



Cork Life Centre

sharing the vision of Edmund Rice

6 Winter's Hill, Sunday's Well Rd, Cork. 021-4304391 corklifecentre@gmail.com Charity No: Chy-6946

Thursday December 17th 2020

Don O' Leary—Director Cork Life Centre

Opening Statement

I want to start by thanking you and the members of this Committee for the opportunity to put a case before you today – a case for the recognition of alternative education as a vital lifeline for many students for whom mainstream education does not work, and, connected to that, a case for recognition and adequate, sustainable funding for the Cork Life Centre.

I am joined today by two students of the Cork Life Centre, who will tell you about their experience of the Centre and the difference it has made and is making in their lives.

Cork Life Centre is an alternative education provider. We are not mainstream. We do not aim to be mainstream. We exist because mainstream education has not worked for the students who come to us. Without the service we provide, our students would very likely be lost to the education system.

We aim to do everything a school does and more—we are committed to and have been successful in keeping children and young people engaged with education in Cork for 20 years. We offer the Junior and Leaving Certificate, and other certifications. In our longer submission you will see how successful we are in getting results, not just in exams, but under a range of headings.

In our 20 years in operation, we have worked alongside many state agencies who know our work and send students to us. They recognise the need for what we provide.

But we are not formally recognised and our funding is, to say the least, minimal and precarious. We have attached an appendix to the main document showing our current funding and the source of it.

Our appeal to you today is to take on the issue of the recognition of alternative education and to bring the Minister for Education and her officials before you, here, to say why Cork Life Centre is not being recognised, and why alternative education in Ireland is not recognised, and to change that.

I am now going to hand you over to Caoimhe Cotter who is going to speak to you about her experience of Cork Life Centre.

Caoimhe Cotter-5th Year Student Cork Life Centre

I started secondary in a mainstream school because it was where all my friends went and I had been perfectly fine in primary so there was no need to look for other options.

I had a really hard time trying to adjust to this new school that had over 3 times the amount of students as my previous one. It felt like the world was caving in on me and I was just getting smaller and smaller. My parents talked to the principal and came to the agreement that I would go into school 3 half days a week, in-between appointments at the doctor or CAMHS. Honestly this just made me more stressed out and at that point, the adults in my life came to terms that maybe mainstream school wasn't for me.

I was close to 13 when I joined the life centre, I was a shy and reserved child with no confidence, I could barely leave my house or talk to anybody.

It was when I couldn't even get out of my mams car that Don stepped in. He came out to the car and took me into school himself and even though he was helping a student, it felt like we were equals, like a friend.

Now, 3 years later, right after my 16th birthday I have accomplished so much that I never thought I would be able to do. I went from a child that didn't think she'd live past 14 to standing here talking in front of the Oireachtas, all thanks to my school.

Rhys Wootten-Former Student Cork Life Centre

My experience in mainstream school was not a positive one. It was definitely not good for my health bordering on dangerous for my mental health.

Alongside anxiety, I began suffering panic attacks, caused by my experience of school. All of this took a toll on my physical health, my immune system weakened, depression intensified and I began self-harming.

I forced myself to keep up with school work and strived relentlessly to excel-trying to study, do my homework, make sure I had everything, that there was no reason to be singled out by a teacher. I was scared of my teachers . My attendance decreased over time.

Then the life centre. The staff encouraged me to be myself, but I couldn't, I was running from my thoughts. It took the bones of 2 years for me to even begin to feel comfortable enough to say more than a few sentences. I was trying to hide how bad I felt from everyone and I felt it too risky to trust anyone. Even though getting me to talk was like getting blood from a stone they didn't give up on me or forget about me.

I couldn't bring myself to approach them directly so I would write notes or show them pieces of my journal to read. Then they would talk to me about it. There was never any criticism or frustration. They always respected my boundaries and accepted that writing was the only way I really felt comfortable talking about some things.

