your life and I know it. I've been trusted to take risks. **September 2024** ”

“ I was aware of the artistic side of it, I came into that with open eyes, and I still am open to that kind of stuff, I'm not slamming it or anything like that. But it's just not me. **September 2025** ”

Impact of project on Daniel

Time has been a real challenge for Daniel, because of his full-time job and having to get cover if he took time off during the school day, and also having a young toddler and then welcoming in a new baby in the first summer of the project. He was also working on a Master's degree. But he still felt part of the project and the group, and he gained knowledge and confidence.

“ It does feel empowering. I feel like my depth of knowledge, but also my confidence in talking about all of these things has developed. I'm not just saying these random thoughts I had one day. I feel this conscious stream of thought is as a result of the eight months. **September 2024** ”

He learnt about the benefits of working in a meitheal and how to organise one effectively.

“ Making sure that when everybody turns up to something that you're organised to get jobs done, that everybody knows straight away what they're doing. I went up and did a few bits above in Barna. I said to Lisa, I'll give you four hours, just let me know what to do. So, the benefits of that kind of stuff, for when I go to set up, let's say, the polytunnel in the school. Organise a meitheal, set amount of time, set amount of people, set amount of jobs. **September 2025** ”

Daniel has also enjoyed getting to know the group.

“ To me, this is perfect, getting your hands stuck in, doing the work, while having proper, meaningful, engaging conversations. It's one of the best things about it, because you might be a stranger, and you might have some chit chat and I have no time for chit chat at all, I just switch off completely. But when you're actually working and getting your hands dirty with somebody and talking about a shared interest that's when ideas start sparking. **September 2024** ”

Impact of project on local community

“ It's really hard to pinpoint one thing, it's exponential, you feel there's a movement. It's not in one direction, it's a broadening. **September 2024** ”

“ I tested the water, I do little experiments every now and again with friends and I just drop in what we're doing, to my close friends, who are not in any way the same as me in terms of this interest, and they are nonchalant and positive, ‘oh yeah, that's good’. It's a positive leaning. **September 2024** ”

Daniel feels that the Sustainability Day in the Tinteán Theatre had a massive impact locally.

“ I think it was only received positively, and the proof is in the creation of the splinter groups that came out of it and the public support for those splinter groups as well. **April 2025** ”



“ I think it's allowed people who wouldn't have been interested in all the aspects, the arts, the conservation and the growing, further the one they are interested in. I see that as being the biggest impact. **September 2025** ”

Looking ahead

Daniel feels he has more time now and he hopes to become more active again.

“ Now that I've finished my own studies, I need to get back into that. And I understand that the project is coming to the end of its cycle. But the network and all these splinters exist. I know if I got in contact with Seán or got in contact with Joanne, or got in contact with whoever and said, here, can I jump in with this, can I take on a project, can I work with you on this they'd all be like, hands down, they'd be in. **September 2025** ”

“ It's in my plans to go down and do a proper unit with the kids on sand dunes, and within that unit to look at the ecology and environmental side of things and look at the plover. Once the plover survey is done, the data will be there, and the kids can go down with me and Seán. **September 2025** ”

“ I want to tie back in with Joanne at some level as well, for Wild about Life with the kids, kick sampling and monitoring. I do want to step back into that. I have the time again. **September 2025** ”

Daniel would also love to see a community garden or allotment and/or a growing group in Ballybunion.

“ A community growing space where people can learn how to grow and share ideas, while also growing stuff that has visual, tangible results. **September 2025** ”

Have Daniel's initial expectations for the project been met?

“ My expectations have been met, absolutely. I expected to go into it, to meet people who knew more than I did about certain things, to learn off them, to workshop with them, and to develop ideas with them. That definitely happened. I feel like I've grown a lot in terms of networking, in terms of what I can bring to a situation as well. **September 2025** ”

“ Definitely towards the second half of the project I fell away, and I felt out of the loop with a lot of stuff. But that's nothing to do with the project, it's more to do with my engagement with it. I had so much going on in my life that it was shunted to the side. For me the project has been a very positive thing. I am disappointed myself that I dipped but I do want to get back into it and carry on. So, for me, it's not going to be just the two years. **September 2025** ”



Aoife Hederman

Background

Aoife is originally from Naas in Kildare. She was the third generation of her family to holiday regularly in Ballybunion. Her grandmother would cycle there from her home in Limerick, and she instilled her love for Ballybunion into Aoife's father who then shared it with his family. In 2020, Aoife moved from Kildare to Ballybunion and is now living with her partner and their young son on his farm in Kilconly, past the Bromore cliffs. Initially, Aoife worked on local dairy farms offering relief milking services. She is now working in a local chemist shop.

“ I feel like I'm in a transitional phase of my life now, learning new skills and I'm so much more open-minded than I was, say five years ago. That's life, you continue growing the whole time. **March 2024** ”

Aoife loves Ballybunion and feels a deep connection to the area.

“ I'm just so thrilled to be living here now and to be bringing up a child here. I think it is a fabulous, fabulous, fabulous community, a loving environment. I've moved from Naas, which is a big commuter town and where I've lived my whole life, and I could walk from one end of the street to the other and not know anyone, whereas you can't go five steps in Ballybunion without seeing a friendly face. **March 2024** ”

Aoife is involved with Beale GAA and is a member of Ballybunion Badminton Club. She loves crafting, cooking and gardening. Before joining the project, she had some experience of growing flowers, herbs and vegetables and she enjoyed foraging for seasonal foods.

Reasons for applying

Aoife wanted to learn how to make more sustainable choices and to encourage others to do the same. She believed in protecting and encouraging Irish and local flora and fauna. She also thought that there is more genuine interest in consuming local and seasonal produce and produce with low food miles because of inflation and rising food costs. But she appreciated that it is a hard task to find locally grown, affordable foodstuffs and there is potential to expand on this by encouraging people to grow their own food.

“ It seems like a project that's bigger than yourself, bigger than your group, bigger than your community. It seems like it'll have a really big impact, hopefully. It seems like a hand reaching out that people are going to grab on to and like seeds, they'll just spread out into the community. **March 2024** ”

“ It'd be great to put Ballybunion on the map as a place of ecological interest, because there's so many beautiful walks, there's so much I think I take for granted walking around the town. **March 2024** ”

Concerns about climate change

Aoife thinks that climate change can be overwhelming, especially when you experience the extreme weather, and think of future impacts.

“ It keeps coming to the forefront of my mind, the insane weather we're having, such bad storms and living on the coast, there's no hiding from it, there's crazy storms. I love nature and you're going for walks on the beach in this lovely area and you're thinking okay, so sea temperature is rising, and it's in the back of my mind, this is going to affect the coastal ecosystems and things like that. **March 2024** ”

But it can be hard for people to see what they can do about it.

“ I think it's something that we all take for granted, it's in the news and yeah, the government is doing things about it. We don't take personal responsibility for what's going on because we're looking at the big cruise ships and the emissions they're putting out and industry and we're thinking, sure we're just a grain of sand on the beach and there's so much more going on. **March 2024** ”

Ballybunion is in a very vulnerable position.

“ Ballybunion is your typical town that has three months, you have one season of the year where you're generating the economy, your income. So, if you're having poor weather, like last July, it was an absolute washout, and as you walked down the street, all you could hear is, it's a disaster, it's a disaster, there's no one around, there's no business. And without businesses thriving a town will turn into a ghost town. **March 2024** ”

However, being in the project has brought some hope.

“ There's no denying it, the facts are there, and it is overwhelming, but I think there's a hint of positivity around and when you're in a group with like-minded people, suddenly it doesn't seem as daunting. There are people out there that do care. **October 2024** ”

Concerns about the loss of biodiversity

Aoife has always loved nature and for her the loss of biodiversity and the slow response is distressing.

“ From the time I was a child, I can remember nearly every David Attenborough on BBC and RTE programmes like Mooney Goes Wild. I have grown up absolutely eating and loving all these nature shows and I still do really, really appreciate them. So, when you're listening to Irish radio, and you're watching animal and nature shows on TV, and you're hearing about all of the local Irish creatures like hen harriers and different types of butterflies and bumblebees that are actually under threat, you're thinking, how in the name of god is this still going on? How are we not taking action? **March 2024** ”

But it is important to focus on the positive.

“ There are great wins, and there's great triumphs, like with the ringed plover for Seán and they found a nest, which is fantastic. But then, on the other side, Joanne reported that the water is looking bad in Kilonly again, and that's having an effect on the biodiversity in the rivers and the streams, so there is good and bad with it. I suppose we need to cherish the wins, but keep ploughing on forward, because it is still going downhill. **April 2025** ”

Food and growing aspects of project

Aoife loves growing and this is the side of the project that she was most interested in.

“ I love practicality. I love learning new skills and hearing what has worked for people and what hasn't. I love having the shared knowledge. **April 2025** ”

She got into gardening about ten years ago when she started growing bulbs and then planting flowers that she bought in the garden centre. She moved onto planting seeds and from flowers to food like tomatoes, broccoli and cucumber.

When she joined the project, Aoife had been growing very successfully the previous year with her mother-in-law in her no-dig garden on the farm. It was real team effort.

“ It's a skill I think that everyone should have because it is absolutely insane when you pick up baby corn in SuperValu and it came from Kenya, or broccoli from Egypt and you're thinking how in the world, when we have a country built for growing food, how are we importing so much? It's bananas to me. **March 2024** ”

Seeing how food was being grown organically in Barna brought up questions for Aoife about whether she would go organic herself.

“ If I was to do my own vegetable garden, will it be organic? Can I afford to go organic? Is it practical to go organic, or do I start non-organic and do I shift over time to organic? **October 2024** ”

Being in the project and having a young child has sharpened her focus on food.

“ I'm now so interested in where our food is coming from, what miles are on it, and what are we actually putting into our mouths. Gerald has started weaning. He's eating what Tom and I are eating as I'm thinking I would rather be feeding him food where I know exactly what he's eating. I'm picking up packets and I'm reading the back of it, where has this come from? I would have done it before sporadically, but now it's honed-in, a laser focus. **October 2024** ”

“ I feel it's time to start peeling back and trying to focus on what we can eat that's more local, or what meals can we start cooking that aren't extravagant, they seem basic but are still nutritious and delicious. I think we overcomplicate things, your meal has to be your meat and spuds and two veg. Peel it back, just run outside and see what can I gather up here now. **October 2024** ”



“ I remember at the start of the group, I was thinking who could afford to only buy organic? It's so much more expensive. Now, I find myself picking up things to see are they organic. I'm thinking, can you afford not to buy it? Can you afford not to be more mindful about what you're putting into your body, on your plate, into your child's mouth. It is a light switch that turned on.

April 2025

“ Everything we've learned in our group now is like going to a doctor for advice. Why are you going to the doctor for advice if you're not going to take it? You've been given all this advice. You've been given all this knowledge. Why are you ignoring it? Start trusting in it now and figure it out. **April 2025**

In the spring of 2025, Aoife broke new ground and started her own vegetable garden on the farm.

“ It was an ambition, but you make excuses, I don't have enough time or whatever. Then this year, my partner and my mother-in-law were fantastic helping to prepare a raised bed, enough talking now and plant what you want to plant. So, from one raised bed, now we have six. So far, I have potatoes that are coming, broccoli and carrots.

April 2025

“ What spurred that on was the Bean Festival. They were looking for people to grow beans and I was thinking, I definitely have bean seeds, and that led to me pulling out all my seeds and saying, it's time to get in the boat and row. **April 2025**

She is now on the organic journey.

“ We're trying our best to be organic, where we are. We have fabulous cow dung from Tom's animals, we've no sprays. I suppose we are organic without having the certification. But it was a conscious choice, because at one stage I was rooting through my flower beds, I was putting down my seeds, and I kept finding leather jackets. I was thinking, oh, how are we going to control this? I was just trying to get rid of them as I was finding them and I was looking up biological agents instead of sprays. And I was thinking, no, you're still putting something in, let's try figure it out. It's definitely got me thinking more. **April 2025**

Nature and biodiversity aspects of project

When Aoife joined the project, she was keen to learn more about the local biodiversity and habitat. She enjoyed learning about the native flowers in Gortbrack Farm and was very interested in the Wild About Life session looking at the impact of pollution in the stream at Kilconly, but she would have liked to have done more.

“ I thought we'd be doing more of that, maybe on the Cashen, on the Golf Course, even on the beach and sand dunes, just trying to figure out, okay, what do we actually have around here? How can we advertise it? This is what we have, this is how we should be protecting it and encouraging it. **October 2024**

Creative aspects of the project

Aoife has a real appreciation for creativity, and she feels that growing and cooking are artforms, but creating art, in the traditional sense, is a challenge for her.

“ I did do art in school, I loved it. But I remember my art teacher at my parent teacher meeting saying, okay, Aoife can't draw, but she's very creative, so she'll get through. That stuck in my head even though it was only a throw away comment. So now when we're drawing, I'm like, okay, don't be crappy. **October 2024**

“ I enjoy the idea of art more than I enjoy it, because I can see the benefits of the artwork and the peace that comes with it and the connection that comes with it. But I do find it challenging, and I prefer doing the routine growing, the more practical side. **October 2024**

“ That's in no way a critique of Lisa, because I can sit back and I can enjoy everyone else's response. Everyone could be looking at the one wall, and the 15 people can take different things from it. I find that so interesting and gorgeous and beautiful. But I don't enjoy it for myself. I enjoy it for everyone else. **October 2024**

Aoife really appreciates the impact of creativity and its reach.

“ The sustainability event was very artistic, how things were done, and even to see how the children in one of the classes were involved. The stage was very impactful. It was so welcoming. It was like you're walking into someone's sitting room, you were going in to have a cup of tea and a chat. I think it was fabulous. **April 2025**

“ Lisa's art exhibition in February and March gained so much traction and had so many people interested and drawn in. There were people speaking about it that I would never have thought would be interested in biodiversity. But it was really the art they went to see. You don't realise how big of an arm art actually has, and the creativity actually has, in drawing people in. It is phenomenal what it can do. It's very inclusive, because even if you're not great at it, it doesn't matter, you can still appreciate it. **April 2025**

The small films were impactful.

“ I really enjoyed watching Lisa’s interview with Vandana Shiva. I took great inspiration from it, I think because I was like, okay, this is a world renowned scientist, and she’s speaking on what you can do in your garden that’s going to make an impact, or what you can do in your community, and how the small steps do all add up.

April 2025

Impact of project on Aoife

Since moving to Ballybunion, Aoife has adopted a farming lifestyle, and she and her partner are very much part of the farming community. While they are environmentally conscious, they are beef farmers and this meant that at times in the project, Aoife felt a bit defensive. But the project has highlighted the benefits of sustainable farming, so then she wants to give her farming friends the other side of the argument.

“ I’m watching Tom rear cattle, calve cows, rear their young, sell them for beef, and the whole chain of events that goes with that, and the joy and the despair that comes with it. I think it is a lovely lifestyle, and I feel like there’s only negative being spoken about it, where I see the positive of it as well. **October 2024**

“ I feel like sometimes I’m sitting on the fence listening to one side, and then I have to come back with my points on that and talk to the farming community, whether that be my partner or our friends, and they’d be, well, actually, what about this point of view? I’m like, yeah, those are valid points as well. So, I find myself caught between two worlds. **October 2024**

“ Without this project, I wouldn’t have been thinking about the benefits of less beef or meat or less intensive farming and milking, I was thinking of the jobs it creates, or the pros for it. Now I find myself taking a step back again and then thinking, okay, what if we did go organic? What are the benefits? What are the negatives? **October 2024**

Aoife has really enjoyed the group, the people and the accountability.

“ The project has been really insightful, and it encourages you to try to make better choices when it holds you accountable, and when you’re in a group of like-minded people who are all trying to forge their way forward the best possible way. **October 2024**

“ You can slack off at home and who knows, but when you’re meeting with the others you want to be able to encourage, and to be encouraged by doing the right thing. And I just think everyone is so lovely, everyone is coming in with fresh, good energy, looking for better. It’s a really solid, nice group of people.

October 2024

“ I just love hearing everyone’s stories. I enjoy listening to what other people are doing. Why is Seán so interested in the birds, why is so and so interested in growing, and Danny’s history stories. I really like learning from people, even seeing Lisa and Rena keep their bees. I’d love to keep bees in the future, so I’m thinking, why are they doing it, what are the benefits? **April 2025**

The project has helped Aoife to change habits and practices, and to spread the word.

“ I’m not going to put my broccoli in this plastic bag in the shop, because I don’t need to. I’ll just put it in my tote bag, or tiny little things like using a shampoo bar instead of buying bottled shampoo. Okay, that’s a tiny change, but I’m going to mention it to my friends, maybe they’ll take suit as well. It’s all a big domino effect.

October 2024

Aoife’s friends have responded really positively for the most part.

“ It’s taking your stand and being confident to talk about it. Because I don’t think I really have been confident before this. I’m not very outspoken about my own views on things. But I was saying I’m involved in this project and it’s really good, and this is what we’re doing, and this is actually what I’ve been doing. I was taking pride in what we’ve learned and what we’ve been exposed to.

October 2024

Impact of project on local community

Aoife feels that the Sustainability Day really helped to spread awareness locally about the project and then the sub-groups have launched it further into the community.

“ I think the project has brought more awareness into how to tread lightly, bringing awareness into what steps you’re taking, what’s going to disturb, or maybe encouraging people to not be afraid to take a leap and say, right will we plant this to help the pollinators, or don’t be walking your dog off the lead because that’s where there’s nests.

April 2025

And the gentle conversational tone is important.

