

Strong support shown at WLD Showcase

by Sarah Bermingham

OVER 400 people made a strong show of support for the work of Wexford Local Development (WLD) at the company's showcase event held in the Talbot Hotel last Friday afternoon.

The future of the development agency, which has helped in Wexford over the past three years, is under threat as a result of major planned local government reforms.

In a change which could spell the loss of eighty Wexford jobs and with them over twenty years' experience, the local and community development programmes which WLD currently deliver are to be commercially tendered from January 2015.

Not only could this move "open the door to the privatisation of essential community services," CEO Brian Kehoe warns, it also jeopardises the future of smaller initiatives operated by WLD, including the Cornmarket project.

Programmes Manager Clare Ryan has stressed "if you pull our main source of funding, quite simply the whole infrastructure will fall and the other programmes and services we provide to individuals and communities in Co. Wexford will not survive."

Representatives of some WLD success stories, from social groups such as the Wexford Age Equality Network to rural enterprises including Killowen Farm, addressed those gathered at the Showcase on how they have benefitted from the agency's work to date.

Nicholas Dunne of Killowen Farm described how his family's Courmacy-based yoghurt business has gone from strength to strength over recent years thanks to both the vision and financial assistance of Wexford Local Development. The multi-award winning firm employs 17 local people and supply homemade products to a wide variety of retail outlets nationwide.

Manager of Hook Tourism Group Alan Ryan also highlighted how "the local development model used by WLD has ensured that our group has benefitted from a whole range of supports... the people working in WLD have been extremely supportive and informative and are passionate about what they do."

A specially-commissioned video produced by Wexford firm Highwind Films, who have availed of WLD supports, highlighted how almost 2,000 local people have found full employment through the organisation. Some 16,500 young people,



Deirdre Bennett and Rose Caulfield from the New Ross office of the Wexford Local Development pictured at the Showcase Expo in the Talbot Hotel. Pic: Jim Campbell

meanwhile, have participated in its educational and recreational programmes over the past three years.

The Wexford Youth Action group works to improve the social inclusion of local 18-25 year olds and is facilitated by WLD Officer Siobhán O'Brien. Member Stephen Doyle outlined how the firm has "shown me that I am nowhere near achieving my potential... they have introduced me to so many people and opportunities."

Wexford Age Equality Network support senior members of the local community and are also facilitated by WLD. Network Chairman Sean Kinsella gave an address on active citizenship.

WLD Board Chairperson Pat Rath spoke emotively about how Friday's successful celebration of community collaboration and enterprise was "tinged with sadness" for him as on foot of Local Government Minister Phil Hogan's plans, Wexford Local Development will not continue in its current guise after this year.

The firm, he said, was "fair, transparent and honourable." Through a bottom-up approach, he explained, local people were designing and shaping the Wexford they wanted to live in. "Surely that's a true democracy... I think it was a beautiful model

and it worked extremely well," he said.

One of the local enterprises exhibiting at the showcase was Diarmuid and Paula Bolger's Gorey-based 'Prokill Pest Control'. Wexford Local Development Officer Tom Bermingham worked with the couple to help them establish their new Irish branch of the UK franchise. "He brought us all the way through the process and really helped us," Diarmuid described.

Also voicing her support for Wexford Local Development was Beryl Power, who highlighted how the agency enabled her business to "expand again and take on more people." Power's 'The Rug Hub' is based in Cannolin and provides horse-owners with a comprehensive washing and repair service for all types of horse rugs.

Speaking after the event, WLD CEO Brian Kehoe expressed his satisfaction with the support shown for their work to date. The agency, he said, are now working to ensure this can continue into the future in some form, despite the planned changes.

"There's government policy in place... we'll be applying for the tender so we have to prepare ourselves for that and hope we win it. Today shows that we have the support on the ground," he stated.

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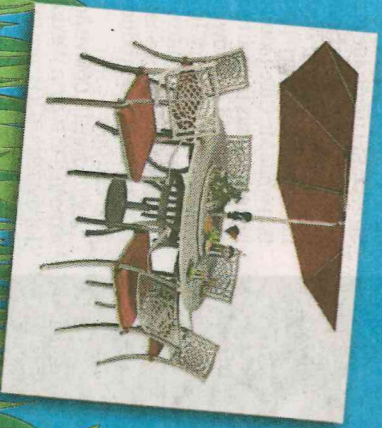
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