What about now? I am an author. I have written pieces for publications and the life centre published my book.

I just graduated from UCC with a 1st class honors degree in sociology and psychology. My final year sociology dissertation received the award of Best Final Year Sociology Project. Since receiving this award I am working on refining my project for publication in a journal.

I am taking a year off in between my undergraduate and postgrad degrees. During this year I am volunteering at the CLC teaching maths to the young people.

None of this would have been possible if I hadn't attended and had the support of the Cork Life Centre. As important or impressive as any accomplishments may be if it hadn't been for the ethos, persistence and support of the staff in the centre, I would not have been alive to accomplish any of it.



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AN EQUAL AND SECURE FUTURE FOR THE STUDENTS OF CORK LIFE CENTRE

SUBMISSION FROM THE CORK LIFE CENTRE

TO

MEMBERS OF JOINT OIREACHTAS COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION, FURTHER AND HIGHER EDUCATION, RESEARCH, INNOVATION AND SCIENCE

Thursday December 17 2020

We would like to begin by sincerely thanking the members of the Joint Oireachtas Committee for your positive response to our request for a hearing on Early School Leavers and the role of Alternative Education, including the recognition and resourcing of alternative settings.

Alternative Education: need for definition and recognition

We have asked that you consider this issue with specific reference to the work of the Cork Life Centre and we are here on behalf of the Board , staff and most importantly, the students, past, present and in particular potential future students, of our Centre, for whom the Centre has been nothing less than transformative, and for some, life-saving.

We are asking that you examine the Department for Education's policy around access to alternative education, the definition of "alternative" education and its place within the education system for children and young people who leave school early or at risk of leaving school early. This lack of a clear definition of

what constitutes “alternative” education means that, although CLC provides a proven, high quality holistic education to children and young people, we have no clear and explicit pathway set out by the Department for Education for recognition of our model of delivery and this blocks our access to funding.

Our inability to be recognised as an alternative centre of education means that we, but particularly our students, are not being treated equally to students in mainstream education, despite their right to it.

We ask also that you consider the cost-effectiveness of alternative models like CLC, especially when compared to, for example, home tuition, and the interventions by the criminal justice and mental health systems necessary when a student faces the challenges which arise due to being out of school.

We believe that it is important that you do this, not only on behalf of the students of our Centre, but on behalf of a significant number of young people, all over the country, for whom a Centre like ours is not available, and whom we believe are being further marginalised and disadvantaged due to the absence of alternative provision in their area.

We contend that:

- there is a significant and undocumented number of children and young people leaving school early and that the 'face' of early school leaving is changing;
- the current range of supports available to children and young people is not adequate;
- these children and young people are 'falling through the cracks' in policy, with devastating and long-term risk and consequences for the children and young people left behind, without their rightful education.

Education policy or lack thereof is out of step and is lagging behind the reality of life for children, young people and their families.

There is a strong case for the Department for Education to review, refresh and develop its policy on 'alternative' education, for children who are leaving school early and in number. We are asking this Committee to shine a light on this trend, for the Department to measure it and to identify solutions and pathways to Centres like ours, funded on a shoestring, our fingers always in the dam.

We ask that you call on the Department of Education to explain why there is no explicit policy definition of alternative education? Why there is no pathway for

official recognition of a service like ours? Why we have been funded on a shoestring, but allowed to continue, including with some funding from the Department, to provide a much-needed service, for 20 years, and when our students will be treated equally?

Our model works and is needed

Cork Life Centre is proud of its alternative education offering. We are not a mainstream setting and we do not seek to be, and for a very simple reason: mainstream provision has not worked for the students who come to us.

The model we use, and which we have used for the 20 years we have been open, is designed to put the student and the needs of the student, at the heart of our work. Because many are coming to us having already been marginalised and disadvantaged, they need either one-to-one or a small group tuition, in a small setting, where their self-esteem is built up and a relationship of trust is established with the adults they meet in the Centre. This is what makes the difference.