“ We can gently tap each other on the shoulder without offending, I think it'll help people along. It's just a conversation, this is what happens when we do x, y, z, so if you could take her handy. If it's more conversational, which it is, I think it's a very gentle nod in the right direction. Come walk with us, not forcing people to do it. It's a gentle, loving way forward.

April 2025

Looking ahead

Aoife feels that Brilliant Ballybunion is only the beginning and it won't end in 2025.

“ I could literally visualize it as a tree, the trunk is Brilliant Ballybunion, and now all these branches I can imagine are coming off it, because everyone has such different interests. I can imagine just everyone branching off, doing their own little things, and then everyone being all linked in together with it as well. Hopefully, we have the foundation set together, that there's a community of people to lean on and spread the word.

October 2024

“ It's nearly like a movement has started now, and once that snowball starts rolling, you can't stop it, it just gathers momentum. I see that happening, and I hope it will happen that more and more people come on board, and it becomes bigger than our group.

October 2024

“ Two years is not in fact a long enough time to implement ground-breaking change, the effects of the project will keep rippling on for a lifetime and hopefully great changes will come with time and will continue on.

October 2025

Have Aoife's initial expectations for the project been met?

“ I have gained so much more that I thought I would when I was filling out the application. Expectations in reality, were exceeded. **October 2025**

“ Every day was interesting. Most days were amazing and one or two were frustrating, but that is what growth and learning are all about. To engage with each other, guest speakers and the wider community sparks conversation, interest, debate and reflection. Not everyone will agree with your point of view but when you listen to others you learn so much more. Personal growth can be uncomfortable, but it is a wonderful thing. My opinion has altered on many things and that to me was unexpected.

October 2025



“ When applying for this project I thought that it was funny that a scientific thing like a climate action project was funded by Creative Ireland but that has come full circle, and I get it now. In the world of climate change, actions that make a difference can seem out of reach. Technical and scientific jargon can be isolating to those without scientific backgrounds, whereas art is a universal language. It's the typical proverb that a picture is worth a thousand words. Art invites everyone to engage. Art invokes emotion, healing and conversation- when utilised it is a powerful tool to have in your belt.

October 2025



Danny Houlihan

Background

Danny was born and brought up in Ballybunion. His family on his mother's side lived in Bromore. They were blacksmiths and farriers and came to the area around the time of the great Irish famine. His grandfather on his father's side lived in the Glen road and was very active during the foundation of the state. Danny is a local historian and a keen pipe musician. He has been very active in his community over the past 40 years. In 1990, he opened a small museum in the town, without state funding, and this has since developed into a podcast project. In 2011, he launched a historical record of the town using old photographs, *Ballybunion: An Illustrated History*, published by History Press. Danny started the first walking tours in Ballybunion and completed an Ecotourism Ireland course in 2015. He incorporates a Leave No Trace policy.

Five years ago, Danny started his own podcast, 'Danny Houlihan's Irish Experience', and he now has an online radio station, Ballybunion YXQ Webcasting, where he brings the history and culture of Ballybunion and the surrounding townlands to an international audience, mainly comprising of the Irish diaspora (of all ages) in countries like America, Australia, England, Germany, France, Italy, Spain and Portugal. It is now also an avenue through which Danny talks about the damage that was done in the past to the local environment and biodiversity and what the community is now doing to try and save it.

“ The Irish diaspora really want to know what happened, the appreciation of who they were, where they came from, and they want to find out, do we understand what happened here, and also what are we doing to rectify the situation. So that's what I'm doing.

September 2024

Reasons for applying

Danny joined the project to learn more about the environmental impacts on the Ballybunion area and its biodiversity. He wanted to research the damage caused by the felling of trees by landlords and the removal of the peat bogs from Beal to Ballylongford which destroyed the ecosystems along the Shannon Estuary from 1669 to the 1850s. He then wanted to show how a small group of people are now trying to repair the damage, by growing food locally again and re-planting the area. The aim was to bring this to a greater audience around the globe through his podcast. He also wanted to take the log cabin, where he does his podcasting, off grid to cut his electricity bills.

Concerns about climate change

Danny takes climate change very seriously.

“ I'm very worried about it because I live in an area which is coastal, and the summers are getting way shorter. The weather is getting very, very, very, very upset. Where once we had visitors coming and lovely weather and sunshine in May, June, July and August, now it's rain, rain, more rain, wind and extra storms.

March 2024

“ For Ballybunion, there has to be another direction because visitors come here and they expect to have fine weather like Spain and Portugal. That's not going to happen anymore. That's possibly where biodiversity and eco-tourism will kick in, because the realisation is you can't run a summer season and a seaside resort with only four weeks of good weather.

March 2024

“ I’m realising, with the research I’m doing consistently, that if we don’t reduce our carbon footprint we’re going to be in very serious trouble. And if we don’t grow our own food we’re going to be in trouble because we’re bringing in food and we have no idea what we’re eating at times, that’s my worry as well. Food production is really coming to the top now.

September 2024

Danny lives in a small bungalow which was built around 1964 and has no insulation, so he wants to address that soon. As he enters his mid 50’s he’s finding it very cold and he knows he’s not alone.

“ As you go through Ballybunion, you’ll see the old buildings, the amount of insulation that’s going to have to go into them is going to cost millions, there’s no doubt about it. **March 2024**

Concerns about the loss of biodiversity

For Danny, biodiversity is very, very important. He is particularly worried about how much was lost when the woodlands and bogland were destroyed.

“ There used to be woodlands here in Ballybunion, even as close as the golf course. And you can still find where once the bog was there. The trees, the birds, the wildlife and all the ecosystem survived in harmony and our ancestors survived with the system that was there and there was land husbandry. When they cut down a tree they didn’t just go in and blast everything out of it. There was husbandry going on the whole time here and we’ve lost all of that. **March 2024**

Food and growing aspects of project

For Danny, local food is so important, yet so hard to get nowadays.

“ We depend totally on the Musgrave’s truck that comes up from Tramore Road in Cork. I know because I worked in Centra, another part of my life, and every day the truck would roll in, and I’d pull out loads of lettuce, carrots and onions. But I remember years ago the locals would supply the local shops here. **March 2024**

“ You could see long ago that everyone including my grandfather, and great grandfather, had a garden at the side of the house, that fed the house, and you knew what you were eating. **September 2024**

He really enjoyed the site visits, especially Brookfield Farm, and he was particularly inspired by the Ballymaloe Festival of Food.

“ The way that all the community pulled together there that day, and the way that you can actually use what you have. Darina Allen could have gone away and built a great big marquee, but she used the units she has. You had a village in there that day and it was fabulous. We learned an awful lot from it. They’re so active and professional.

September 2024

Danny would have grown a small bit in the past, but the project encouraged him to do more.

“ This year, I grew my own lettuce and cabbages and other items here in the yard where before I would only have grown maybe one or two little bits. I’m worried that if we go down the road of importing too much unknown veg it’s going to lead to serious problems in the future, health wise, and also for the environment.

September 2024

In September 2024, Danny put up a small six-by-six glasshouse to grow tomatoes and lettuce and extend the growing season. In the second summer of the project, Danny produced about 210 heads of organic lettuce and also cabbages, kale and beans.

“ What we learned in Barna, Rena has this attitude, and her uncle used to have it too, I’ll lead you to the trough to drink the water, if you’re prepared to drink, you’ll be okay. Now, I have drunk from the trough. We also had about three days in Barna with Pádraig through NEWKD. He came out and he gave us advice as well. So, that drove it home.

September 2025

“ Gráinne gave me six beans and, out of that, two plants grew, I had about 40 pods. I used some of the seaweed mix. I gave Gráinne what I could for the Bean Festival, and I held on to a few to taste for myself. Fabulous. One of them is still growing, she’s popping another pod at the moment.

September 2025

“ I have saved seeds as well this year, radish seeds, bean seeds. The klaxton has been sounded. Those of us who are going to grow next year are planning now. I’m inspired by that side of it.

September 2025

“ I’m very proud of a meal I produced about two weeks ago from the garden here. Never, in my lifetime would I have put something like that in front of me. It looks absolutely artistic, it’s something else.

September 2025



Nature and biodiversity aspects of project

Danny's father was a JCB driver.

“ When he went draining long ago, he always said the machine used to be covered in turf. You could see it was just peat, and he used to say to the farmers, look, the minute I start draining this, it's going to go down in through the drains and into the river Cashen below. And that is exactly what's happening. The woodlands were holding together the biodiversity. So, remove the woodlands, what have you got? You have the remains of the old peat that's stagnant and rotting there, and it's going into all the drains, and that's where your pollution is coming from now. **September 2024** ”

As part of his research, Danny picked a particular area along the coastline and has located four major bog lands that were former woodlands cut down by the landlords of the time. In the winter of 2024, he visited these areas to see what the condition of the peatland is now. A friend showed him where he used to cut turf years ago. In some parts, coniferous forests have been planted on top of old bogland. But with the help of a drone, Danny could see that, in one area, about a mile and a half circumference of peatland has been removed over the last 25 or 30 years.

“ So, it is serious. Remove that, you're removing all the dirt, and it's going into the rivers. When you take all that bog out of it, all that is left is just mud. There's no earth there, it's only stone and mud, it's only the bare amount to feed the cattle. And then you're talking about these pits where they store all the muck. This stuff is actually inside, in the ground, in big tanks. And then when they spread it out, it's not brown muck, it's blue. **April 2025** ”

Danny really enjoyed the 'Wild About Life' session with Joanne, where they tested the river water at Kilconly and the experience of eating honey in Barna brought home the importance of maintaining habitats for bees.

“ I never thought in my life that honey could be produced in this area and the honey they had below in Barna, it was twenty times better than anything you would get in the shop. And to realize then that honey is being produced if the bees fly around. You don't think about it when we're in our busy lives, that if we damage the hedgerows and start cutting them, and start spreading that horrendous stuff, the weed killer, that kills off all that potential for our business, livelihood, and also for our health. **September 2024** ”

Lisa suggested that the collaborators take a mile and look at it closely, which Danny did. It brought home the reality of what can happen in a small area.

“ I chose from here to Cnoc an Oir and back, a beautiful walk. It was absolutely alive with birds. I did a drawing with Cnoc an Oir hill on the top and on the bottom old furze bushes and a wall. I went back about two weeks ago, and all that's gone. They moved in with the JCB, and flattened about 200, 300 meters. So, if I hadn't drawn that little wall, you wouldn't even know where it would have been. And the birds and the wildlife that were there, it was just obliterated. **September 2025** ”



“ There was an ash tree growing in the river and it was doing no harm to anybody, it must be there over 100 years. They went in, only into that spot and dug that ash out of it and just dumped it. The water was going around the ash, there was nothing wrong with it. So okay, we've a fine line, you're learning, you're enjoying, then you're seeing this, and you say, how can you deal with this? It's only through maybe education the whole time and just trying to drive it home.

September 2025

Creative aspects of the project

Danny's late mother was an artist and, while he wouldn't describe himself as an artist, Danny is definitely open to sketching and doodling and he enjoyed recording in his journal.

“ I've been doodling to such a degree that now it's transpiring that I'm making a log of archaeological items that would have been there long ago. Also, all the places that we visited, I took notes. When I'm working away on my own work here and I go for a walk, if anything crops up, I put it into my diary. I treat it like a bible. You can go back and use it and it's ideal for the podcast.

September 2024

“ The creative side of it for me is going out there, surveying the areas, the notebook, it's jammed with stuff. The creative side applies to what I'm doing with the podcast, and even if I'm out there I'm going to take notes, to jot it down. **April 2025**

Danny recorded some of the lectures and Brilliant Ballybunion events so he could use them in his podcasts.

“ I went down to the Sing for your Supper in Barna. I just let the recording machine roll. But when I was listening back to it, the hair was standing on the back of my head when the chant came in, I had to walk out of the room. Did I actually record that? I didn't edit it or tear the rear off it, and it's just a snapshot of what is, but I got the feeling going through the woods, something definitely was there. Nature was responding.

September 2024

Danny really enjoyed the Imagine sessions.

“ Especially when you're below growing, you come back inside in the polytunnels, drawing. It pushes your mind to it. And it doesn't matter how good or how bad you are, Lisa's right about that. Okay, some of my stuff is bad, some of it is very, very bad, but for me, I'll be able to draw from this. Indeed, I've actually copyrighted one little picture myself - that's the original Ballybunion Castle from an old pen and ink drawing, and I redid it. I'll be using that for some of my logos.

April 2025

Impact of project on Danny

Danny feels empowered by the project.

“ I was always culturally driven but I appreciate it more now. I'm getting a chance to record a bit and be involved with more. It's impacted me a great deal.

September 2024

He is more aware of nature and his natural surroundings.

“ I am looking at the landscape every morning now when I go off on my walk, I don't just do Ballybunion, I go from here to Lahardane, which is above Barna and you are looking down at Barna and all the townlands in the morning, and one thing that struck me is the burning of the electricity in the countryside here, there's no need for half of those lights coming into Ballybunion. There's a roadway there. There's absolutely no need for those lights. **September 2024**

“ What I'm watching along the hedgerows, and it'll be my next podcast, would be the old hawthorn or whitethorn. Those roads were manufactured around 1851 so I'm looking at the hawthorn that was planted, it was a quick set tree, the growth, and your alder up along. But I noticed now that the hawthorn is getting very sparse in places, and it has berries at certain times, and the birds nest and feast on them. But I can see where there's plenty of scope, if we work with the farming community, say listen, there's funding, there's grants there, plant up the native trees along by those hedgerows, it's a winner. I think everybody can win with this one.

September 2024

“ I have more of an awareness in nature now, cycling on the bike, in the morning times you see the hares, the rabbits, the winged pigeon is there in the area, and also our famous plover. I showed it to Joanne, where they rooted out that place with the digger, the ring plover was in there. It showed it up on Merlin, but he's gone now, there's no cover for them.

September 2025

Danny cycled up and down to The Barna Way for the Friday on the Farm sessions. When his uncle passed away in 2024, he restored his old bicycle and got it going again.

“ I used the bike to get to Barna, I was 100% with the carbon footprint, bang on target, which I'm proud of. I have a scooter there in the house all year and I didn't use it.

September 2025

One of Danny's initial interests was to bring in solar power. It had been on the long finger, but he credits the project with giving him the enthusiasm and push to move it on. He first installed a panel outside his podcast cabin.

“ I went away and researched it myself, and we're firing off grid as we speak. The lights are off grid. The laptop is off grid. So, in the course of watching other places, those solar panels at Ian's place, I could see what I needed to do. I had to see this stuff in operation and then to put it into operation. **September 2025**

He used the stipend from the project to also invest in a 600Kw PV system and battery for his house which will go into operation this winter.

“ With a small amount of money, you can actually do it. **September 2025**

When his uncle passed away in May 2024, Danny, inspired by Brilliant Ballybunion and Barna, stored the contents in a container for future use, rather than getting a skip.

“ His house was a literal hardware shop so I can keep a house going for nearly 20 years. We don't know what's going to happen with economies, it's very uncertain, and with our environment too. We need to mind what we have. **April 2025**

Danny developed his growing skills.

“ To use the word, ignite, it ignited the system completely. We were told years ago you can't grow nothing in Ballybunion. Now we know that was lies, that we can grow. If we had a national emergency, could we grow food to help our locality? We can. I brought it from three heads of lettuce up to 220 now and I will keep going. I want to see how far I can go. **September 2025**

He really enjoyed the group.

“ What happens in the morning time when you go down to Barna, the kettle is on, there's a welcome, there's a hub there with everyone. They're going back to the old ways, back to the roots. There's a different soul to this group. There's nobody going in there to say, right, I'm going in to take your idea, or that idea. Some people are coming up with ideas, and they're testing to see how it will work. **September 2024**

“ The positiveness that's going to come out of it when it's over, people are going to look back and say, we went through two years of this, and you know everyone is friends at the end of it, nobody had a fight or a row or anything like that. **September 2025**

Impact of project on local community

Danny believes that slowly people are beginning to understand what needs to be done.

“ And it's down to the likes of what we're doing. Lead a horse to water gently. Don't expect the horse to drink straight away. That's my mantra now.
September 2024

“ Brilliant Ballybunion is a great foundation, and everyone is asking me about it locally. What are you doing? What's going to be the outcome?
April 2025

“ It has opened their mind that food production can be done. It's got out there. When they hear that we're growing, and the beans, no doubt about it, the beans kicked them into touch. It's the belief that we can actually do this here, because we were told we couldn't. When the clip was on Nationwide, I think that actually nailed it, because they were saying, is that actually down there? I think they're beginning to realise that we can do things ourselves, and the food is completely different.
September 2025



Looking ahead

The strength of the network and people's different interests will drive things forward.

“ Everyone is going to filter out to their own individual field, but I think we can all be in contact, and I think this is going to grow into something completely different.
September 2024

“ What I feel is that you'll have one of the strongest groups in North Kerry for promoting the aims and objectives of our ecosystems, preserving the forestry, the bird life. It's a nice network. We all have something to offer.
September 2024

Danny would love to see a designated space in Ballybunion for a local market where people can sell their produce, like they have in Kilrush. He would also like to see a continued focus on growing beans next year.

