



Representatives from Local Enterprise Offices, Local Authorities, Enterprise Ireland and the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation joined Minister Heather Humphreys and Minister Pat Breen for an event in Russborough House to mark the fifth anniversary of the Local Enterprise Offices.

MAKING IT HAPPEN

In April, Minister Heather Humphreys T.D. and Minister Pat Breen T.D. hosted an anniversary event in Russborough House, Co. Wicklow to mark five years of the Local Enterprise Offices.

Over the past five years, every one of the 31 Local Enterprise Offices (LEOs) has played a key role in fostering entrepreneurship in its area and is very much at the fulcrum of the local business community, according to Oisín Geoghegan, Chair of the network of the LEOs.

"I truly believe that LEO supports are best-in-class in both a European and global context. LEOs are working closely and collaboratively with Enterprise Ireland, through the local authority system, to achieve ambitious targets through the rollout of enterprise development plans that collectively incorporate a national, regional and local focus," he says.

"One of the keys to the success of the LEOs in my opinion is that while they operate at local level – which is essential for local businesses – the services are coordinated nationally and best practice is continually promoted."

FIRST STOP SHOP

Lots of people come to their LEO with an idea for a new business. They all need guidance, knowledge and sound advice on how to go about exploring their idea so they can determine its potential.

"It is very important that we foster an entrepreneurial culture in Ireland which provides a supportive environment for anyone who has the potential to start their own business," says Geoghegan. "People need to have easy access to support services so they can make informed decisions about whether or not to start a new business and how to go about it. The first step



31
LEOs operated on a partnership basis by Enterprise Ireland and Local Authorities



18,640
Net jobs created by LEO-supported clients



5,080
Projects approved for funding by the LEOs



€81.5m
Direct financial assistance to LEO clients



17,587
People who have taken a Start Your Own Business course with LEOs



144,830
People who engaged in training with their LEO

in accessing these supports is through the LEO."

All 31 LEOs have reported a consistently strong demand for their services and this is reflected in the take-up of courses such as Start Your Own Business, mentoring and other training programmes. In the past five years, over 144,000 people have participated in LEO-run training programmes and over 40,000 people have received business mentoring.

"Some clients approach their LEO because they're not clear on what supports are available to them, so in some cases they just need information – a 'signposting' service and an introduction to the organisation that can help them," explains Geoghegan.

"In many cases, the LEO has a programme or an initiative that will be of real value to the business, whether that is by providing funding directly or enabling the business to access funding, or a management development programme or networking opportunity.

"Being an entrepreneur and running a small business can be a lonely place and the LEO is a real lifeline to enable owner-managers to network and plug into the local business support ecosystem."

ADDRESSING GAPS

The most successful entrepreneurs are those that are acutely aware of the skillsets that are needed in their business, in Geoghegan's experience. So, identifying knowledge and skills gaps, and addressing those gaps, is crucial to achieving business success.

"If you're standing still in business today, you're moving backwards," he notes. "Technological changes in the business environment are massively changing the focus and skills needs for SMEs. Small businesses, in particular, have to keep ahead of the curve or they will lose out or even worse, get left behind."

An example of this is in marketing, which has been revolutionised in recent years with the advent of social media, online trading and digital communications. This is a gap the LEOs have been helping small companies bridge with social media training, mentoring, the trading online voucher scheme and digital marketing expertise.

ACCELERATING GROWTH

One of the key metrics LEOs are focused on is enabling and accelerating the growth of businesses so that they can progress into the Enterprise Ireland portfolio. The LEO will typically support an eligible business financially



752
Companies were approved for Technical Assistance for Micro Exporters grants



40,577
People who availed of specialist mentoring through their LEO



5,227
Companies were approved for Trading Online Vouchers



7,371
Entries to Ireland's Best Young Entrepreneur Competition



1,687
Applications were submitted for Microfinance Ireland loans



432
Companies availed of the LEAN for Micro programme through LEOs

until it reaches ten employees, at which time it may then be eligible for further Enterprise Ireland supports.

"While not all small businesses will become global players, some do, and an increasing number of LEO-funded companies progress into Enterprise Ireland," says Geoghegan. In 2018, 171 LEO-supported companies employing 796 staff transferred to Enterprise Ireland. That's up from 80 LEO-supported companies the year before.

EVOLVING OFFERING

Given the fast-changing business landscape, the supports on offer through LEOs are continually reviewed and updated. Brexit supports have been hugely important over the past two years and comprise: scorecards to help with planning, one-to-one mentoring, specialist training and consultancy, financial supports and access to worldwide support networks.

New initiatives that have gained a lot of attention and have proven to be hugely successful include the Ireland's Best Young Entrepreneur competition and the Trading Online Voucher scheme.

One other programme rolled out over the past two years is LEAN for Micro, which has been extremely helpful for small businesses that want to become more lean, efficient and competitive, according to Geoghegan.

"While the majority of programmes and services provided by LEOs are available throughout the country, all LEOs are continually innovating locally to find solutions to address local challenges, for example sector-specific programmes or initiatives to encourage SMEs to internationalise," he notes.

"Looking to the future, I expect this evolution in our offerings to continue over the next five years. We will be increasingly focusing on helping SMEs to innovate, become more competitive and productive; to exploit technology and embrace green competitiveness and sustainability."

Local Enterprise Offices are operated on a partnership basis by Enterprise Ireland, Local Authorities, the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation and the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government, supported by the Government of Ireland.