We offer our students the opportunity to sit the Junior and Leaving Cert, and the numbers of students achieving state exam certification has increased throughout the development of our service.

Our model works. There is evidence of this. Demand for our service is high and growing. We have 55 students currently on our books, but we are constantly being asked to take in new students and often, we cannot. In 2017-18 for example we received 155 referrals but could not offer the placements sought.

These referrals are coming to us from schools themselves, from a range of state agencies working with children in Cork city and county including Tusla, CAMHS, TESS, and from parents who come to us on behalf of their children.

We have very few staff. Volunteer teachers come to us, many from University College Cork, and we cover the curriculum very effectively. Students are encouraged to select the subjects that interest them most and a wide subject choice is offered.

The needs of our students

Students at Cork Life Centre come with a range of needs, many of them complex. Almost half come from the urban area of Cork, and almost a third

from the rural Cork area. Here are some statistics to demonstrate the range of needs the students have:

- 27% of our cohort are either currently in care or have experience of the care system
- 34% of the cohort have current social work involvement
- 27% have a specific educational challenge or diagnosis with more students having undiagnosed and previously unmet learning needs
- 54% of the cohort could be classified as experiencing socio-economic disadvantage
- 58% present with mental health challenges at various levels (based on diagnosis, accessing of external services, accessing counselling support in-house)
- 14% of our current cohort are struggling with substance abuse issues
- 15% are involved with the Juvenile Justice System at various levels
- 16% are diagnosed as being on the ASD Spectrum

We are a centre of education offering Junior and Leaving Certificate – and more

- Students are offered Junior and Leaving Cert curricula and the opportunity to sit these state examinations in a range of subjects (14 subjects offered at JC Level; 15 at LC Level). The centre is unique in its provision of tuition on a 1:1 or small group basis and consistent with its ethos of understanding and providing the set of supports which each young person coming to it, needs.
- Due to the varied needs of our students - personal, learning, social and psychological, they are offered a range of additional programmes and activities to support their social and personal development with counselling and therapy services onsite. The Cork Life Centre has solid working relationships with local services and organisations which means that there is good inter-agency collaboration as well as referral to external supports.

The difference Cork Life Centre makes

- 12 students completed Junior Certificate Examinations in June 2019. 9 progressed to Leaving Cert Cycle at the Cork Life Centre. 2 pursued

placements at Community Training Workshops. 1 student entered an apprenticeship.

- 11 students completed Leaving Certificate Examinations in June 2019. 9 progressed to 3rd level/further education. 1 student moved abroad and continued education. 1 student delayed progression to 3rd level due to family circumstances.
- 8 students completed the Junior Certificate in 2020.
- 14 students completed their Leaving Certificate in 2020.
- Between January and June 2019 we had 167 individual interventions or services provided to the students including educational; mental health; outdoor & community activities; trips & workshops.
- Students have the opportunity to access the following activities and programmes weekly: Rowing; Boatbuilding; Choir; Music Group; Drama Classes; Speechcraft (public speaking) workshops; Leadership Group; Yoga classes; Gardening/Horticulture; Stone-Sculpting; Counselling/Therapeutic sessions.
- 2 former students have completed their education to degree level during the 2019/2020 academic year with one proceeding to study at Masters level.
- A team of 3 students from the Cork Life Centre took 3rd prize in UCC's Psychslam Competition in February 2020.
- A 6th year student of the Cork Life Centre won Foroige's National NFTE Competition in May 2020 taking the title 'Innovator of the Year'. She will move on to the European Competition.