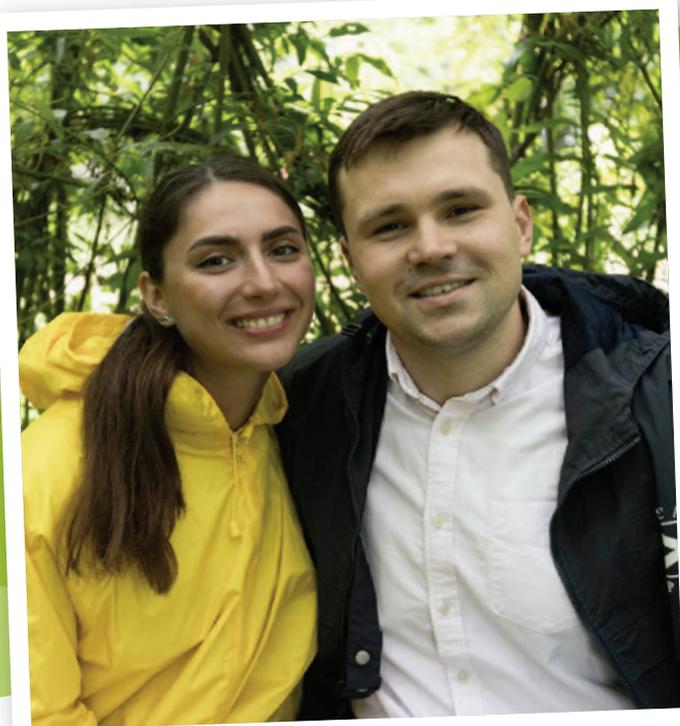
“ I'd say another year of looking at it in depth, the type of place to grow them, the soil, the watering. Everyone takes a few more beans to grow them again, you can nearly take that to the Ploughing Championships and show people how it can be done.
September 2025

Have Danny's initial expectations for the project been met?

Danny is very happy with where the project brought him.

“ I consumed close to 170 heads of organic lettuce, three different types, over the summer months. If you told me five or six years ago, I'd be laughing at you. So, salads and everything, I use them all and I feel way better after it. So, there's a health benefit, you could say, with our veg and our beans, it's like the champagne air.
September 2025

“ Maybe two years ago, people mightn't have envisaged that it was going to come off at all. It has succeeded and there's been no waste.
September 2025



Polina Serohina & Oleksandr Levochko

Background

Polina and Oleksandr are a young married couple from Ukraine. When the war broke out, they moved to Poland with Polina's mother and brother. Polina worked in a shop there, but life was difficult so a year later, in early 2024, the family came to Ballybunion. Ballybunion is now their second home.

Polina comes from the centre of Kyiv and before the war she worked as a graphic artist. Oleksandr was born in a very small city, and his family had a farm where they grew wheat and corn in lovely rich black soil. He studied engineering, machine building and agriculture in the Technical University in Kyiv. Before the war, Oleksandr worked in the big aircraft manufacturing company, Antonov. When they arrived in Ballybunion, Polina and Oleksandr took English lessons, and they have now both completed courses in Kerry College. They have worked in the Cliff House Hotel for the past two holiday seasons.

Reasons for applying

Polina wanted to do something to change this world for the better because she believes we all come here as ordinary people and our good deeds should be what we leave behind as our legacy. Polina has some knowledge about nature and experience working with plants and animals. She is skilled in drawing and graphic design. She also sings and dances and enjoys experimenting with cooking.

“All that we do in the project is new and is a very cool experience for me. I've never seen before the kind of farm that Rena and Lisa have. I'm meeting very interesting people in the project. We have a really good team.”
Polina, March 2024

“I can't stand by as I see the earth becoming a place where nothing can exist. I want to leave something good behind me. I live here, I'm grateful to have the opportunity to live at all and it's my duty to do what I can to help change at least a little of what's happening. Change myself, learn something new, and of course help the planet.”
Polina, March 2024

“For Ukrainian people, it's very exciting to be in this project. It is brilliant for us.”
Polina, March 2024

Oleksandr loves nature, growing food and is very concerned about the world's future food and water issues. He really wanted to connect with, and benefit, the local community who have welcomed him so well recently, and to become an active participant.

“For me this is about growth and development, and I think for Ballybunion, it's a step forward to improve life around them.”
Oleksandr, March 2024

Concerns about climate change

Polina and Oleksandr are very concerned about climate change because all living things on the planet are affected by it.

“I feel it is becoming much warmer than six years ago. I see in winter, not so much snow, a lot of rain and in Ukraine, it's not normal. I remember we went with Oleksandr and his father to look at the soil, it was dry, very dry, like the Sahara.”
Polina, March 2024

“Humanity is facing it now and we will face it in the future. Every year we see change, weather, temperature. For our farm it's also very bad because our plants dry out.”
Oleksandr, March 2024

“ Warming affects the life and existence of living organisms. Due to severe climate change, warming may make it difficult to grow food. Warming oceans are known to be detrimental to marine life, leading to extreme weather events and rising sea levels. There are no words to convey how many species have been erased from the earth forever due to human activity and it’s scary to imagine how many more could be destroyed.

Polina, March 2024

Climate change has health effects too.

“ It’s very dangerous and warming can lead to deterioration in air quality, leading to an increase in the incidence of various respiratory allergic and cancer diseases. Climate warming affects the incidence of naturally occurring infectious diseases such as cholera, hepatitis A, dysentery, tick borne encephalitis and malaria.

Polina, March 2024

Nature and biodiversity aspects of project

For Oleksandr, nature has always been his guide, and he welcomed the chance to be back in nature again. He felt it was the ‘soul of the project’.

“ When you work with the soil, you see that everything is connected - people, weather, time, patience. In Ukraine, I used to grow in open fields, watching every seed slowly become life. Here, I found the same connection again. Being in nature during the project made me feel peaceful and alive.

Oleksandr, September 2025

For Polina, nature was ‘the heart’ of Brilliant Ballybunion not just ‘a backdrop’.

“ I learned to observe life, how seeds grow, how the soil responds to care, how everything around us is interconnected. These moments changed my perspective on the world. Through programmes like ‘Wild About Life’ or ‘Fridays on the Farm’, I realised that nature is not just around us, it’s inside us.

Polina, September 2025

Food and growing aspects of project

“ Farming is Oleksandr’s passion so when he was in Kyiv he would say, I want to go home, I want to go driving the tractor. **Polina, March 2024**

Oleksandr had to do work experience as part of his university course so he and Polina spent four months working on different farms in Switzerland. Here they gained experience with cows, pigs and chickens and also flower and vegetable growing. The organic growing aspect of Brilliant Ballybunion was of great interest to Oleksandr, and it resonated with what he was used to on the family farm.

“ We want to learn as many simple ways to grow food as possible.

Oleksandr, March 2024

“ I know from my own experience that growing food is not easy - it takes time, care, and love. But it also gives something powerful in return, self-reliance and respect for the earth. I completely support the project’s idea of not using pesticides. Back home, we always try to grow naturally, without chemicals, because clean soil gives healthy plants - and healthy people. It was wonderful to see that Brilliant Ballybunion shares the same philosophy.

Oleksandr, September 2025

Polina has always been interested in how local food differs in different cultures and how it can bring people together.

“ I have always enjoyed wandering through markets in different countries and looking at local food and vegetables, seeing how this is different in Ukraine, Poland, Switzerland and Ireland. We have a wonderful chance to make local food more popular in Ballybunion and to give farmers the opportunity to work.

Polina, March 2024

“ For me, it was magical. We weren’t just growing - we were creating a small future, planting seeds of hope. Food brought us together, became a reason for conversations, sharing recipes, culture, and stories. When we harvested or cooked together, I felt a deep connection between people, the land, and traditions. The fact that food became part of art and community - that is one of the project’s most valuable lessons.

Polina, September 2025

Creative aspects of the project

Polina is a creative person, and art is her passion.

“ I think my strong side is art, so there’s a lot of things for me in this project. I have a lot of ideas in my head about what can be done to help the climate and be creative.

Polina, March 2024

She loved how creativity was such a big part of the project.

“ Creativity is everywhere here. It’s in gardening, in cooking, in the way we communicate. I loved that art wasn’t limited to paintings or exhibitions - it was a mindset, a way of building community. Projects like ‘The Square Tomato’, ‘What If We Were Brilliant?’ or our films and journals reminded me that everyone has creativity within them, even if they don’t see themselves as an artist. Creativity became our collective voice.

Polina, September 2025

Art is universal and powerful

“Art is a language everyone understands. It touches the heart and makes people feel, not just understand. Through creativity, we don't just talk about climate change - we show that the world can be loved, cared for, and changed. When people see beauty, they want to protect it and that's what inspires real action.”

Polina, September 2025

For Oleksandr, the mix of farming and creativity really worked, and it showed him how art can inspire people into action.

“It reminded me that working with your hands and imagination can both heal and connect people. I especially loved how art helped share our stories and ideas about sustainability in ways that touch emotions, not just logic.”

Oleksandr, September 2025

“Art has the power to reach people's hearts. It helps us feel the connection to nature, not just understand it with the mind. When people feel beauty, they want to protect it. Through the creative side of Brilliant Ballybunion, I saw how art can make climate action something human, emotional, and hopeful - not just scientific or political.”

Oleksandr, September 2025

Impact of project on Polina and Oleksandr

For Polina and Oleksandr overcoming language barriers and cultural differences wasn't always easy, but the team was so supportive and open that these challenges quickly turned into friendship.

“I think we have a great team. We have only had three meetings, but I love these guys.”

Polina, March 2024

Polina really enjoyed the social and creative sides of the project and being part of the Bean Festival.

“I loved the moments when we all went to the farms together, planted, listened to the birds, laughed, and shared ideas. Those trips and meetings created a real sense of unity. I also loved the creative moments: making things with our hands, drawing, writing, filming, exchanging ideas across cultures. And of course, the festival. It was the culmination of all our efforts - the day we felt we had created something meaningful, something that would stay in people's hearts.”

Polina, September 2025

The project helped Polina to look at her own life and what she can do, and the importance of process, and community empowerment.

“Brilliant Ballybunion changed me. I started thinking more about my footprint in the world, how I consume, how I treat nature, what I can do even in small ways. I also became calmer, more attentive. I learned to value the process, not just the outcome. Most importantly, I saw how a community can make change when people believe and act together.”

Polina, September 2025

“I am deeply grateful to Brilliant Ballybunion and everyone who became part of this journey. For me, this project became a home away from home, a place where I felt connection, warmth, and purpose. We didn't just plant beans - we planted trust, love, and hope for the future. And I sincerely believe these seeds will continue to grow in the hearts of everyone who was part of it.”

Polina, September 2025

Brilliant Ballybunion reminded Oleksandr why he loves the land and why growing food matters, and it highlighted the importance of connection and shared values.

“It made me think more about how important it is to stay close to nature, to grow our own food, and to do it respectfully. It also gave me a sense of community and connection between Ireland and Ukraine and proof that, no matter where we come from, we share the same values when it comes to caring for the earth.”

Oleksandr, September 2025

“The first year was truly special for me. Working on the farms, touching the soil, planting together, and talking with others who loved the land - those moments brought me peace and a feeling of home. When we spent days at the Barna Way or took part in Fridays on the Farm, I felt as if I had travelled back to my fields in Ukraine. Everything about nature, food, and growing resonated deeply with me. It was not just an activity - it was healing.”

Oleksandr, September 2025

“I'm deeply thankful for being part of Brilliant Ballybunion. The first year gave me warmth and peace - like being home again. The second year brought purpose and teamwork through the festival. This project connected two lands, Ireland and Ukraine, through shared love for growing, nature, and community. We didn't just plant beans, we planted understanding, care, and hope for a better future.”

Oleksandr, September 2025



Impact of project on local community

Polina and Oleksandr believe that the project brought people together and has created a movement which is influencing change in the wider community.

“ We haven't just created a series of events - we've created a movement. Local people started seeing the environment, food, and creativity differently. They realised they can act, even in a small town, and their voices matter. The festival became a powerful symbol - proof that change is possible when there is belief respect, and a shared purpose.

Polina, September 2025

“ I think it has achieved something very real. It brought people together - farmers, artists, families, young people - all working for a shared idea of sustainability. Through the Bean Festival, the project gave a strong message: that local communities can lead change through creativity, food, and co-operation. It's a great example of how something small and local can inspire a much bigger conversation.

Oleksandr, September 2025

Have Polina's and Oleksandr's initial expectations for the project been met?

“ Yes, and even more than I could have imagined. At first, I thought it would be a simple learning or volunteer project, a bit of gardening, a bit of art. But over time, it became something much deeper, a space where people truly open up to each other, share stories, culture, experience, and heart. My expectations were not only met, they grew along with me.

Polina, September 2025

“ Yes, completely and even beyond what I expected. When I joined Brilliant Ballybunion, I thought it would simply be a chance to learn new things about growing and food. But for me, it became something much deeper, a kind of therapy. Back in Ukraine, I worked in farming all my life. I even studied in an agricultural college and grew soybeans, sunflowers, legumes, grapes, vegetables, and fruits. Farming taught me patience and respect for the land, and here I found people who shared the same love and care for nature.

Oleksandr, September 2025



Caroline Duane

Background

Caroline grew up on a small farm in East Galway. Her dad continues to farm there, doing meitheals with his older neighbours and tending his vegetable garden. Caroline moved to Ballybunion in 2010 and really loves it here. Her husband, Conor McAuliffe, is a Kerryman and is Treasurer of the Ballybunion Community Forum. They have two children. Caroline has worked with children and families for over 20 years. She currently trains practitioners in the field of family support, social work and social care. She also works as a psychotherapist in her own part-time practice.

“ I work in a complex field, and my head needs to be there, and it's full time. **April 2025** ”

Caroline is a member of the running club and the triathlon club, and she loves hiking and being out in the wilds.

Reasons for applying

Caroline wanted to be involved with like-minded people to explore, learn, create, and to see how she, as a member of such a beautiful town, can support biodiversity on a personal and community level. She didn't feel she understood the issues enough to formulate her own opinion on them. Caroline was open to learning new skills and giving it all a go and she wanted to make changes in how her family lives in their house and how they live in Ballybunion.

Horticulture therapy is now seen as one of the recommended mindfulness therapies for women who are going through transitional changes in their lives. As part of her own development, Caroline was also curious to see how getting her hands dirty would impact on her own wellbeing and then how she could transfer that to the women that she works with.

“ I'm here to learn and soak it all up. I will try anything. I will be curious about everything. And I'm excited about it, days on farms, going back into that wonderful space that I didn't appreciate as a kid. **March 2024** ”

“ I hope to become more informed, definitely a sense of shared learning because there is so much knowledge here locally and space to be able to do it and hopefully create a network of people that will grow and grow and maybe become a town that is recognized for being biodiverse. **March 2024** ”

Concerns about climate change

When Caroline joined the project, she wasn't sure how she felt about climate change, it seemed too big to ground into her life, so she wanted to learn more.

“ When it's so vast, there's a disowned responsibility to it because it's just all encompassing, so it feels disempowering. **March 2024** ”

She was very aware of the weather changes, and the impact of extreme weather on the local landscape.

“ I look at the cliffs every single day and I see how it's changing. I see parts of it falling. So, that I think is the biggest impact for our lives here, the change on the landscape. But because the change is so small on a daily basis, it's not big enough for us to notice how it's impacting us in our daily lives. **March 2024** ”

Because life is so busy, we don't notice the impact of climate change which is a worry and the scale of the problem, the negativity, is daunting.

“ I completely understand that I'm just a little ant in the big world that's spinning around. And what difference can I make all by myself? But the adult, the rational side of me, understands that if we all do a little bit it can make a huge difference in the big term. But when you're fighting really hard waves of negativity and misunderstandings, I don't even know what the word is, it can nearly feel like you're already starting on a losing battle.

September 2024

“ The negativity, I think, intentionally or not, comes across from governments, from the media. The argument for us trying to save the planet and biodiversity should make more sense, instead of it being a battle.

September 2024

“ I suppose we've created a world that is so instant and people at the end of the day just want to survive, and putting more pressure on people to say that they're not doing good enough is difficult for people to swallow. As somebody who now has been involved with really interesting people and listening and seeing things from a little micro piece, and from the work that I do myself, I can see how it is difficult for people to grasp, because I found it difficult to grasp. So, there's an awful lot more work to do. **September 2024**

Concerns about the loss of biodiversity

Caroline comes from an old Irish farm where you go out, you do your work, go milk, plant the spuds, look after the cows. But she always knew she wanted to go back into nature. When she moved to Ballybunion what really struck her was the lack of trees.

“ So then to be able to join a project that is on a farm where there's trees growing, where you can hear the sound of natural wind going through the trees. I love that sound, it brings me back to loveliness, brings me back to niceness.

September 2024

She was keen to learn how to encourage biodiversity in her home garden.

“ We have a little garden in front and there's flowers. We have an old house, so the couple that were here before loved their garden and we inherited it, and I can see the change in when the bees come and go, I can see the change in the soil. I don't know what we're doing to make it better or worse. Is there something else that we should be doing here? I don't know. **March 2024**

As the project progressed and Caroline learnt more, she found there were some days when she felt really sad about the loss, but being part of the project and trying to make a difference sustained her.

“ Nature isn't the same as it was when I was a child even. And then on the other side, to be involved in this project in a small, tiny town in North Kerry is just wonderful. And if this could be sprinkled across all of Ireland, so that people like me who are busy in the world, just trying to survive, could be involved in it to make connections, because it's part of how we survive, it's part of how the bio-world survives, connection, and then to have a biodiversity element to it. I've learned a lot.

September 2024

“ I understand where we are now. I understand that we're in a bad place. I understand that my little piece will make a tiny piece of a difference and if my tiny piece of a difference from being involved in a project is sprinkled across Ireland, then there can be a little bit of change in the positive. So, there is that bit of hope there.

