PROJECT CASE STUDY

LEAD Project



For young people in border communities, the past can feel both distant and close, shaping identities, stories and division. The LEAD Youth Leadership Programme, led by Lifford Clonleigh Resource Centre in partnership with Include Youth, is changing perceptions by giving young people space, time and trust to explore conflict, identity and peacebuilding at their own pace.

Caption: Participants from the project on a study trip to Stormont

Delivered through Lifford Clonleigh Resource Centre by Project Worker Mark McCollum, LEAD primarily supports 16-year-olds across East Donegal and West Tyrone from different community, cultural and political backgrounds. It combined classroom learning with creative and civic participation.

Young people explored leadership, identity, diversity and conflict through dialogue, Theatre of the Oppressed exercises, and engagement with political and peacebuilding institutions. They also encountered local and international perspectives, connecting their experiences of the border with wider questions of conflict, reconciliation and social change.

Supported by the International Fund for Ireland's PYDP, it combines leadership, critical thinking, creativity and dialogue to help young people understand the past, navigate the present and imagine the future. The programme drew on over 30 years' of experience across community development, advocacy, youth work, participatory arts and peacebuilding: *"Looking back, the thread running through the last 30 years of fairly diverse work has been listening, participation and creating a space for people who are not always heard. That is where the LEAD project has brought all those strands together."*

A central principle of LEAD is that real participation means more than asking young people for views after adults have designed a programme. Mark's community arts background, especially Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed, shapes his approach.

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Boal's 'Games for Actors and Non-Actors' is, in Mark's words, *"the Bible"* for much of the creative work that he delivers with LEAD. Through storytelling, role play and filmmaking, groups explore power, identity and conflict, consider different perspectives and imagine alternative outcomes.

Mark says: *"It was never my job to tell a 16- or 17-year-old what leadership looks like. Diversity is about exposing them to different ways of thinking, giving them permission to question, and creating trusted spaces where they can find their own answers. That emphasis on trust can often take time."*

One powerful example is Melissa, a 16-year-old who moved to Donegal from Zimbabwe. Quiet at first, she rarely spoke in sessions, but Mark understood that participation is not always measured by who speaks first.

After several weeks, Melissa began speaking in a smaller group, sharing her experiences of Zimbabwe and Donegal, reciting poetry and revealing she could speak four languages fluently.

"She was listening, watching and deciding whether she could trust us," Mark recalls. *"All of this was there from the beginning, we just hadn't heard it."*

For the group, diversity stopped being abstract as they heard another young person's lived experience. *"LEAD did not give her a voice, she always had it. Our job was to create an environment where she felt comfortable using it,"* Mark explains.

This flexibility is fundamental for project delivery. Mark may arrive with a plan but will abandon it if the conversation becomes more meaningful elsewhere, or step back and let the group lead. When the drama Adolescence became a topic, the group asked him to watch it and return ready to discuss its themes. *"It was by mutual agreement. We worked together and it evolved,"* he says. "*Each session was carefully prepared, but the approach remained responsive. When young people raised an issue that mattered to them, the session could adapt, allowing the discussion to develop and giving the group a genuine role in shaping their own learning."*

Donegal presents challenges, including limited access to opportunities, transport and distance barriers. But rural communities also offer strong ties to family, community and places. *"Rural does not have to mean peripheral. The aim is not to prepare them to leave rural Donegal, but to ensure where they come from does not limit where they can go,"* Mark says.

LEAD also responds to contemporary challenges, including social media, information and misinformation. Sessions use myth-busting and critical thinking to challenge assumptions around immigration and migration. *"We can't keep reproducing the same models we used 20 years ago and expect them to solve today's problems,"* Mark believes. "The connection between a LEAD classroom and wider peacebuilding is clear: whether a young person is finding confidence to tell their story, or communities are navigating identity, history and change, the process begins in the same place.

"Listen. Build trust. Create space for difficult conversations. The context will change and our methods must evolve, but after 40 years of the IFI, those fundamentals remain vital. I'm optimistic about the next generation because when young people are given space, trust and opportunity, they continually surprise us."

LEAD creates a valuable space for young people to understand where they come from, make sense of the world around them and shape the future they want.

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