Impact of Cork Life Centre not being officially recognised as an alternative provider

Precarious funding poses an ongoing and immediate threat to the Centre which has to battle constantly for recognition and resources. This includes annual negotiations for funding. And although we were recently successful in securing funds for Covid 19 adaptations for a safe reopening, the ongoing exclusion of Cork Life Centre from the educational mainstream system results in unnecessary diversion for Cork Life Centre's Board, staff and volunteers. It distracts from the primary task of educating young people who are marginalised and alienated from their rightful education. Lack of long-term funding also has an impact on

the Centre's ability to retain key staff and thus adversely affects the continuity of relationships between teacher and student. This is fundamental to working effectively with young people alienated and excluded from educational opportunity.

Being outside the educational mainstream also means that students attending may miss out on support like transport, the recent distribution of computers for young people to access teaching remotely because of Covid restrictions, the arrangements for this year's Leaving Cert results or funding Centre adaptations for reopening in the light of Covid 19. Ultimately the lack of recognition and inclusion of Cork Life Centre as an alternative and effective part of the educational system impacts on the students' right to an education with parity of esteem to peers in other educational settings and with access to appropriate levels of resources.

As pointed out by TÚSLA, the fact that the Centre is "not officially recognised as an alternative educational setting by the government" means it is "minimally funded by state agencies".

What TUSLA¹ said about us

In a very positive 2019 assessment, TÚSLA refers to "the commitment, leadership, and inspiration provided by the Centre's director and the enthusiasm and generosity of the school's staff in providing a successful alternative educational experience for the young people who attend there"

Cost effectiveness of our model

We ask that this Committee examines and reports on early school leaving, its extent, its risks and long term consequences on children's life chances, the adequacy of the current Departmental policy response, the timeframe for the current Departmental review of out of school provision; the definition of and recognition and the official pathway to recognition of alternative education centres; that you look at the cost effectiveness of alternative and indeed mainstream models.

We are loath to measure our effectiveness in crude financial terms, as it is not a true reflection of the value to the student who attends our Centre, which cannot be measured in euros and cents. We want to point to the level of funding awarded to Cork Life Centre by the Department of Education, which is minimal

¹ Assessment of Education in Places other than recognised Schools: Review Assessment Report 2019.

when it is compared with funding awarded to models such as Youthreach centres, Youth Encounter Projects, or to mainstream schools.

In preparing this submission, we looked at publicly available data on funding models for mainstream schools, which indicates that students attending mainstream education are being funded to the tune of more than €9,000 per student per annum.

Data available on the funding by the Department of Education to help alleviate educational disadvantage indicates that funding per student per annum is a minimum of €11,000 in centres such as Youthreach.

Last year, Department of Education funding for Cork Life Centre, in total, was €77,500 (see appendix 1).

Making a straight comparison between our funding and the funding awarded to other centres is only useful in highlighting not only the inadequacy of our funding, but also the inequality in treatment being experienced by our students.

There is a clear question of equity for students attending Cork Life Centre and the funding of their education in that setting, which works for them in a way that the mainstream failed them. What, if any is the rationale for not adequately funding a child's education in Cork Life Centre, as opposed to in a Youthreach, Youth Encounter Project, through Home Tuition or even in a mainstream school?

Cost of not funding alternative education

However, in addition from a public policy perspective, it is important to look at the cost of providing alternative education when compared to what the state provides for students for whom mainstream education is not working. What is the cost of Home Tuition, compared to an alternative setting? What is the cost of an intervention by the criminal justice system? What is the cost of providing mental health services which often become necessary when a student faces the challenges which arise due to being out of school.

We have looked for evidence of such a comparison, but have not found it, and we believe it is not available, because it has not been done. It appears to us obvious, however, that the cost of keeping a child or a student in education during the critical years of their development, costs less, even if only measured in crude financial terms.

We do not believe it is valid to assess our current funding model by simply comparing it to Youthreach centres or mainstream education, when our model,

while producing results, continues to operate on a shoestring, supported by volunteer teachers and philanthropic support. Our students deserve equality with mainstream provision and official recognition as an alternative setting.