September 2024

Food and growing aspects of project

Both Caroline and her husband were interested in learning how to grow some vegetables in the limited space they have available at home and to involve their two children who are now getting older. She was also keen to barter with her father!

“ I would be very much into understanding and knowing more, and being able to go back to my father with my bags of potatoes, or carrots or whatever, onions survive everything, and saying, here I'll take some of yours if you take some of mine, bartering and creating more conversation, which is always a positive.

March 2024

“ I don't have the luxury of having access to places where I can plant yet, but I've really enjoyed going back to the farm and listening. I've really enjoyed being in the greenhouse over in the farm and just watching the change throughout the summer. And I've heard other people talk about all that they're doing on their land. Sometimes I get a little bit of, oh, I wish I could, but you can't have everything. In time I plan to do a little bit of space at the back when we finish. I have a little plan, but it's on a very small scale. **September 2024**

However, the exposed nature of their space and the stormy winds is proving challenging, but Caroline will continue to try. The family is now actively letting the garden in the front re-wild at certain times of the year.

Caroline took annual leave days for Fridays on the Farm and really enjoyed getting her hands into the muck there.

“ I loved them, they really laid the foundation for the whole community development piece. I loved just having a place to go to, where we could all meet up and follow some sort of a flow. I really did love it. **September 2025**



A lot of the other activities took place on workdays, so Caroline found it hard to attend, but she was inspired by the trip to Ion Organics in Ballyduff.

“ She uses her plants to make oils and soaps and things, and I was just fascinated with that. I just thought how simple and lovely to get away from all of the plastic stuff that comes into the house and just make it yourself.
September 2024

The project has influenced the family’s diet.

“ We're now more plant-based, our diet is changing. Only since this project has tofu come into my house, I always had it in the back of my mind about trying it, but it's now part of our food plan. We have a lot more beans, we use an awful lot more vegetables. Because we're busy, we work a lot and we have the kids, the instinct to find something instant comes up every now and again. I'm like, no, no, hang on a second, take a breath, just look again and let's do this. **September 2024**

Caroline felt the Bean Festival was a lovely way of demonstrating the impact of the two years.

“ The Bean Festival was so wonderful. It was just so lovely to be around and to watch people flourish. Where people had come from two years before, and then the confidence to be able to showcase themselves.
September 2025

Nature and biodiversity aspects of project

The project has helped Caroline to change her mindset around the look of her front garden and the value of ‘weeds’.

“ The biodiversity piece was really new for me, but I probably didn't place value on what I did know, and going back to the simplicity of it, wanting to mind the bees. When I see my garden out front, we are choosing not to do anything with it at particular times of the year so that we can allow all of that to grow, this has been a learning for us. Everything doesn't have to be perfect, it doesn't have to be pretty. Leave the weeds because it's actually fine.
September 2025

“ My bees are becoming my friends now. I have wildflowers. I'd say once they start coming up, the neighbours will be like ‘they're everywhere’, and hopefully they survive.
April 2025

Caroline loves being out in nature and seeing the beauty in what Ballybunion has to offer.

“ I'm more mindful when I go to my family in Galway of what is going on there. I grew up on a farm, so I see things probably the way my father sees things, in terms of his love of the land and appreciation for the cycle of life, the simplicity of that and then the importance of it as well.
April 2025

Creative aspects of the project

The creative side of the project really attracted Caroline. When she moved to Ballybunion, she joined Lisa’s art group.

“ So lovely to be able to sit with people and just have a chat and come up with something. There was no plan, you just create something that comes to you, and I thought it was wonderful. So, whatever it is, I'm open to it.
March 2024

“ The creative piece is lovely, because I think we can all connect. We all have a little bit of creativity inside of us. It brings out our little childish, playful part, which is bringing us back to sticking our hands in the mud and allowing that to be a little bit more important in our lives.
September 2024

“ I think the Square Tomato was a brilliant concept. That whole piece around, in one generation's time everything could be different and could look different. And even thinking that I'm a country girl but my son is a townie. He grew up in the town so he's lucky enough to have his granddad's place to go back to every now and again, but he doesn't stick his hands in the soil.
April 2025

The power of creativity is becoming more recognised and important in these times.

“ A lot of the world now connects through creativity and being creative, and I'm not just talking about doing and making things, but that creative mental process, it's becoming a bit more alive. I think it's not seen as being airy fairy. People are now allowing themselves to become more open to thinking outside the box, maybe because we have to now. **April 2025**

“ Art and creativity definitely have a part to play in how we engage children in climate change, because you can hit all the senses, and it becomes part of their learning and their growing. Then for adults, in the doing of something, we're distracted from how vulnerable we can feel with sharing our experiences and maybe what we know and what we don't know. So, the simplicity of using creative means to learn more and to develop more around what we can do in our simple lives, I think certainly has a role to play. **September 2025**

Impact of project on Caroline

“ My priorities will always be the same, but now the picture is painted with the world in it as well. It's in context and it's interconnected. So my family, all of those pieces, how we live, it's not isolated to just existing in my world, it's now looking at how I plan to develop my backyard, to include me being able to grow something, to bring it back into the house, to allow my children to understand it's important to recycle, to see the cycle of life in terms of the importance of bees in our world. So, it's not that my priorities have changed, it's just that they've become more interconnected with biodiversity.

September 2024

For Caroline, getting to know the group and strengthening that sense of connection with both people and place and the sense of community that has been established has been the most important impact of the project. The Fridays on the Farm were the foundation.

“ The group, for me, is important, because that's just part of who I am. I like to connect with people. I'm a blow-in into the town, so it is important to have connection with people, to have ownership of where we belong. Also, to be empowered in a group is easier than trying to empower yourself all by yourself. **September 2024**

The people make it, and the acceptance of everybody being at different levels, because when you're not accepted into a group, where you're not really of the same understanding or experience then it's easier for people to start dropping out. But what's lovely to see is that the group itself has connected really, really well.

September 2024

“ I'm totally a blow-in and because my work takes me out of the community, it's like every time I come back into something, I'm re-parachuted back in. I'm okay with that, but it is lovely, I do feel more integrated because of the project.

September 2025

The value of the group cohesion was evident after storm Éowyn.

“ The community of Brilliant Ballybunion, we all met down in Gráinne's place for the cup of coffee because we had no electricity, we'd no radio, we'd no communication, there was no internet. Everything was gone. So, we had to go back to the simplicity of walking down the road to meet everybody over a little hot stove. **April 2025**

Community development is about slowing down and connecting.

“ All of these fast ways of existing in the world have taken over the simple life, because our lives are so busy. So, if you take that away and go back to the simplicity of just sitting with somebody and connecting through being creative, through digging soil, through getting your hands dirty, I think there's real power in that.

September 2025

“ Isn't it funny how a Creative Ireland project goes back to that sense of place, that sense of connection. It's in everything. And if you don't have connection to place or connection to people, why would you place value in wanting to make it better or to keep it existing?

September 2025

Impact of project on local community

“ I think since September, it has literally gone from the insular out into the community. Although I wasn't there on the day, I was there up to the day, the feedback after the Sustainability Day was incredible. I think people were surprised with what they came away with. My husband thought it was brilliant. When I was talking to him after it, he was just in awe, like wow, this is just incredible, the amount of people that were there, the stands, the speakers, the inputs that were given, the way the place was. It looked lovely, it really did, it looked incredible. Even when I went to Super Valu a couple of days later, people were talking about it and saying, gosh, I called down to that, it was just brilliant.

April 2025

While Caroline feels it is too early to measure the full impact of the project, there is certainly more awareness.

“ The PR side of it, all of those big events definitely raised an interest and raised awareness locally. It'll be interesting to see what might happen this time next year, or in two years' time, what will have come about because of it. I think it is too early to tell yet, because this part is only ending. I don't know what the impact will be. Maybe there might be more funding to come back and review it?

September 2025

Looking ahead

Because of the organic development of the splinter groups that are coming 'from the mothership, from the mainland', Caroline thinks they're going to grow and develop.

“ People who show up to those groups are there because they're choosing to and want to be there, and they're interested. I feel the majority of people that live here love this place, love Ballybunion, and want to see it do good and do better and be a lovely place to live and a lovely place to thrive. It's such a beautiful place, it's just incredible. The birds are louder, I don't know if that's because my lens is focused in, but the birds are louder.

April 2025

The sense of community formed through Brilliant Ballybunion will continue.

“ I think of the group as a little community, I think that foundation has been laid now, so I know I'm going to walk down the street and connect with the people that I've gotten to know through this project, because we've shared experiences, we've shared laughs, we've shared learnings. I really feel part of that.

September 2025

And more will come out of it. Caroline is hoping to get involved in the Nature Group and is particularly interested in combining kayaking with water testing at some stage.

“ Conversations have started to grow because of those connections and those little learnings, and the interest from different people. We'll have a purpose if we do meet as a group to go kayaking down Beale to do the water testing. And I've talked to other people who have an interest in seeing the coastland, and maybe that's something that we might do. So different ideas have started.

September 2025

Have Caroline's initial expectations for the project been met?

“ I definitely think so and more. I always had a hope for connection, which has happened. I had an expectation to learn more about biodiversity, which I certainly think has happened and there's other things that have just happened that weren't in my initial thoughts, that sense of community that has been established because of the project.

September 2025

“ I knew time was going to be a big challenge for me just because of my work. It wasn't because of a lack of interest, or it wasn't a representation of my commitment to the project. So, there were different times where I felt this year that I was missing out, and that was a big challenge for me personally. But again, we can only do what we can do. I don't have the luxury of free time.

September 2025

“ This, for me, was a real pastime that I was curious about, that I wanted to get into to see what it might be like, and I wondered if I could learn a bit more about this and also connect with people who I wouldn't have connected with without this project, and that happened. So, for me, that's a wonderful thing.

September 2025





George Nolan

Background

George was brought up in Co Wexford. After leaving school, he worked in construction and in the recession of the 1980s went to the UK to train as a nurse. He came to live in Ballybunion in 1998 and worked in Limerick in various capacities within the nursing sector, most recently in nurse education and staff training in Limerick. George took early retirement in 2020 to care for his mother after she developed dementia and until she moved into a nursing home. George then found himself trying to figure out how best to use his skills and knowledge and decided he wanted to focus on food production, ecology and biodiversity. In the autumn of 2023, he began a Level 5 course with Kerry College in Killarney on ecological field skills and biodiversity, which ended in June 2024.

George is married with three adult children, two of whom are living at home and one who's not too far away. He loves being out in the wild and the weather and enjoys sea kayaking and hill walking. He also enjoys sketching and painting and is a member of the Ballybunion Art group.

He has been growing some of his own vegetables since 2018. George has good writing and IT skills and through his previous work developed facilitation, reflective and training skills.

Reasons for applying

George joined the project to continue learning about growing food, creating habitat refuges, and to explore all of this creatively. He had enjoyed exploring the coastline around Ballybunion by kayak for many years and wanted to learn more about this incredible habitat. He also wanted to get involved in some citizen science activities, e.g., shoreline surveys, bat and bird surveys, and to get to know a network of like-minded people, to be part of the movement and to see if he could bring anything to bear in a small way and to win over some people who would not normally be easily swayed.

“ Part of my job involved convincing people to do things that they didn't want to do. I used to work in nursing education, and we used to identify new placement sites for student nurses and sometimes you would meet people who really didn't want to have the hassle of it. I used to be able to get them on side and convince them that this is a win-win. You don't have to lose. And I really like that idea that biodiversity loss and mitigation of climate change can be a positive thing. It doesn't have to be disastrous. I actually think that if you can get people on side and tell them that they don't necessarily have to give up their holidays, they'll do it anyway, they'll do it themselves. Because once they're in the frame, they will get on board. What I'd like is to bring what skills or abilities I have in that area to bring people in who wouldn't normally be in. **March 2024** ”

Concerns about climate change

George is fully aware of the potential implications of climate change.

“ I try to avoid the doom and gloom scenarios around climate change, but anybody that's done any reading on it, the implications and the possibilities are pretty catastrophic and that will be the same for here as for anywhere. **March 2024** ”

“ Ireland might look like it might be in a bit of a Goldilocks zone for a while, where the worst impacts on our way of life might not happen as immediately as they do with people that are farther south, or people that are farther north even. But we don't know. Who knows what the impacts are going to be? But they will be substantial, they'll affect growing food, they'll affect the habitat for wildlife, particularly the marine habitat. **March 2024** ”

There are likely to be enormous impacts on Ballybunion, being a coastal town.

“ Even things like the golf club and the sand dunes and the beaches. We had a big storm a couple of years ago and it washed all the sand away from the Men's Beach. It took months for it to come back and that had an impact right into the early part of the summer that particular year.

March 2024

Getting people on board is a challenge.

“ Health promotion is all about removing barriers, and similarly you see huge barriers to people changing their thinking around biodiversity loss and climate change. There's a big challenge there to get people on board without making them feel that they're going to lose everything that they hold dear.

March 2024

George has noticed a change in the mainstream media narrative from ‘flattening the curve’ to ‘climate change is here and now it’s time to get ready for the consequences of it’.

“ I'm not entirely sure how I feel about this change. To be honest, it feels like giving up. It feels like we're losing a battle here, we're all being swept downstream, we're trying to swim against the current, but for every three strokes, we're going ten yards downstream, you feel like you're getting somewhere, but you're not. But I think I have been aware of other reports and discussions that would suggest that progress is being made, carbon emissions are being reduced, not fast enough, but that there's a gaining momentum. There's reason for some optimism. **September 2024**

Climate change now has the attention of the public.

“ I see that it's firmly on the agenda, it is something that everybody is aware of, and there is almost no talk anymore about, do you believe in climate change, or do you think that it's a real thing? It's been accepted as a reality. **April 2025**

Since joining the project, George is keen to look at the positive side.

“ When I came on the Brilliant Ballybunion project, I spent a lot of time reading disaster stories about climate change and biodiversity loss and all that. I find myself more recently looking for more positive stories, just for my own mental health.

April 2025

Concerns about the loss of biodiversity

George sees that there are two parallel processes going on at the moment, and he thinks the biodiversity crisis is a more immediate one.

“ I think climate change gets an awful lot of coverage in the media and a lot of people are talking about it because it poses a bigger threat to people like, am I going to lose my car or am I going to lose my holiday in the south of Spain in the summertime? What's it going to cost me? The biodiversity one is much more insidious, and it's harder to see because of the rate that it's happening.

March 2024

“ I think biodiversity loss is the more immediate threat, in terms of food security, and systems collapse. The situation up in Lough Neagh is an exemplar of when nothing goes right everything goes wrong. If nobody takes any action you have absolutely catastrophic failure of the ecosystem. Everything starts to collapse, the key species start to disappear, and then there's a domino effect. I find that very, very worrying personally.

March 2024

But there are some positive signs.

“ The last government invested very heavily in the National Parks and Wildlife Service, and there's a lot more enforcement of regulations going on. There's a lot more wildlife rangers going out and investigating farmers. A lot of the time the farmers don't even know that what they're doing is wrong and once they know, they're pretty good to row in, so I see that as a very positive thing. **April 2025**

George began working on his vegetable patch two years before he retired, having had no experience of growing any food before. He has built up experience and capacity gradually since then, self-taught from YouTube, and he learnt a lot from the Kerry College ecology course.

“ I started with six feet by six feet the first year, and then doubled that the next year, and doubled that the next year. You make an awful lot of mistakes as you go, and that's how you learn. **September 2024**

George loved the Fridays on the Farm and he also had extra days working in Barna as a placement for his ecology course.

“ I really like the hands-on stuff. I really like the digging and watering and weeding and all of that sort of stuff in Barna. And the extra time I'm able to have in Barna has been very enjoyable for me, and I've been able to develop a really good relationship with Lisa and Rena because I'm out there once or twice a week. And I've gotten involved a little bit in the social farming side, and I've learned so much really from start to finish, from preparing the way to planting, and all the way through. **September 2024**



“ I also really enjoy having access to the food, I don't come out with carrier bags weighed down full of stuff, just a little bit, just enough to keep me going and to use for cooking at home.

September 2024

George is now more mindful about processed foods, packaging and where food comes from. The project has also helped change the family's diet.

“ I would prepare a lot of the food here for myself and my wife and my two grown up sons and their diet has adjusted a little bit over the last year as well, like it or not. More fresh vegetables, more salads, and more fresh ingredients.

September 2024

“ I'll continue to grow my own few bits and pieces, and take a lot of pleasure from that, and a lot of confidence. The other thing is that I'd be much more aware of local growers that are growing around here. We are lucky that we have Billy Jo, who provided a lot of food for the Bean Festival just 10 kilometres over the road. I'd be supportive of them in terms of what I buy in supermarkets. I learned an awful lot from the days that we had on the farm. And I will be building my own greenhouse hopefully this winter, as a project. I'm fairly exposed up here, compared to Barna, so a polytunnel really wouldn't be an option, but I've plans to build something with polycarbonate, something that'll last.

September 2025

Nature and biodiversity aspects of project

George really loved the Wild about Life sessions, and he learned a lot. He was very involved in the ringed plover survey and is now on the steering committee of the Nature Group.

“ I think that the plover group has been such an amazing success and there's loads of other people now involved. It brought it home to a lot of people, people that weren't involved in Brilliant Ballybun, the impact that human activity can have on the ecosystem that supports something like the little ringed plover and the kind of thoughtlessness of your Sunday morning walk on the beach, and letting the dog off the leash, that that can have such a huge impact on this particular species. But more than that, it's like a metaphor for all of us. Our thoughtlessness has damaged the ecosystem that supports the ringed plover, our thoughtlessness has also damaged the ecosystem that supports us. Habitat isn't lost, it's taken. We take it.