Official recognition as an alternative education setting

Our understanding is that, under the terms of the Education Act 1998, the Minister has the power “to designate a place to be a centre for education” and that Youthreach Centres, which are funded by ETBs, are recognised in this way. We believe we meet all the criteria for designation; that precedents exist with Steiner Schools and other settings which have been designated; that we fit within the sphere of 'second chance' education, with demonstrated success as we have outlined.

Cork Life Centre, our students, their parents and our supporters respectfully ask why this designation has not been awarded to us, so far, despite our requests made several times since our foundation?

We request that the process of designation begin immediately.

We ask for your support

The Cork Life Centre therefore asks that you support and grant the following:

1. Official recognition of Cork Life Centre as an alternative educational setting meeting a specific and proven need and with an established and recognised track record of success on behalf of our students.
2. Funding for our students at a level equal to that provided to mainstream schools, with the same access to resources such as school equipment and transport.
3. Funding for 12 full time staff (Tutors and Teachers).
4. €50,000 per annum for running costs.
5. Continuation of the existing rate of cooperation hours.

Appendix 1

Cork Life Centre Funding Streams

<i>Funder</i>	<i>Amount</i>	<i>Notes</i>
<i>European Congregation of Christian Brothers</i>	<i>€90000</i>	<i>Trustees of Cork Life Centre</i>
<i>Department of Education Social Inclusion Unit</i>	<i>€77500</i>	
<i>Tomar Trust</i>	<i>€40000</i>	<i>Paid directly to SIFI for Uplift Funds. To be paid directly to Life Centre following end of SIFI Funding. Final instalment due 2025</i>
<i>SIFI Uplift Funding</i>	<i>€22800</i>	<i>€62800 paid annually incorporating Tomar Trust Funds. Final instalment March 2022</i>
<i>Tusla Section 56</i>	<i>€20000</i>	
<i>HSE</i>	<i>€20000</i>	
<i>Community Foundation</i>	<i>€40000</i>	<i>Paid through a specific donor to fund counselling services. Finishes 2021</i>
<i>Christian Brothers College</i>	<i>€12000</i>	<i>Annual Donation</i>
<i>Total</i>	<i>322300</i>	
<i>Other smaller donations and grants for specific projects</i>		

Appendix 2

Statement to Committee-Caoimhe Cotter-5th Year Student Cork Life Centre

I initially started secondary in a mainstream school because it was where all my friends went and I had been perfectly fine in primary so there was no need to look for other options.

I had a really hard time trying to adjust to this new school that had over three times the amount of students as my previous one. It felt like the world was caving in on me and I was just getting smaller and smaller, though of course when I talked to the counsellor about this, I was told that it was totally normal to feel that way and that everyone felt it on their first week, but it carried on for much longer than just a week.

It got to the point that only a month into first year I wanted to leave school completely and I had loved school since I was a child so this was the point where my parents got really concerned. My parents talked to the principal and came to the agreement that I would go into school three half days a week, in-between appointments at the doctor or CAMHS, so I didn't miss my classes and I would get sent home any important work I had to do. This may have worked for some, but it honestly just made me more stressed out and at that point, the adults in my life just came to terms that maybe mainstream school just wasn't for me and had to decide what to do.

Luckily for me, my parents had already had this experience with their children before as three of my brothers had already gone through alternative education. My mam talked to me about switching schools and told me that I could go to the same school as my older brother. I automatically shot this idea down as I thought that if I changed schools people would think that there was something wrong with me and as a twelve year old girl that was my biggest fear.

So I was out of school for a few weeks before my parents decided to take me in for a meeting with Don, the director of The Life Centre, to talk about attending the school. This hadn't been my first interaction with Don but, it was definitely the most terrifying. After an hour of my parents and the staff of the centre trying to convince me to make what now seems like such an obvious decision but back then felt like life or death, I agreed to officially switch schools. I had no clue how privileged I was to be able to make that decision for myself, every year there are so many teenagers just as bad as I was then who don't even get the choice because of the lack of placements there are at the school.