September 2025

While Seán's passion and vision is responsible for setting up and driving the group, George also acknowledges Dr Barry O'Donoghue's important input in helping to formalise the surveying process and data collection.

“ He put together all of the forms and the Google Drive and what to look for and what other stuff to include. He took the good intent that people had and turned it into a very professional survey project which will have real value, that can be presented to people who make decisions about such things. That's just fantastic. We were saying we could do this, or we could do that and he just came in and put a framework around everything that we wanted to do, so the reporting will be done in a consistent, measurable way.

April 2025

George has also become involved in doing the annual Coastwatch survey around Ballybun and he is planning to expand this work over the coming years.

“ I am developing some skills in relation to that, and it is definitely something I'm going to keep up after the project is over and try and rope in some more locals.

April 2025

The project has also helped to draw George's attention to the negative impact that chemical sprays can have on biodiversity.

“ I was in the Woodies in Tralee last weekend and they have a whole section given over to pesticides and herbicides, lovely, bright colours, lovely marketing, you'll have a beautiful garden, just spray this stuff on. There are tiny, tiny little instruction leaflets stuck onto the front of the bottle. Before I started this, I wouldn't really have given it much thought, but when you start to think about it, and you start to think of the impact of all of these little spots all over the map where this stuff is being used, not even to talk about the massive agricultural use of the same stuff, it's just unbelievable.

March 2024

Creative aspects of the project

George threw himself into the creative activities with great enthusiasm.

“ Creativity helps you to reflect because you can get caught up in what you're doing, it becomes very task oriented, I must do this, I must do that, but to sit down and take that little bit of time and reflect on what we're doing and why we're doing it, and what works well and what doesn't work well. The creative side of it also helps you to cement those values that you're developing while you're going along, while you're doing these mad things. The Bean Festival was creative, but it was out of nothing. I just thought it was insane, and I can't believe that it went so well. I knew it would work on some level, and on another level, I thought this is mad, this is not going to work.

September 2025

“ Creativity is producing something out of nothing. It's an idea, a spark. You build on that vision, and all of a sudden you have 100 people in the tent, in a thunderstorm, dancing away to Sailhymn, all well fed, and all fed creatively and psychologically and then entertained for the night. It was fantastic.

September 2025

There were many other co-benefits to the creative activities.

“ I think creativity was a great way to get people engaged in the first instance, because people who are creative and have an interest in sustainability saw it as a two for the price of one kind of thing, I can get involved in this, and I'm also interested in the creative stuff. And there's quite a few people in the group that would fall into that category and then there are others who had no creative background, but who drew into it, and it helped to gel the group together. It's a shared experience, some of the more creative activities that we have done are great team-building exercises, they break down barriers between people.

April 2025

The films are an important part of the project.

“ The films are beautiful, the music was beautiful, the one in Barna with Sailhymn singing the backing track, they're fantastic. Seán's film, the one down at the Cashen, was breathtaking. And really, really good production values, very professionally done. Like with the catering, these things all contribute to an overall sense of what has been done, and that it's been done properly. There's no shortcuts here, and there's no cutting corners, it's not an amateur thing. These are professional people who do a very professional job, and that reflects then on the message that you're giving that you're not just some crackpot who's got some notions. There's a validity to everything that you're doing. That comes across in those films. **September 2025**

“ Creativity is the third leg on the stool really. You need the energy, you need the bit of science and you need the bit of creativity, even if it's just to pause and think about what we're doing and to come up with novel ways of engaging people.

September 2025

“ I think it would be a poorer project without it. It would become much more of a strategic planning project if there wasn't a creative element to it, and it would lose the human impact of all of this. It would become much more about policies and politics.

April 2025

Impact of project on George

“ The project has brought home the whole impact of climate change and biodiversity loss to me, it's reinforced my worst fears about those things, but it has also shown me that there are things that can be done, there are possibilities, particularly around conservation.

September 2025

“ I would definitely say that my perception of other people and other people's buy-in has changed dramatically over the last two years. Whereas I thought most people were completely detached from this, I would have thought that most of the farmers were disinterested and focused on intensification and industrialisation, dairy farming around here was the big thing, that has been very much challenged. I think that there's far more buy-in for these kinds of initiatives. I think that there's huge potential for change, and it's just a case of how that change is co-ordinated and how it's brought about. That'll be my big take home from it. It really has opened my eyes to the fact that a lot more people are a lot more aware than maybe they're given credit for.

September 2025

George has also become more aware of the importance of good local food. Once you get your hands dirty and you partake in the harvest, there's no going back.

“ Once you have access to that kind of food, and you have thought about what the benefits are, even though the potatoes are small and the onions are a bit small this year because of the lack of rain, you have much more confidence in what you're eating. I think it's as much about the access to it, you don't want it taken away from you, you want to keep that.

September 2024

“ It has a knock-on effect because it makes you start thinking about things like packaging and pollution and the whole recycling thing. Do I really need to buy this plastic stuff?

September 2024

George enjoyed the social side and making connections.

“ I enjoyed meeting the people in the group. I've met a lot of people that I didn't know and like minded people, and met a lot of people that I thought I knew, or was acquainted with, but I've gotten to know them a lot better, and I've met a lot of people outside of the group who I didn't know, all local people with an interest in sustainability or growing food or biodiversity. That has been the big thing for me, that has been absolutely fantastic. **April 2025**

Impact of project on local community

“ At the beginning, people were asking, what's Brilliant Ballybunion, and slowly but surely I was able to give an answer to that after a few months. But nobody's asking that now, because most people have been to one bit or another bit or are involved in some way in it. I think most of the winter population people in Ballybunion would have an awareness of Brilliant Ballybunion.

September 2025

The Sustainability Day was a big eye opener for George, he was initially wondering if anyone would turn up! The Tinteán Theatre is a bit out of town so no-one would arrive there by accident.

“ But I was on the door for large portions of the morning, taking people's details and it really knocked me back how much interest there was and how enthusiastic people were for something like this. The feedback was very, very good as well, so that was a big impact.

April 2025

“ I've spoken to people since, people not involved with Brilliant Ballybunion, but people that you know locally around the town, who were very taken with it. They didn't know there was a biodiversity officer in Kerry County Council. They were absolutely knocked back by the emergency guys. When you've got the emergency guys talking to you about climate change and the consequences and what they're dealing with as a result of more severe rain and more severe storms, it brings it home.

September 2025

Again, initially George wasn't sure about the Bean Festival.

“ I had one foot in each camp on the day as a consumer and a provider and I just really enjoyed the day, I thought it was such a great success. I remember being downtown when we launched it back in June, at the Moya festival. We had this little area down outside one of the cafes, and we were giving away beans, and I was thinking to myself, this is just insane. But there was a huge amount of interest from people passing by on the street, and you explaining it to them and them saying, that's a great idea and you give them their bean, and off they go. I had my doubts about whether it would actually fly or not on the day. And it was great. **September 2025**

“ The catering was a really big part of the day. It was walking the walk as well as talking the talk. To have people like Lily and Steph doing the catering just really put the cherry, or the bean, on top, and to be able to cater for that many people to that level of quality, within what we were doing on the day, it was just fantastic.

September 2025

Looking ahead

George is hoping to develop the Coastwatch survey in the area through the Nature Group.

“ The whole point of those things is that it's a sustainable survey of the coastline over years, looking for changes in usage and pollution and that sort of thing. It's another thing I have on my To Do list.

September 2025

“ I'll continue growing and there's some talk here about a community garden or allotments or something. I'm sure I'll be stuck in that as well, in some form or fashion. And the school polytunnel will be another project.

April 2025

“ There has been an integration with Tidy Towns. Tidy Towns will never be the same again after Brilliant Ballybunion. It is less about flowerpots and the litter and more about the environment and biodiversity, it is great to see that kind of shift in approach. I'll see myself involved with that one way or another. You can't get to know all these people who are doing all of this stuff and not be involved into the future. I've been colonized at this stage. **April 2025**

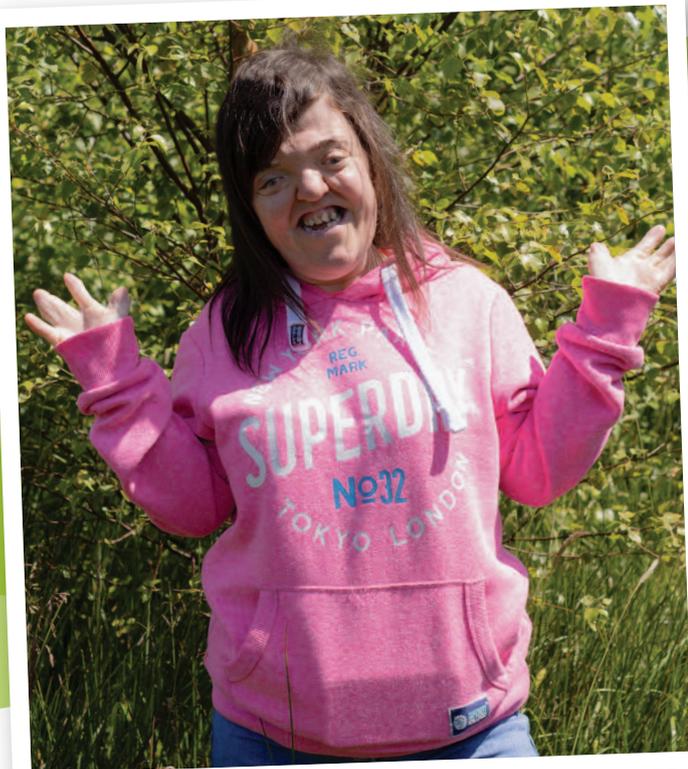
Have George's initial expectations for the project been met?

“ I didn't really know what to expect, because I've never been involved in anything like this before, but in terms of what I was hoping to get out of it and consolidating some of the learning that I had done previously, and some of the ideas that were starting to form in my head, it has met all those expectations.

September 2025

“ It was early on in the ecology course when I heard about it and it sounded like exactly the kind of thing I wanted to do after I was finished, and I managed to overlap the two of them. I did my work experience as part of my course out in Barna, which was really handy. It was very enjoyable, it ticked all the boxes for the course, so it was a great all-round success.

September 2025



Antoinette O'Sullivan

Background

Antoinette is from Ballybunion. She has worked with Kerry Social Farming for over five years, after being referred through St. John of God's support services for people with disabilities. She likes gardening and art, and all that goes with it.

Antoinette is a very positive person and keeps busy organising charity events. She loves social media and sharing her disability awareness. Antoinette eats healthily, she goes to personal training twice a week and has recently joined the Ballybunion running club. She is a sociable person and loves trying out new things and meeting new people. In April 2025, Antoinette played multiple roles on stage in 'A Night Full of Stars' at Siamsa Tíre, which included a solo performance of 'I had a Dream' from Les Miserables.

Reasons for applying

Antoinette applied to the project because she is interested in nature and gardening and wanted to learn more about them and about climate change. She also wanted to join a nice group and have new experiences, and to contribute her own ideas and imagination.

“ This project might teach me to be kind to nature, so that when I'm out and about if I see something that shouldn't be there I might take it upon myself to bring an extra bag in my backpack or use my pocket and I will pick up the paper, and by doing that I'm helping the environment. Now I know I can't do it everywhere I go, I can't clean up the island, but I can do my bit for the community, because Ballybunion is a lovely spot and with the beach and everything it's important to try and keep it tidy.”
March 2024

“ Hopefully, the project will change me into a better person. I will learn so much, it will teach me to be kinder to places like the woods. I'll have a better understanding about climate change and growing food. **March 2024**

“ I feel that my imagination can impact the project, for example my ways of creating Barna to be more accessible for people with disabilities, and they love my ideas. Sometimes my ideas can come out of nowhere. **March 2024**

“ I just can't wait to see what we can come up with because I know that at the end of this project, we will create something that Ballybunion doesn't have. I'm very excited because I know that there's a lot of imagination going around and I know that we will come together as a team and create something. **March 2024**

Concerns about climate change

Antoinette didn't know much about climate change when she joined the project, but her awareness and knowledge grew significantly during the two years.

“ I suppose climate change hasn't really impacted my life as much. I wouldn't honestly know a lot about it, but I'm learning. **March 2024**

“ The project has made me more aware of my surroundings, for example, how something is done, how it survives. I've learned so much in the last couple of months about climate and the way I recycle, about food and it has opened my eyes more. **September 2024**

“ I have a better understanding of it now. I feel like it's time to start doing something because if we don't do something now, we'll ruin the earth. **April 2025**

“ I'm more aware. Every time I go for a walk, I see the river, and I see how things are getting damaged by the storms. And I have a better understanding of how there's just so many little things that we can do to help the environment. **April 2025** ”

Concerns about the loss of biodiversity

Antoinette likes nature and she wants to do what she can to mind it. She is particularly frustrated by the damage that people can do by throwing litter and not tidying up after themselves.

“ Sometimes people create nature as a dumping ground, people throw their rubbish. I think there should be a place for people to grab their bag for the rubbish, like they have bags for dogs, because I feel if we're picking up after dogs we should be picking up after ourselves too. What's wrong is throwing a bag away, not caring about who the bag will upset. It will upset the environment. It will upset the animals. It could do damage to the wild. **March 2024** ”

Food and growing aspects of project

Antoinette really enjoyed the Fridays on the Farm and Imagine days in Barna. She loved working and learning with the group, bouncing ideas off each other and the fun!

“ We share all our ideas, and when all our ideas come together that makes things, because my idea could help someone else, and their idea could help me. And it's just amazing how everyone is putting in their input and it is not down to the one person. **September 2024** ”

“ It's the power of it, everyone is getting along, everyone is staying, we're all having fun. And we're helping Lisa and Rena by coming together once a month, we get so much done in a space of a couple of hours, and it helps them, and it boosts their energy and the energy from the project just helps me. When I come home, I can always say this is what I've learned today, and I can take that from the group and bring it home and work on it. It makes me feel wonderful because I wouldn't have known that I could do this without the help of the group. And I can also bring something to Instagram. **September 2024** ”

“ I think it brings everyone together. We're always laughing, we're always smiling when we're there. That's important for us, because if we go out to some place and we're all down, no one is going to enjoy it, we're all going to get fed up of it. But now I feel the wellness of it, and we are all getting on and the trips are unbelievable. **September 2024** ”

Antoinette has a better understanding of where food is coming from, how planting seeds can create a lovely lunch. She is now eating and enjoying foods that she would never have tasted before.

“ Every time we meet up as a group, the food is amazing, and the food is something that we grew but we never really thought about how food is being made, and we see it with our own eyes. **April 2025** ”

“ There would be food that I haven't tried before, even in a restaurant. I wouldn't even go for that type of food. But now I'm tasting it, and I'm loving it. It's just amazing to see it being prepared as well because sometimes when the girls are in the kitchen preparing it, you're watching them putting whatever in, and sometimes they'll share something with you, and then they keep the rest a secret. **April 2025** ”

“ I enjoyed the different tastes of food, the way Lily and Stephanie created this lovely food. Now, I'm a plain eater, I wouldn't have notions of putting food together, but when I tasted the different kinds of food, oh, my god, it was just so delicious. **September 2025** ”

“ I'm more aware of where food comes from now and it's taught me that this comes from the ground. Anytime I go to do my shopping, I'm constantly picking out fruit and veg and I'm more aware of where it comes from. **September 2025** ”

During the project Antoinette developed ideas about what to do with her own garden at home, with the support of the group.

“ I have a big garden here, well, it's not big, big, but big enough to fit in all my imaginations. I'm watching, I'm listening to what other people are saying and then I'm thinking, oh, that would be nice in my garden, and then I can create it. I've started to design my garden, so I'm probably going to start doing it next year, because this year is just full on for me. Everyone has been helping me create it, and the ideas that people have, and it makes me feel grateful that I have this project to come to, because I wouldn't have known that I can do it. **September 2024** ”

“ When you're growing something yourself, I just think it makes you more appreciative of the food. When you're going to the shop and you're picking up food, you don't know where it's coming from. So, when you're planting it yourself, at least you can pop up and say it came from my garden. And hopefully one day, that's what I will be able to say. **April 2025** ”

Because Antoinette was so busy performing in 'A Night Full of Stars' in early 2025, the garden isn't up and running yet, but her plans are definitely progressing.

“ My plans for my garden are ongoing, because they change every week. The first week, it was just a garden that has decking and stuff like that. Now with the project, my feelings have changed. I mostly want to plant salads and stuff. But I know that I can turn my back garden into a forest, if I wanted to! **September 2025** ”

“ Both Lisa and Rena came to my back garden one evening, we were drawing, and I was like, okay, I'm going to have an apple tree there, and I'm going to have plants there. It's just amazing how I'm more into the gardening side of things. I'm more into growing veg and growing fruit as well, and it's not just all going to be flowers. One day, I'm going to have my own salads from my own garden, and it's all learning. **September 2025** ”

Nature and biodiversity aspects of project

Antoinette is excited about the Nature Group and the people involved in it. She joined initially but had to pull back because she had so much on her plate, but she is planning to get more involved now.

“ I think it's amazing having a Nature Group. **September 2025** ”

“ There's a mix of people, men and women, and they're not all from Brilliant Ballybunion. There's a mix of community spirit. **April 2025** ”

“ I love nature and when I do put my mind into it, I will love it. Once all this has finished, I know I'll be in there somewhere. **September 2025** ”

Creative aspects of the project

Antoinette is very creative, but she has always been too busy for art, so she loved that the project gave her the opportunity to focus on creative activities, to experience and try different things.

“ There's a lot of thinking going on in my head. And I do like creating. I like doing art, but I don't really get time to do art through nature because I'm always busy, I'm always on the go. So that's why when I signed up, I knew this is my way of learning and my way of expressing the ideas that I have. **March 2024** ”

“ I enjoyed everything about it. There isn't a gig I didn't enjoy because it's enjoyable to go somewhere away from the town, because I'm always in traffic, I'm always listening to traffic. And it's nice to go somewhere where you can concentrate. We can use our mind to create and it's very quiet back there in Barna. **September 2024** ”

“ I'm loving it. I'm using my imagination a lot now. Before I started this project I was not really into journalling or not really into artists. The more I'm doing the project, the more I'm learning about myself, about the stuff that I love now. I always loved drawing, and I always loved writing, but I never got a chance to do it. The project has brought me closer to journalling and I'm now taking up painting. It's bringing stuff I used to enjoy back into my life. **April 2025** ”

Monto Man and stone rubbing caught Antoinette's attention.

“ I think it was amazing where we went to Siamsa and seeing, I'm going to call it a robot, but there was this man hanging over us, made with different kind of materials. **April 2025** ”

Antoinette really enjoyed using her journal.

“ I write down what I see now with Brilliant Ballybunion, every time we meet up, I'm capturing it. I'm writing in my thoughts, but I'm also drawing as well, like the bees and stuff, and I'm just writing what I think about everything around me and the sea and then how people seem to throw their rubbish everywhere, and I'm like, but there's bins there. **April 2025** ”

“ I love the films, and I love the journals. I loved how each of us got to take home a journal and had to jot down our own ideas. I mostly stick the photos I take on a daily basis into my book, because that's where I can visualize. **September 2025** ”

Creativity opens up new experiences.

“ Last week when we went to Clare, it was just so amazing, we were looking around and we went to this graveyard, and I had my journal and Lisa told us how there was a picture on the gravestone that we couldn't see. But when we put our page down and we coloured it over in crayon we saw what it was like. I had an angel and a sun, and I wouldn't have imagined doing that here. If I saw something on the ground, I would walk past, but it's the experience of going down on your knees and trying to figure out what it is. **September 2025** ”

Impact of project on Antoinette

Antoinette is now aware of the importance of good local food, she is checking labels and planning to grow some of her own salads and other vegetables.

“ I'm supporting local. I'm reading the labels more, seeing what's in the food because sometimes when we pick up a ready-made dinner, we just pick it up for the sake of being lazy, not being able to cook, but I'm learning that we need to read our labels more, because then we know where that food comes from. I haven't really bought takeaway meals, because I feel I can create a salad if I want a salad, I don't have to rely on the salads that are already made, I can just do it myself, and sometimes Lisa and Rena give us stuff that we can take home to try out, and that's what I love. **September 2024** ”

“ I'm very interested in growing now and it's all thanks to the project because before this I was never interested in anything like this, but when I got involved it made me more aware of the food and where it came from. **April 2025** ”

The project has taught Antoinette that she has a great imagination, and it has helped her to reflect on her thoughts and ideas.

“It's amazing what you think about and once you write it down, you're like, oh, my god, I can't believe this is what I'm feeling inside, or this is what I think about the world.”
April 2025

She has really enjoyed being part of the group and getting to make such great friends.

“It's such a lovely group. We've never had a falling out. If I ever have anything to say or do, I can now share it in the group and they're so easy to chat to, they're just incredible.”
April 2025

“I thought transport would be an issue getting out, but I was collected and I was dropped home. There was no problem. And even though I didn't know anyone at the start of the project, now we know each other, and it's just amazing.”
September 2025

She has developed within herself and learnt so much.

“It's been a pleasure working with the lads, and I can't wait to see what else they have for us. I'm flying, flying, flying. I have improved and I see myself how I have improved, massively, and the learning of it as well. I'm learning something new every time I meet up with them. If I didn't learn something there'd be something wrong, but I've learned so much.”
April 2025

Antoinette loved the trips away, particularly the Ballymaloe Festival of Food and the Earth Rising Festival at IMMA, where she spoke at a seminar with the Brilliant Ballybunion panel.

“I loved it. It was just amazing how we got to explore the other artists and how they go about their projects.”
September 2025

She is much more aware of nature now.

“Because of the project we have more awareness about nature. Before this I would just listen to music and forget about the world, but now when I go out for a walk, I'm more aware of my surroundings, I'm watching the water and I'm enjoying it a lot more. I think it's very important to our daily lives, because sometimes our lives can be busy, but then taking yourself into nature, to the woods or the beach, winds you down.”
September 2025

Thanks to the project, Antoinette has recently joined the running club.

“I've known the running club was there for a couple of years and I know that there's a few in the group that go, and now I'm doing it. Joanne was talking to me about it and I was, oh yeah, I'm doing it and we're going to get Gráinne to come along, we're going to get Rena and Lisa to jump on and some of the others to join us. I will probably end up swimming too, who knows?”
September 2025

Impact of project on local community

Brilliant Ballybunion brought people together and it has spread awareness. Antoinette could see that local people were talking about the public events in the lead up to the days, and they would be chatting about them afterwards.

“The Bean Festival gave everyone awareness because we were outside the tourist office one day, planting beans, everywhere I looked beans, beans, beans, and I suppose it brought people together.”
September 2025

The new groups, like the Nature Group, will continue to spread that awareness.

Looking ahead

Antoinette really likes the idea of developing a community garden in the town.

“If we didn't want the group to finish up, maybe we can continue by bringing our ideas into the community, and we can create a community garden for everyone. It doesn't have to be us that always have to be there, it can be everyone, and then kids will learn. Kids can come and plant and they'll also be learning.”
September 2024

She would love the project to continue but also knows that she will be involved in the new groups that are emerging.

“For me, personally, I think there should be an extension going on for an extra year, because we were so busy the last two years, and we're so active this year, we won't know what hit us, because we were involved in such a lovely group. But I'm hoping that next year I will be busy doing my garden, growing my food, but I'll also be involved in those little groups, so that will keep me going, and I will be more than happy to help out when I can.”
April 2025

Have Antoinette's initial expectations for the project been met?

“I was at the open night, I saw the impact that it had on everyone, and I'm like, yeah, I might as well, I'll do it for the gas and see how we go. If it doesn't work out, I can always pull back a small bit, but I loved every minute of it and I'm so glad that I pushed myself to doing it.”
September 2025

“It's been inspiring and amazing. It's just a credit to have learned so much in a short space of time, even though I know two years is a long time, but when you think about it, it was only last year that we got together and I'm like, how did that go so fast?”
September 2025

“I'm going to miss the project, because it has kept me going.”
September 2025



Marta O'Connor

Background

Marta was brought up in a small village in Poland and as a child was in tune with nature, going to the fields, looking at the flowers, the bees and the birds. She and her husband, who is originally from Ballybunion, lived in New York City but visited Ballybunion every summer. Marta has three children, a young daughter and two sons, one in secondary school and one in his twenties (who lives in New York). In 2021, the family moved back to Ballybunion, which was a big change, but Marta feels incredibly lucky to live here now. They have an acre and a half of land, and her husband has created a lovely vegetable garden.

“ I love nature and I love Ballybunion, and I love the spaciousness of nature because I feel more authentic to myself. I love walking down the beach. I love the air that hits you when you come from the airplane. I love Ireland. It just does something to my body, in my mind. It quiets me down and makes me feel good. It feels like it's closer to who I am, because I'm into meditation, into yoga, I want to live a good balanced life. And it seems like New York was so chaotic. Over here, you can get in tune with yourself. **March 2024** ”

Reasons for applying to project

Marta heard about the project and on an impulse applied. She wanted to be part of something bigger than herself and to help preserve our environment, surrounded by other creative people. She also wanted to learn about growing food and to help her husband in the vegetable garden. This kind of thing is normally out of her comfort zone because she's not so much of a people person, but it just felt the right thing to do.

“ It's strange, but when Lisa told me about the project, I jumped on it, and I don't jump on things in my life. I was just, okay, let me do it. Something pushed me, I swear. **March 2024** ”

“ I am very open minded about it. I'm actually watching myself being part of the process. I have almost no expectations. I know I will end up in a better place. I'm just here to experience and to learn with a completely open mind. I'm just opening my awareness and will see what will happen. **March 2024** ”

Concerns about climate change

While she had some knowledge of climate change when joining the project, Marta wanted to learn how she could usefully contribute.

“ I hear about it, of course, but it almost feels unreal in day-to-day life. It's a terrible thing, don't get me wrong. If I could have an impact on it as a person with any action, that's why I'm here. I would like to learn. I would like to learn to be bigger than myself and to affect this world in a positive way. **March 2024** ”

“ I just know from New York City we got such bad storms and hurricanes which never happened before. It was frightening. I notice that in my country, in Poland, the heat rises so much, it's extremely hot. When I was a child, that never happened. I've been living here for only two years, but summers are hotter here too, and I heard there was never such a thing. So, you can sense it, feel it. **March 2024** ”

Being part of the project has helped Marta bring climate change and its effects to the front of her mind and it has also helped her clarify her thinking around what climate change is teaching us about how we should live.

“ I definitely see a clearer picture of climate change. I definitely see a bigger impact, now I'm conscious of it. Before, I was living in my own bubble and hearing about it, but it didn't feel real. Now I see it as part of my life, it's part of us. That's what's happening right now and it's obviously frightening and concerning. But on the other hand, the way I look at it, it's Mother Nature's call to wake us up and change things around, which is good, because I don't think our society, the whole economic thing, I don't think it's right, and there are things we have to change. So, in some strange way, it's a good thing. I feel like it also will create more happiness within us, a more simple life. **September 2024**

“ Obviously, it's concerning and it's a bit scary. But for me, personally, I feel I have great faith in nature, it's something beyond us little humans. So, I feel like it is bringing us back to balance, it's forcing us into balance, into reflecting on it and just picking a different path. That's how I look at it - I'm concerned naturally, but I'm hopeful in that way, I just perceive the bigger picture. I don't take things personally. Nature is straightening us up. **April 2025**

Concerns about the loss of biodiversity

Marta is saddened by the loss of biodiversity and the negative impact we humans are having on nature, but she is hopeful that this is changing and will continue to change.

“ It's very sad. But I have faith in nature, that nature will rebound, will fix itself. Nature is so much more powerful than we are, but we are part of nature. So, I feel sad, but I have hope that all of us collectively can do something about it. I feel we are changing, we are so much more aware. Looking at my previous generation and my parents, the way they perceive the world, it was all materialistic stuff. Right now, people, or maybe based on myself, are getting more spiritual, more involved with just the oneness of everything. There's been a shift in peoples' consciousness. **March 2024**

“ I have hope in humanity, so I guess I have great hope that we will change it. Some people have a perception of humanity, that we're going down. I feel the other way. I feel like we will understand, we'll be great, we're part of it. **March 2024**

“ I feel like the anxiety belongs to the past. We are here in the future. So, we have to be positive to do positive changes. We're not crying over spilled milk at this stage. I'm positive because we are capable and able. **March 2024**

“ Of course, I'm saddened by it. If I can do anything, I will do it. I'm aware of my responsibility within all of it to do as much as I can, but responsibility without feeling guilt and remorse. **September 2024**

Marta believes we all have to slow down.

“ Slowing down I think is extremely important, and we'll be forced into slowing down. On the other hand, I feel like there's a big part of us that is already very aware, and we will slow it down, we will make it better. There are many people who are aware, and we are spreading the awareness in every way. I feel like we are the army. **April 2025**

Food and growing aspects of project

When she joined the project Marta did not know much about growing food and she wanted to learn.

“ We have a bit of land and when we came two years ago my husband started a little farm without knowing what he's doing and he's doing very well. I never joined him, and I would like to because I love good food. But I'm the type of person who needs to know what I'm doing before doing it. Food to me is nourishment, and I can feel the difference in my mood, in my whole body, when I eat good food, homegrown food. **March 2024**

“ I'm getting much more involved in our garden and I'm actually starting to enjoy it. Yesterday, when we went to Barna and we were planting the beans, the contact with the earth, I had this beautiful moment of just being present and doing it. Sometimes you get those moments in your life, stillness, and you're really present, and it's so wonderful. It felt so good. **April 2025**

“ It's really fantastic to be able to grow your own food. It gives a sense of pride, it enriches your life and makes you more present with your food. You realize that food is not only food, because from small beans, we made such a huge celebration, and it was fantastic. Food is connection, it's so many things. I didn't give so much thought to it, so it brought greater awareness to me. It was really great. **September 2025**

Marta is now buying local.

“ I will be honest, before I joined the project, I see all of those things, buy local, do local, and I hear it and even I heard about Lisa's Sandwich Project, and I was like the wall. Now after listening to all of the experts talking, now it totally makes sense, now I actually implement it in my life. Now if I have a choice, I will buy local. I think it is very important to support your community to get rid of the carbon footprint. **September 2024**



“ This project woke me up. I didn't think about it before, and it makes sense. **September 2024**

In the spring of 2025, Marta began creating a small Zen Garden with her husband near her house.

“ I want to bring stillness and peace into my life overall, so I'm bringing the beauty and the peace to my immediate environment, it's so important to me. I don't want to sit, I want to create something. It comes from within me. I've been meditating for a long time, but lately, I'm doing it twice a day, and I've noticed how the peace comes over you so much more. I feel like if everybody was meditating in the world, the world would be a different place. **April 2025**

“ We still need the pebbles for it, I got a beautiful Buddha statue, we have a couple of rocks and things, so, it's almost done, and it gives me joy because it's at the front of my house. Each time I enter in the car, I stop and it gives me this beautiful feeling in my heart. **September 2025**

Nature and biodiversity aspects of project

Marta has always loved nature, and the project has developed her awareness and helped her to reconnect in a deeper way.

“ Little things like I downloaded the Merlin bird app and I walk around my property and listen to different birds. Being able to recognize them gives me great joy. You feel more connected to it, you know about it, connection and knowledge. So that was fantastic. **September 2025**

She was very saddened to learn, on a Wild about Life outing with Joanne, about the poor condition of the stream near her house.

“ I was very surprised, because really that's why I moved to Ireland. I thought it's pure and clean, and then we found out our stream is not as healthy as it's supposed to be. So, I connected to what there is right now. It feels intimate. **September 2025**

Marta really loved the Ballymaloe Festival of Food because there were so many experts talking about different things.

“ Especially the man [Dave Beecher] talking about soil, it was fascinating, because right now, when I look at nature in a healthy state and the way it works all together, it's fascinating and beautiful. I didn't know what harmony there could be between all of the elements, I'm very excited about it. **September 2024**

Because of her personal time limitations, Marta had to choose between getting involved in the Bean Festival or the Nature Group.

“ I'm taking one day at a time. Right now, we are focusing on the Bean Festival, growing beans. So I'm soaking my beans. I will grow them, I will try to take pictures of them daily, or hopefully every couple of days, to record it. **April 2025**

“ I'm very interested in the nature side, but I just couldn't deal with two different projects, because of the time. I still eventually would like to join the nature group, because that probably interests me even more. But I just can't split myself in too many ways. I know my little limits. I know my priorities. **April 2025**

Creative aspects of the project

Marta is very creative, and she has always loved drawing, painting and taking photos. However, as her life became busier, she had to put this part of her on hold. So, the creative side of the project really attracted Marta, as it reconnected her with her creative self.

“ I love it. I love it. I'm going back to my childhood, and also back to my older self, the creative self, because I shut it down for a while, and I feel like it's opening up again. It's definitely open, and for me it's fantastic. Lisa is a wonderful guide to creation, because she shows me, which I know about, but she shows me again to shut down your critic, because that was my biggest problem, my internal critic. So, when you don't listen to that voice anymore, that's when you can flourish. **September 2024**

“ I feel like I reconnected with that aspect of myself, which I didn't realize was one of the greatest aspects of me as a person, and now I'm streaming with ideas for my personal life and also with the project. **September 2025**

Marta also took up journalling again.

“ I've started to write my ideas as they pop in my head, which is great. When I was young, I used to have a journal all the time. Right now, I could be doing something, and something pops in my head, and I would write it down, sometimes you get those wise thoughts. **September 2025**

The films were a joy to watch, and the Square Tomato Exhibition was wonderful.

“ Lisa's drawings make you think, reflect, which is fantastic, and that's the way to communicate with others. When you get home, it stays with you, then you realize the layers of it, and then you grasp the truth of the matter. **September 2025**

Marta believes that art is very important because it goes beyond words, it goes deeper.

“ I believe art, like Lisa's exhibition, gets you thinking on a different level. You don't scream with words, it just makes you feel. And through feeling, you can reach people differently, in a better way. Creativity also can create new paths because creativity is like expansion, it's beyond the linear. It can touch people deeper, because words just wash over you. In order for any kind of change, you have to sense it, to feel it. **April 2025** ”

“ Previously, for me, art was a personal thing. Now I realise it's a perfect communication tool. You can communicate with others, you can go past the brain, past the reasoning mind, straight to the heart, because preaching will never work, telling people what to do makes them shut down, but somehow art can get straight, deep into your heart. I think it's a fantastic thing. Plus, I feel like creativity shows you more solutions because you're thinking broader. So, I think it's a very, very important aspect of the project. **September 2025** ”

“ I believe that creativity is like an outlet for us to create something new, which is not here. So, I believe if we are faced with a challenge, we should use this creative channel to resolve it. I think that's the only way. **September 2025** ”

Impact of project on Marta

The project opened Marta up as a person.