This new place was smaller, quieter and had way less people than my previous school, the number going from over a thousand to around 30 at max. Although you wouldn't have known by looking at my anxious presence, I knew that I was going to fit in there.

I was only twelve when I first joined the life centre, I was a shy and reserved child with no confidence, I could barely leave my house or talk to anybody. It was when I couldn't even get out of my mams car when don stepped in and decided that I needed a bit of extra help. On my thirteenth birthday, about three weeks into starting at the life centre Don came out to the car and took me into school himself and even though he was helping a student, it still felt like we were equals, like a friend. Now, three years later, right after my sixteenth birthday I have accomplished so much that I never thought I would be able to do. I went from a child that didn't think she'd live past 14 to standing here talking in front of the Oireachtas, all thanks to my school. They've done more for me than CAMHS or Jigsaw ever could.

Every year, thousands of students across Ireland leave school; and whether it be for mental health reasons, bullying, or just not being able to afford it anymore, they shouldn't have to give up on education so early on. Alternative education would give these students a place to go when mainstream simply doesn't work for them.

Appendix 3

Statement to Committee-Rhys Wootten- Former Student Cork Life Centre

My experience of mainstream education

My experience in mainstream school was not a positive one. It was definitely not good for my health to say the least, bordering on dangerous for my mental health.

Upon entering mainstream secondary school the stress/anxiety induced stomach and head migraines worsened, they no longer happened once a week, as they had up until then, instead they became more frequent, eventually becoming a daily occurrence. Alongside this anxiety, I began suffering panic attacks, caused by going to school/my experience of school, at 13 years of age. All of this took a toll on my physical health, my immune system weakened, the depression intensified and I began self-harming.

Regardless of how bad I felt, I forced myself to keep up with school work and strived relentlessly to excel academically. I would work until 3am or 4am in the morning trying. Trying to study, trying to do my homework, trying to make sure I had everything, that there was no reason to be singled out by a teacher. I would get about 3 or 4 hours of disturbed sleep every night. All I was doing was trying. School was my everything, the fear and the anxiety consumed me.

Despite all of these attempts, I was genuinely terrified to go to school. I was scared of my teachers and of the staff in general. My attendance decreased over time. Granted, sometimes I was genuinely ill or injured but I would also use any and every excuse in the book to not go to school or to leave early. The one time I can remember a teacher taking me aside and talking to me about my attendance was to tell that if I didn't stop missing days then I would fail my junior cert. On the surface that could be a reasonable concern, however, it was not a discussion but a scolding, and it felt like a threat.

By Fourth year, I was well and truly burnt out, but I couldn't stop. The scaremongering from my teachers only seemed to get worse as the weeks went on. I couldn't see that I was running myself into the ground trying to fly under the radar. The only thing I could focus on was not getting into trouble and trying to prove my worth as a person, through my results.

My experience of alternative education

The sad thing is that I didn't know or even think that there was any other way of being educated. To an extent I thought it was normal to be scared of teachers, classes and just generally going to school. I believed that it was my fault that I was so scared of a teacher that my hand would shake too badly to even write my name. I believed that my anxiety, depression, self-harming behaviours and passive suicidal ideation were my fault, that I deserved to feel the way I was because I wasn't good enough.

Then came the centre. I remember Don telling me in the first meeting that if something didn't change I would have a full breakdown before I was twenty, that I could get 600 points in the leaving cert but I wouldn't be able to do anything with them. I believed him, but I just didn't care. All that mattered to me was getting the points. Though I was naturally terrified by the thought of changing educational settings, the thought of going back to mainstream secondary school was as bad, if not worse.

I am not going to lie and say that it was easy for me to adjust to being in the centre. I definitely struggled to adjust, not just teaching but the atmosphere itself. What may seem small things about the centre, like calling staff by their first name was extremely difficult. I was conditioned to only use sir/miss, to use any other form of address didn't feel respectful, and if I am honest it still feels wrong. In mainstream we were not allowed into a classroom unless the teacher was there or you were invited, or you would likely get in serious trouble. In the centre that wasn't a rule and just sitting in a room waiting for a staff member to arrive was not a punishable offence. The staff encouraged me to be myself, but I couldn't, I was running from my thoughts and unsuccessfully trying to fly under the radar. It took the bones of 2 years for me to even begin to feel comfortable enough to say more than a few sentences to the staff and my peers. I was trying to hide how bad I felt from everyone and I felt it too risky to trust anyone. Even though getting me to talk was like getting blood from a stone they didn't give up on me or forget about me.

When I did start talking I was in a really bad place mentally and it still took a while for me to be honest about my feelings, thoughts and actions. Once I did start talking to them they were always there when I needed to talk but they were also willing to give me space when I needed it. Regardless of how much I trusted them, I couldn't bring myself to approach them directly and (in my mind) 'disturb' them, so I would write notes or show them pieces of my journal and hand it into the office for them to read. Then they would talk to me about it when they had a chance to read it, this became practically a daily occurrence. There was never any criticism or frustration on Don and Rachel's part. I don't doubt that they wanted or wished that I was comfortable approaching them directly, but they always respected my boundaries and accepted that writing was the only way I really felt comfortable talking about some things.

The centre doesn't give homework, in fact, they went so far as to forbid my teachers from giving me any work to do at home. You don't have to bring any materials to classes nor do you have the financial pressure of books or uniforms.

There were no raised voices in the centre. No hidden implications or veiled threats.

Why I feel alternative education is important

Not only is it important to have alternatives to mainstream school, it is important for them to be fully supported, financially and otherwise, and for the awareness of their work and existence to be highlighted.

I think that there is no single way of providing an 'alternative education'. The rigidity of mainstream is often part of the problem and therefore should not be part of the solution. By all means, there should be rules and regulations but it should not seek to remove all individuality from its participants, nor should it aim to robotify them. Alternative educational settings should seek to do exactly what they say, they should explore different ways of educating young people. They should take into effect that not everybody learns in the same way or at the same rate without stigmatising, judging or critiquing them for things that are out of their control. Some people learn by doing and maybe some sort of apprenticeship or trade related learning is best.

Is the point of education not to support and nourish individuals and their creativity, not to restrict and regulate it. I believe that alternative educational centres should be holistic in their approach to learning and should look at the young person as an entity and seek to educate them in many different areas, and not just look at them as a machine which must memorise and regurgitate sometimes irrelevant information for examinations, the results of which are framed as being far more important and influential than they are.

One of the core differences I see between the two systems is that mainstream seeks to mould young people into its interpretation of a beneficial or ideal citizen. The centre seeks to support you in figuring out who you are, where you fit into society and helping you set and achieve your goals, not the goals of an institution.

Where I am now...

I am an author. I have written pieces for publications and the life centre published my book. I was one of seven students in the country to win the 2016 UCC Law Essay Competition.

I have just graduated from UCC with a first class honors degree, majoring in sociology and minoring in psychology. My final year sociology dissertation/project also received the award of Best Final Year Sociology Project. Since receiving this award I am, at the encouragement of the head of the department of sociology and criminology, working on refining my project for publishing in a journal.

I am taking a year off in between my undergraduate and postgrad degrees. During this year I am volunteering at the CLC, mainly teaching maths to the young people.

None of this would have been possible if I hadn't attended and had the support of the Cork Life Centre. On a practical level, it was the centre who suggested, supported and eventually published and launched my book. It was the Don and Rachel who suggested entering the law essay competition. As important and potentially impressive as those accomplishments may be, if it hadn't been for the ethos, persistence and support of the staff in the centre, I would not have been alive to accomplish any of it.