“ I consider the project as a personal growth project, going to the uncomfortable places. **April 2025** ”

Marta learnt the value of connection, of community and of being with like-minded people.

“ Even though I'm a person who avoids connections, I realised it's actually important in your life. It's very helpful and it's a great thing. **April 2025** ”

“ I came here four years ago. The project started two years ago, and I felt like I was in my own little planet here. And now I definitely feel like it's a bigger home. And now I want to give my light to it somehow. I'm excited, and I definitely want to do something. **September 2025** ”

She loved the comradery and support of the group.

“ Doing little things and being together and laughing. ”

“ One thing which was important, when we had the big storm, and I lost my electricity for days and I was really dying to take a shower. When I got three text messages from people in the group, oh, you can come to my house to take a shower, that touched my heart. The thing is that somebody has your back. **April 2025** ”

The project has helped Marta to live a more wholesome life.

“ I feel like my living is becoming more and more clean and conscious and it affects my daughter, it affects the people surrounding me. It feels like I'm in the right place at the right time. It's wonderful. **September 2024** ”

“ I'm becoming more and more conscious of all of the chemicals I'm using in the house. I've started making my own cleaners and looking into eco living. **September 2024** ”

“ I would like to go more towards being almost vegetarian without the label, because I don't believe in labels. I just want to eat more vegetables because it's good for my body and I'm naturally drawn to it and the more I hear about stuff, the more I'm drawn to our own vegetables. **September 2024** ”

“ I would love our little farm to be self-sustaining. I would like to find out more about the new energy sources, get solar or something else. I would like to be self-sufficient. I feel like it would create a new kind of happiness and joy. Plus, it's good for the whole environment. **September 2024** ”

It has helped Marta to re-connect with her creative self and it gave her confidence.

“ I'm greatly affected by being surrounded by people who think alike, and especially by Lisa's ease at creating, she has an idea and it so, so gently comes out. And I've noticed within myself then, that this is happening to me so much more. **April 2025** ”

“ I enjoyed seeing how an idea can spread, start with a little seed, a little silly idea, and then it can expand and become a physical thing. That was phenomenal. It gave me total confidence within myself. I'm like, wow, now I can gather some of my ideas and make them happen. That was fantastic. I really needed to learn that. **September 2025** ”

“ Do you know what I noticed? That I can make a difference. I hear this thing, I can make a difference, you can make a difference, it's just a bunch of words. But somehow, on the deep level, it taught me that, it hit me over the head, that I can make a difference. I realised, wow, I can reach out to other people, that's what the project did to me, and I can put my energy into something beautiful and positive and change some people, change something, make this world a better place. **September 2025** ”

“ I performed, or I don't know how would you say it, a play which was *The Bean Chronicles*. The play explored the mysterious history of beans, the magic of soil and the birth of Ballybunion Bean Festival.

The play was actually a surprise for me as much as for anybody because it's something I did not expect to do and then I didn't realize what I got myself into. It was dramatic yet it actually grew on me and at the end of the project, at the end of writing the play, I truly enjoyed it and I must say, I found this creative outlet through it and it felt very homelike. It felt really fantastic, and I felt like it was success.

Sometimes I feel like creativity could be slightly painful. It's like birth but at the end it's worth it and I'm so glad. It was wonderful, beautiful day.

Interview filmed at The Barna Way at the Bean Festival, August 2025

Impact of project on local community

Marta doesn't believe that telling people what to do works, and it can sometimes have the reverse effect. But she feels strongly that change is rippling out from the collaborators and others in the project.

“ I was the little person who didn't know much about it, and now there's a ripple effect. This project is spreading the word. I feel like Ballybunion is getting more and more aware, so it will spread everywhere. **April 2025**

“ It always comes out, even talking to my friend and I'm like, guess what, it's so much better to buy local, or I don't want to buy the chemical things anymore. I'm buying good shampoo. Ideally, I want to make my own. **September 2024**

“ We affect other people, just by our example, so me purifying and making my life whole, will affect somebody else. **September 2024**

She also feels that local people are beginning to get interested in learning how to grow their own food and they are definitely curious about solar and other renewable energies.

“ I feel like people want to make the difference. Sometimes maybe they don't know how to, so they start asking questions. **September 2025**

“ The project is the foundation. It's like the roots of the big plant. Look at the people who come to the Ballybunion Nature group. People are interested. People want to spend their time in a positive way. **April 2025**

Looking ahead

“ I believe there will be other projects coming out of this project. It will split into a little bunch of different projects, and it will continue. So, it will be in history at some point. It started with Brilliant Ballybunion.

April 2025

“ I feel like the seed's been put into the ground, and it will have a ripple effect. **September 2025**

Have Marta's initial expectations for the project been met?

“ I jumped into the project with a totally open mind. But I definitely feel like I expanded as a person, and so it exceeded my expectations, because I feel like a greater, better version of myself, just because of going through all of the experiences and also having many things to deal with, that I didn't really necessarily enjoy, like being almost an event planner. It's not my thing, but it made me grow in a direction that I didn't expect I could grow and I would enjoy it. It showed me a greater self. I can handle so much more than I thought I'm able to. I learned fast. **September 2025**

“ I think whatever problems are in the world reflect our inner world. So we have to invest in making our inner world better. If everybody's inner world is more happy and kind, then the outer world will be a better place. That's what I will create from now on. I believe now we have to teach everybody how to meditate, to find that stillness within themselves, in their different way, and prioritize it. That is my mission. Climate change isn't just an atmospheric problem, it is a by-product of great short-term thinking and disconnection. If we support and nurture inner wellbeing, we will see the ripple effects. **September 2025**



Patricia Pienaar

Background

Patricia lives in Ballybunion. Both her parents came from farming backgrounds, but she was brought up in Limerick city. Her mother was always growing strawberries, potatoes and other vegetables in the back garden.

“ We just ignored all that and now I'm wishing I had the skills, why didn't I write it down? **March 2024** ”

“ As children we were always sent back to the farm for the summer holidays. My mother used to make the comparison between rural and city living that when you lived and worked on the farm, you were never hungry. Her experience of going into the city was that you needed to have a job, you needed money. **March 2024** ”

Patricia works as housing officer for a housing body. She has responsibility for the management of four estates locally and she also manages estates in two other counties.

Reasons for Applying to Project

Because of her job, Patricia felt well placed to promote and transfer the learning and skills gained in this project to residents and neighbouring estates in Ballybunion.

“ Because I'm involved in housing projects, you're always trying to encourage families to look after their green areas, their communal spaces, and look at ways that it can be a shared community experience, so the idea of growing food intrigued me. **March 2024** ”

“ The knowledge is important. I've access to a lot of families, we could jointly have workshops and transfer the information to children and families to parents, through our education programmes. **March 2024** ”

She was also keen to learn about growing.

“ I've never grown my own vegetables, so I'm looking forward to that experience. I don't have a huge understanding of what it entails, but I do think it's worth the investment of your time. **March 2024** ”

Concerns about climate change

Patricia is very concerned about the bad weather and the extreme conditions we are now experiencing.

“ I feel a little overwhelmed, a little guilty and a little worried. **September 2024** ”

“ The change has happened. We don't have the nice, reliable weather that we had at one time. **September 2024** ”

There seems to be a lot more flooding and this is impacting on people's lives, particularly in relation to their housing.

“ I suppose we are the eternal optimists, Irish people, we think it's going to be fine tomorrow, but from a work perspective, I would see that there is a lot more drainage being done, a lot more thought has to go into building people's gardens, there's lots of stuff getting damaged. **March 2024** ”

“ Building materials were a certain price and now you're having to combat the weather with the materials, which wasn't really a main concern before. I noticed that from the repair list, even in the driest places. **March 2024** ”

“ Maybe as human beings we will adapt, or we will organise ourselves to adapt to it or try and hopefully prevent it. If we know the worst-case scenario, maybe we'll be putting measures in place to combat that. But we're not good at the preventative stuff, it's kind of like Plan B. **March 2024** ”

Concerns about the loss of biodiversity

Patricia has noticed that growth is happening earlier in the spring. She is also aware of how the trees, the foliage and bushes, the habitat for birds, is being destroyed in the storms.

“ With trees, the concern is where do you plant them and how do you mind them? You need more education around that now because of the storms and the winds that are coming. **March 2024** ”

“ With plants you’re thinking you're doing your best to plant stuff, and then it's destroyed by the weather. It does require a lot of planning, a lot of thinking, a lot of knowledge around what we're doing. **September 2024** ”

“ You'd be looking forward to planting things that are missing in your area, like something for the butterflies or something for the bees. I am noticing more and more of that kind of stuff, thanks to the project, that I haven't seen them this year or certain areas might be doing it better than our area, so there's definitely a cry for help. **September 2024** ”

Food and growing aspects of project

Patricia was interested in learning more about growing but she wasn't able to put the learning into practice at home. However, she enjoyed seeing and hearing what others were doing.

“ I'm interested and keen to learn because it is important to know that, because we've just been living a life of convenience really. **March 2024** ”

“ Looking at the world, the wars and the whole injustice of that and you're watching kids starving and all this could be avoided, you're thinking we need to be more mindful about the food that we take so much for granted. **March 2024** ”

“ It's very interesting, what people are growing and how they are progressing in their own skills, it's amazing. **September 2024** ”

“ The speakers on the day of the Bean Festival were just amazing. There was one guy talking about the history of the land. I suppose all of us have grown up with some farming in the family. My parents would have come from farming backgrounds, and I remember an uncle in Clare looking after the farm. I hadn't realised the government had had such an input, and that they were all nearly organised into what they were doing. That farm ended up losing out to a younger generation, because they either had to produce milk or something or other and it just wasn't viable. It was around the 1980s, where everyone was going off on holidays, and the young people didn't want to do it. It was a hard life. **September 2025** ”

She really enjoyed the food side of the project.

“ I was fascinated by the history of hospitality, and the whole idea that even in tribal time, the first thing you were greeted with was food and you felt safe. And I certainly think about that in my own life, because I'd want to entertain. **September 2024** ”

“ The food at the Bean Festival was amazing, that was just mind blowing. The whole bean concept and the idea that there's a group of people out there that can just put all that food together from local produce, that blew me away, absolutely. I thought they were amazing, all of them, and it was very professional, it was very well done. **September 2025** ”

Working together on the farm with the other collaborators was a great way of getting to know each other.

“ Because everybody wants to be hands-on and helpful, you might go and take a shovel and a wheelbarrow, and we'll all be laughing, we're the crew. But you'd be surprised then what the person who's digging with you is telling you about themselves and what they're doing, that I wouldn't have known. **September 2024** ”

Nature and biodiversity aspects of project

Because of the full-on nature of her work, and other pressures, Patricia wasn't able to give the nature side of the project as much time as she would have liked. However, she developed awareness, learnt a lot and enjoyed following what was going on.

“ I loved the enthusiasm from everybody and the passion that they had for the different things that they were interested in, between the birds and the surveying on the beach, and where the nests were. We're walking along every day and not being mindful of this habitat and then there's the marine noise, all the activity going on affecting the mammals and the dolphins. **September 2025** ”

“ I do think that that's probably the one that's the easiest to create in different pockets. People will buy in to help with nature, with butterflies and bugs. **September 2025** ”

Creative aspects of the project

“ I am fascinated by the enthusiasm that Lisa has for transcribing things through art. **March 2024** ”

“ The project is bouncing with ideas and creativity, and the energy is huge. **September 2024** ”

Patricia feels she is not an artist and she doesn't have the skills to draw.



“ So, if we're sitting around nature, oh, draw that tree, or draw what you see in front of you, and you're thinking, well, I actually can't do that. Lisa will just tell you, whatever you're doing, it's beautiful, it's fabulous, so it's not about being judged. I wouldn't fear that. No, it's just not my thing, Now, if you had given me a paint-by-numbers that would have been fine.

September 2024

“ So, sometimes I feel a bit lost in that, even though I'm amazed at what it's producing in other people. It's bringing out hidden skills that they had and that's lovely to watch, it is very nice, and the other side of it is that they bring you to the nicest parts of nature as well.

September 2024

From the outset, she was unsure about the idea of journaling and doing reflective work with it, but she was hoping to train herself in the project. However, her activist nature won out!

“ I'm very much an activist and so I have no problem doing the physical stuff and getting involved with that. But sitting down and thinking about what you're doing and where we're going with it will be a challenge for me.

March 2024

“ I'm very bad at journaling. I'm a reactor and a physical activist. Even at work, they say can you record what you did? But I've moved on to the next project, to my own detriment. I'm very bad at literally putting pen to paper.

September 2025

However, Patricia loved the paper-making session.

“ So certainly, arts and crafts, making stuff out of something, I definitely would love that.

September 2024

She was fascinated by how the crayon rubbing worked on the gravestones during the Scatterly Island trip.

“ That was very creative, that was something that those who can't draw could do, and you're thinking, how about bringing that back, framing and hanging that on your wall, that's a story in itself, a life. I thought that was just incredible. **September 2025**

Patricia believes she can think creatively, and she sees the importance of creativity in engaging people.

“ I mightn't physically be able to do it, but I certainly can have visions for stuff, definitely. Even when we went to visit Vandeleur Gardens, I thought, that's definitely what we need to create for biodiversity.

September 2025

“ They had these little wooden seats with plants coming out of it, and they had things on the wall that interested children, like a little puzzle that you do and while you're at the puzzle you're aware of the flowers and you had to step into this little stony area and try and do this little intricate maze on the wall. I thought that was very clever. So definitely, creativity has a role to play, in drawing people in.

September 2025

Impact of project on Patricia

Patricia really enjoyed being at The Barna Way.

“ What I've enjoyed is literally the downtime at the farm and being made to be mindful of the surroundings. I think that was the biggest thing for me because I'm always in grey buildings and driving cars, and everything I do seems to be bricks and mortar. So, I have really enjoyed being in the woods, the mindfulness around food, that has been just mind blowing. I've loved that.

September 2024

She valued being part of such a great group and the social side.

“ They're a lovely bunch of people, really and truly a lovely bunch of people.

September 2024

“ I can't believe that two years have passed. A year would have been too short. I think the two years highlight how many people have been busy with children. Life happens to people as well, but the group is very bonded. I have to say it was a great group, because every time you meet them, it's like we've just picked up.

September 2025

“ For me, it has been very positive. I've enjoyed it immensely. I've enjoyed that they're very open and welcoming. You can definitely share this group with a lot of people, so I wouldn't hesitate with any of the groups that I'm involved with, I do always brag about it. I do think you could recreate this anywhere else.

September 2025

She loved the experiences, the visits to other places and learning.

“ The exposure to the different areas and the learning you can have from other groups was probably the best thing that happened with Brilliant Ballybunion, that we were taken out of our own comfort zone and brought to different areas. A group of us were saying, we would do more of this in the coming years.

September 2025

“ The most impressive for me has been two things, the Ballymaloe Festival of Food, but it's very established, and the Bean Festival on the day and the speakers. I mean even Lily talking about the food and how she produced what she did on that day, you would have blown me away with that.

September 2025

Impact of project on local community

Patricia isn't sure about how the wider group is responding to Brilliant Ballybunio. From her experience, local groups tend to stay apart.

“ Nobody has found the magic to join the dots yet.

September 2025

“ When they had the event in the Tinteán I was very mindful of how it was like-minded people that attended rather than your ordinary resident in Ballybunio. There is another target group out there, and they can be challenging enough to engage. **September 2025**

Looking ahead

Patricia was talking to a few other people after the Bean Festival about setting up a group that would continue the learning and support around what food to eat and where to buy it.

“ You could nearly bring them to the shop or to the markets to say, right, this is what you need to buy, X, Y and Z, this is what needs to happen. Because you go away from a talk with good enthusiasm, but then you're going to the supermarket and you're kind of back to square one, going back to the old familiars. **September 2025**

“ We definitely feel there's a gap, and maybe it's an age thing, I don't know. We don't want to be in a particular committed group, we'd like to be able to fall in and out of some kind of, not a women's shed, but it would be a kind of environmental, learning group, with a social aspect as well. So, it's a work in progress. **September 2025**

She is hoping to organise some events for local residents.

“ I'm already thinking the people that are in the group would now come to a talk for some of the families, in our hall, because they're so in tune with it, and it's natural for them now to talk about it. There's a kind of a pride in it, as well as a duty, almost a civic duty now.

September 2025

Patricia is very keen to see the development of a central community garden, or allotment, in Ballybunio.

“ I think while Barna is beautiful, you do need something that people are passing and that they can give a couple of hours to, rather than a huge, massive weekly commitment. It does need to have almost an ownership within Ballybunio itself.

September 2025

It would also be good to have a central community space for events, talks, maybe an information centre, to create a bigger forum.

“ You have to include people who don't drive, or who have walking difficulty, and also you have to protect the land down in Barna as well. While it's an amazing place to go, I think you do need to have something central.

September 2025

Have Patricia's initial expectations for the project been met?

When she joined the project, Patricia hoped that she would be able to bring what she was learning back to her work environment.

“ Encouraging the local community to get involved in the wider community in these projects, that would be my aim.

March 2024

Mid-way through the project she put together a proposal to develop a biodiversity project on one of the estates in Ballybunio, in collaboration with Brilliant Ballybunio and the Rural Social Scheme - involving residents, young and old, in wildlife-friendly gardening initiatives, identifying areas that have the potential to improve biodiversity of the area, and raising awareness on the role of native wildflowers native trees and native wildlife have in our environment. However, this proved difficult to implement within the timeframe, but Patricia feels confident that it will happen in the near future.

“ Obviously, I was very ambitious, hoping that we were going to do so much in Kerry with the company that I work with, but it just hasn't happened, and that's not to say anything negative about the group. It was more to do with the climate, the weather itself, and putting things in a row, but I will say it's still a project with a view to doing it, and even better now, because we've got more of a network of good people and the exposure to the different things that we got involved in and people's different passions. Certainly, there are a lot more volunteers, or mentors for the future for these estates.

September 2025



Áine O'Farrell Hellard

Background

Áine is originally from Limerick and both her parents are from farms. Her father is an avid golfer, so, as a child, she used to come often to Ballybunion on holidays. In later years, Áine travelled widely around the world, to South America, Argentina, Bolivia, Peru, Patagonia and South-East Asia. She worked as commercial director for an online marketing company in Dublin before marrying and moving to live in Ballybunion in 2013. Her husband is from the area and runs a pub in town (where they recently installed solar PV panels). The couple has two young boys. They plan to install a solar system on their house once some roof issues have been sorted.

Áine trained in Ballymaloe Cookery School and ran a coffee shop in the town for a number of years. In 2023, she completed a Special Needs Assistant course. She is an active member of Scoil Íosagáin Parents' Association, the Badminton Club and is a member and coach in the Adults Running Club and the Kids Wildcats Basketball Club.

Reasons for applying

Having seen the effects of climate change, Áine really wanted to be instrumental in lowering the impact of it in the local community. She really loves where they are living but has seen a huge change in the landscape over the past eleven years. Áine wanted to learn how to make changes both small and big, and then in turn spread this knowledge in an empowered way to really help influence the community. She aspires to being a leader and an advocate for biodiversity for her boys and wants them to see nature and help it flourish. Áine feels we owe it to our children to show them how to look after our biodiversity and to make more responsible choices so that they in turn have an incredible planet in years to come.

“ I love Ballybunion. I'm here because I married my husband who is a Ballybunion man, and I hope that there's great hope for Ballybunion, I really do, and I will do my utmost to be a part of that wave.

March 2024

“ I'm super enthusiastic about the project. I really want to be a champion with the younger people, to try and get a little project implemented through local schools or local groups.

March 2024

“ After the end of the two years it would be great to have little subcommittees responsible for maybe birds, maybe signage ways for walkways, little things. I'm not looking for dramatic change, but if we could have little groups that were filtering across the community helping, and if we could see those little groups getting bigger that would be amazing.

March 2024

Concerns about climate change

Áine is very anxious about climate change.

“ I watched David Attenborough's last documentary, and I'm not joking, it actually terrified me so much that it brought me to tears. My little boy said to me last night, oh, I wish we could have more sun in Ballybunion, and I just said to him, we have to be so careful what we wish for. We were watching Wild Babies last night on one of the documentary channels and it showed walrus and they had no place to land. The mother couldn't feed her baby because she had no ice to climb up on.

March 2024

“ It terrifies me for my children. Not so much for me in my life, but for my children and grandchildren, in time, if we're lucky enough to have that. Sure, we mightn't even see that, the rate things are going, the way humans are ruining the planet. It's really worrying. **March 2024** ”

She has noticed a dramatic shift in the local coastline over recent years and the rise in powerful storms and worries about the impacts. However, this is giving her real reasons to do what she can, however small.

“ There are parts of the cliffs that are gone. There's definitely been more erosion on the Cliff Walk and heading over towards Bromore. **March 2024** ”

“ For a seaside coastal town that relies on tourism for the summer months, I could see a huge amount of people just not taking their mobile homes anymore, possibly giving up their places and heading for the sun. It could be absolutely detrimental if we continue to get wetter and longer spells of summer that aren't favourable. **March 2024** ”

“ My feelings are worse than they were before. I just seem to hear it all the time, and more so from people that may not have mentioned it before. There's just the shift, even the temperatures here this week shouldn't be here, but we'll gladly take them. It's so worrying to see the temperatures changing all across the world. **April 2025** ”

“ I just feel even more empowered to do something more about it. Obviously, I can't change climate change personally, as one person, but if we all work together and do our own little bit, it definitely can help. **April 2025** ”

Concerns about the loss of biodiversity

This is also a real live concern for Áine and one which she really wants to do something about.

“ At our first introductory meeting, when I heard that there was one pair of curlews left, I feel like I'm watching an episode of one of those David Attenborough films, where the gorillas are about to be extinct. And surely we have it in our power and our strength to pull it back from extinction. I know that sounds really naïve in a way but surely there is a way of planting a native tree that can sustain them. **March 2024** ”

For the past four years, Áine has been living in a house that overlooks the sea.

“ We have families of dolphins that we can see from our window every morning from early April until late October. That's a huge asset to have outside your window. **March 2024** ”

“ I was walking back the beach three or four weeks ago, and a beautiful baby dolphin was washed up on the ocean. It was fascinating to be able to see such a beautiful sea creature up close, but for all the wrong reasons. Then it was going through my mind did that little dolphin die because of rough sea conditions, or was it because they ingested plastic? Was it because they couldn't find enough food? Did they just get beached? Was it just one of the unlucky ones that happened to die of natural causes? Or was it because of everything else that's going on and people's selfishness? **March 2024** ”

“ The loss of biodiversity is just depressing. But again, we're trying to do our bit locally. We're trying to plant bee friendly things, and we're trying to plant stuff that is friendly for the birds. We're changing our attitudes. **October 2024** ”

Food and growing aspects of project

Áine's home is very exposed to the sea-winds so growing anything is an on-going challenge.

“ I have tried to grow a lot of things, even just flower baskets for the birds. We had beautiful flowers, the June bank holiday weekend, and then there was this massive biting windstorm and everything was killed, even the roots of the flowers. So, from that perspective, I'm hoping that Lisa and Rena will be able to help, even just to give me nuggets as to what might survive all year round. Besides heathers, heathers are great for the bees. I'd love to be able to grow a few bits and pieces. **March 2024** ”

While Áine was inspired by seeing the growth in Barna, she couldn't replicate that success at her home.

“ What I really loved was day one, when we were out on the farm, we planted the seeds, and then we saw, within a few weeks, those seeds flourishing into actual plants. Now, because of the growing conditions of the tunnels and everything out there, seeing the growth cycle from seed to fruit or seed to vegetable I found really, really wonderful. **October 2024** ”

“ I'm struggling massively, I was really successful in growing from seed, then seed turned to flower or plant, and then I neglected them, forgot to water, it was a bit of a disaster. Then anything that I had successfully growing, once I transported them outside, died. So, it was very demotivating for me. I don't think I had anything at all that survived. **October 2024** ”

“ I'm growing little mung beans and little cress seeds and stuff that I can grow inside. It's not where I really wanted to be. I was hoping that I'd be able to embrace that part of it a bit further, but I really don't want to watch any more suicide missions outside. It is depressing. **April 2025** ”

“ Whatever way our house is actually built, the wind just literally blows around the house. It's almost like in the middle of a little tornado, if there's any bit of wind at all. So even if it's at the back of the house, in a sheltered spot, I was going to put a greenhouse there. But sure, I was looking at the line of clothes drying the other day, and things were just being whipped off the line at one side and being brought to the other side of the house. So, I just don't think even a small greenhouse would survive. I'll just have to develop my growing skills in Barna, or in another garden. **April 2025**

Áine was very excited by the Bean Festival and the idea behind it.

“ I think it's going to be brilliant. The beans have been planted. I would have loved to have been at one or two of those meetings. I think it's really, really cool. There's a lovely play on words, and as well it might show people that beans are so high in protein. The price of beef and the price of dairy cows is skyrocketing. As a result of that, dairy is also going to go through the roof. So, people might be forced to try and find protein in a cheaper source, i.e. beans. It is really timely, coincidentally or not for people. **April 2025**

“ I loved the concept of the Bean Festival, and the opening of the ceremony was excellent but due to unforeseen circumstances I wasn't able to make the Festival in the end. I was disappointed to say the least. **September 2025**

But Áine was able to grow some beans at home.

“ I still struggle a bit with the growing aspect, due to lack of appropriate resources for our location at home, however beans do grow pretty well here as do some beautiful bee friendly flowers. **September 2025**

Áine would love to see a community garden in Ballybunion but is realistic about the amount of work required to keep it running.

“ It would be fabulous to have a community garden, but the other side of it is, I see the level of work that goes into maintaining a garden in Barna, and unless there was a huge rota and a huge amount of interest locally, I think it could go to rack and ruin. It's not something that you can just half undertake. There would need to be a good few people that really want it to work and really want to put in the hours. **April 2025**

The project has increased Áine's awareness around food.

“ I'm definitely buying more local organic food that I can get in our local supermarket and it's locally produced and I try to get to the farmers' market in Listowel or Tralee. I seek out stuff that is local and organic, as opposed to just buying the 49 cent stuff. **October 2024**

“ The vegan food, that's one thing that I was really, really hoping that I would be able to get a bit more knowledge on and anybody that they've brought in for cooking has been fantastic. **October 2024**

Nature and biodiversity aspects of project

Áine loves wildlife and nature, and she is very keen to pass this on to her two young boys. The project and particularly the ringed plover campaign and Nature Group have helped her to do this.

“ I really love looking at birds. I wouldn't have been a bird watcher as such, but when I would run, I would see, I would hear, I would listen. I wouldn't know the birds' calls, but I would appreciate them. We had birdhouses when we were kids, we would be looking at the birds having their food. I'd know the blue tits and the sparrows, but I wouldn't know all of them, so I am a little bit more conscious, based on the project. **October 2024**

“ The Nature Group is a major, major interest to me, because I want my children to be able to appreciate the amazing place we live in, and for them to understand that if we don't mind it it'll be gone. **April 2025**

“ The plover project is really, really exciting. I haven't been actively involved in it yet, but I'm hoping to do a few hours now over the weekend, with the boys. The fact that the plover is up in Littor and there's been active sightings, that's really positive. **April 2025**

Áine is now on the steering committee of the Nature Group.

“ I absolutely love it and am so happy that there is a good group of people involved and happy to move forward with next steps and plans for 2026 and beyond. I felt this was a really strong outlet for me as I was able to include and involve my children and family in this part of the process. **September 2025**



Creative aspects of the project

Áine feels she is very creative but in more practical ways. She enjoys art but is more of an 'abstract artist'.

“ From an art perspective, I probably wouldn't be the most artistic person in the world. I remember going over to a workshop in Barna years ago, Lisa asked us to draw something special to us, so I drew this horse, and I brought it home and put it on the fridge and my husband had no idea what it was, I'm not joking. **March 2024** ”

“ I would be very creative in that I would be good at cooking and creating recipes and things like that. I would say I am very much an abstract artist, you'd need to have contact lenses on the glasses to be able to make it out. But I enjoy art. I enjoy people's creativity. So, I'm really excited, but more excited than optimistic for my personal contribution. **March 2024** ”

“ Some people are really creative people, I would consider myself creative with regards to food, I wouldn't necessarily say I'm creative with regards to art or an artistic flair, and so I suppose anything that I get out of the artistic side of things is brilliant, but I wouldn't be necessarily expecting a massive creative impact on my life. I'd be more matter of fact down the line. **October 2024** ”

“ I have taken maybe three or four creative elements on board from my learnings in the project. I'm constantly making rose hip oil, which is lovely, and I use it on my skin, and I find it great. We're going to be doing the recycling paper and making our own paper at home. I now use vinegar, just regular house vinegar as a softener in clothes. **April 2025** ”

Drawing continues to be a challenge.

“ I see Lisa, and she can just get something so amazing, and to be fair, it's always premised with, it doesn't matter what it looks like, but it does to me because I can't draw, and I feel like the child with the horse that looks like an elephant. All of the other side of that creativity is fabulous, but if it just comes to the traditional, let's take half an hour to doodle and draw a picture, I just feel very inferior. Some people have this innate creativity, they mightn't have drawn or done art for years, but they have it in them that they're brilliant artists. **April 2025** ”

“ I would consider myself an artist with regards to baking or maybe doing something else. If it was a mosaic now, I'd be happy out, because there's no right or wrong. You're not necessarily trying to make a sun star out of broken tiles or whatever. We could all make something lovely. **April 2025** ”

For Áine the films are a very powerful way of communicating.

“ Making snippets, the films, the power of photos, and the power of music. Some of those little videos that they've created, they're worth hours and hours of interviews, they're so powerful, so engaging. And if you put the right music to a series of photographs, even from a creative point of view, it literally can be a game changer. You choose the wrong sound to go behind it, and it could literally fall on deaf eyes and ears. **April 2025** ”

Impact of project on Áine

Áine has changed how she buys and is more mindful of supporting local producers.

“ I am more mindful to buy more local organic produce, I have more value on the cost I'm spending on organic food, because I can see how hard it is and the value of eating stuff with no chemicals, but I would have a value on that anyway. But I suppose it's a mindset change that it's not all about the cheap purchase, it's about keeping local suppliers in business, and it's also about feeding ourselves with nutritious, non-chemical foods, if possible. And so, I suppose there definitely has been a flick in that aspect of my purchasing strategy when I'm in shops. **October 2024** ”

She was inspired by the lovely vegan cooking.

“ I want to increase my cookery skills that are vegetarian or vegan, because I think it's really important now, especially with all of these cost hikes coming down the line, and, if I can increase my skills, then I might be able to demonstrate or do something to help the group as a greater input, even if it's just a case of sharing recipes, or doing, I don't know in what capacity. But that's what I'm trying to focus on myself. **April 2025** ”

Áine loved the farm visits.

“ The day trips were absolutely incredible. Íon farm, where they make the different perfumes and oils, I thought that was really, really wonderful. Then seeing the realistic side of climate change on Gortbrack Farm. He was so inspirational with regards to his piece of land, and he was told he couldn't do this, that and the next thing. And you could see it was just thriving with the growth of different plants. He had peach trees growing, he had apples, he had stuff growing that you wouldn't even think would grow in Ireland, and he was told they wouldn't grow in Tralee. **April 2025** ”

Áine is more aware of the weather impacts and the dangers of plastic.

“ I am definitely more in tune with how the weather impacts our shorelines and the inhabitants of same. I almost always bring a backpack when walking the beach to collect rubbish and plastics that can harm wildlife. When we are out walking, we don't pass rubbish on the street, we make an effort to pick it up and put it in a bin. I buy less items in plastic and other packaging if and where possible. Also, instead of buying rosehip oil cosmetics I make those myself.

September 2025

Áine has enjoyed getting to know different people in the group.

“ Brilliant Ballybunion has built a lovely group of collaborators who are friends and who now share more known common goals, some of us are on certain project groups going forward. **September 2025**

Impact of project on local community

At the outset of the project, Áine was wondering if the project would be seen as being too alternative but the Sustainability Day, the development of the Nature Group and the media coverage have really helped to avoid that.

“ So many friends of mine that have kids were at the Sustainability Day, and they were just blown away and a lot of them are involved with the Nature Group as well, and some of the other offshoot groups.

April 2025

“ There's more of an open platform to discuss what we do in Brilliant Ballybunion, what it's about. There definitely seems to be more of an opportunity to have the conversation and say, well, there's this little bird down the Long Strand that is in danger of being killed by the dogs off the leads, could you keep a little eye out? If you see it, let me know.

April 2025

“ There has been incredible media mileage and local discussion from the North Kerry Sustainability Day in the Tinteán, the Bean Festival and IMMA.

September 2025

Looking ahead

“ My eldest boy will be going into second class next year. I'm hoping that I'll be able to get involved with the school growing team.

April 2025

“ We will concentrate on the plover project for 2026 and try our best to really keep this bird alive and away from the Red and Yellow lists. We may even foster another wildlife project.

September 2025

Have Áine's initial expectations for the project been met?

“ I absolutely loved making oils, seeing the end produce of seeds sown turn into local fresh organic produce, but most importantly I loved the creation of the Ballybunion Nature Group.

September 2025

“ It was challenging juggling family and unforeseen circumstances and events with the project. Lack of structure and clear objectives for certain days were also a challenge for me.

September 2025

“ Thanks for having me on this journey, I did enjoy it and feel that the more you can put in the more you get out.

September 2025

Brilliant Ballybunion Legacy ...

“ I hope that the groups will continue and thrive. I feel like we have built a great network of people in the community, who can trust each other and use their skills to work together to get more for the community, in terms of sustainability (SEC) and biodiversity (Ballybunion Nature Group) with a special focus on community as a whole, including the nature of the area, growing food, reducing waste, better water quality, etc.

Gráinne, September 2025

“ It feels as though we are not only protecting what we already have but also actively building a healthier, greener future. For me, that is the true legacy of this project knowing that the work carried out today will continue to benefit both people and wildlife for generations to come.

Joanne, September 2025

“ I feel people have really tapped into their creativity in this project and connected with the hearts of others through song, poetry, film, writing, journalling, drawing and more. It is wonderful to see people finding their voice and speaking up for themselves and the creatures who don't have a voice. This is so important for the future.

Lisa, September 2025

“ It has been great to celebrate local and seasonal food over the last two years. We shared so much delicious food that we grew together. When I was a child, I grew food with my grandmother in Ballybunion and I would love to see this for future generations. **Rena, September 2025**

“ Ultimately, the legacy of this project will be a more sustainable, engaged, and environmentally aware community in Ballybunion and North Kerry, with a creative aspect to everything. **Gráinne, September 2025**



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- Artist/Grower: Lisa Fingleton
- Photographer/Grower: Rena Blake
- Ecologist: Dr. Joanne O'Brien
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