FACILITATORS OF CHANGE

Kildare: PESTLE & MORTAR



Sonia Deasy, co-founder and CEO, Pestle & Mortar

Much-needed supports and advice from their Local Enterprise Offices in recent years has helped these four very different companies to grow, expand and shift their strategies.

Co-founder and CEO of global skincare brand Pestle & Mortar Sonia Deasy discovered that Local Enterprise Offices (LEOs) are not just about helping people to start businesses, they are also proactive in supporting entrepreneurs to grow and scale existing companies. In 2017, after appearing on QVC in the US, which led to supply deals with Bloomingdales, she was approached by Jacqui McNabb, Head of Enterprise at LEO Kildare, who asked what areas of the business she needed to expand.

Following McNabb's advice, she successfully applied for a Business Priming Grant and subsequent Business Expansion Grant, both of which provided financial support that enabled and facilitated fast growth. "At the time we employed five people. The Priming Grant helped us to employ the next eight. It provided us with a contribution towards the cost of the first year's salary for each staff member," says Deasy. "That was hugely helpful, because we knew that if we got them for a year we could hold onto them."

The Business Expansion Grant was also a game-changer, allowing the company to install a high-tech phone system and upgrade hardware to high performance Apple Mac computers, vital for a business that does its own design work.

"LEO Kildare helped reaffirm that we had something special. They really believed in the business and knew we could go global," says Deasy. Now supported by Enterprise Ireland, Pestle & Mortar employs nearly 30 staff and has sales around the world. It was through LEO Kildare that Deasy entered and won the overall title at the National Enterprise Awards this year.

Cork: ACADEMY CRESTS



Phil Cone (on the right) with family members and the team at Academy Crests.

The Lean for Micro programme delivered through the LEO in Cork City has made a huge difference to Academy Crests, which provides specialist embroidered and printed branded clothing to schools, clubs, companies and individuals. Owner and Managing Director Phil Cone first enrolled in the course in 2015, after moving to new premises in Northpoint Business Park in Cork, and the company took part in it again in 2018 and 2019 as he was so pleased with the results.

"Lean was a process that allowed me to step back and have a fresh, critical look at the business and where I could find efficiencies in how we were doing things and where and how we were spending money," says Cone.

Involving the staff of ten people from the start, some great ideas emerged. "We moved machines, we moved how we did things and we changed the workflow. A change that might save one person five minutes doing one particular job is huge if it's a job they do 50 times in a day," notes Cone.

By implementing more efficient production processes, improving time management and communications and reducing waste, Academy Crests made annual savings of almost €50,000.

"We changed a lot of things last year and we're still tweaking to refine the process. One notable benefit of making all of the changes so far is that we've ended up removing a lot of our processes. Whereas we used to have two units, we're now wholly contained in the biggest unit and I'm subletting the other one," says Cone.

Galway: SKYLARK ELECTRIC ATTIC STAIRS



Peter Morrow, founder, Skylark Electric Attic Stairs

Peter Morrow, founder of Skylark Stairs, contacted his LEO in Galway for help in 2016 as his company's UK sales had dropped to zero for two months after the Brexit vote. Up until that time, 95% of sales came from the UK.

A Business Priming Grant, a Start Your Own Business Course and a Business Expansion Grant, all delivered through his LEO, gave him the vital back-up he needed to diversify and eventually move to his current, larger premises. Further to being granted a US patent in August of 2016, he secured an order to send a shipping container of product to a US stairs specialist. The LEO helped him to build capacity for that large order, encouraging him to participate in its Lean for Micro initiative. "A suggestion the Lean consultant made about a component that took me 32 minutes to make cut the time to 15 minutes. What it has done for the business has been incredible," says Morrow.

Skylark Stairs launched in the US in January 2017, supported by LEO funding to develop and localise its website. Today 25% of its sales come from the US. The UK market, which has since rebounded, now accounts for 50% of Skylark Stairs' business – with geographic diversification mitigating risk. A further 25% of sales come from Australia.

On the back of a recent LEO national ad campaign featuring the company, Skylark Stairs was spotted by a German TV producer who did a piece on it. Within one hour of the piece airing, Skylark Stairs had received 100 email queries from Germany, a market it was not previously in. This extended to Austria and Slovenia as the show aired there too.

Westmeath: DEAD CENTRE BREWING



Liam Tutty, founder, Dead Centre Brewing

Financial supports from LEO Westmeath since 2016 have allowed founder of Dead Centre Brewing Liam Tutty to turn redundancy into a positive and make his craft brewery idea a reality.

A Business Priming Grant enabled him to secure a long lease on a former pub overlooking the Shannon in Athlone. He developed plans for a microbrewery, bar and pizza restaurant, including installing a glass wall so that customers could see where their beer was made. The grant also meant he could hire staff.

Last February, the Dead Centre Taproom opened and the brewery became fully operational this summer. This is allowing Tutty to move from contract brewing to producing all of his own beer and retaining much more revenue. Exporting to the UK is also now on the cards.

"The UK was always part of our projections but exporting only makes sense once we're producing the liquid ourselves because the overheads are higher than with contract brewing," Tutty explains.

A Technical Assistance for Micro Exporters Grant from his LEO in 2018 enabled Dead Centre Brewing to take a stand at the Alltech Craft Beers & Food Fair in Dublin. "The market I'm in is very competitive. Being able to take a stand at Alltech got me in front of international buyers and distributors," says Tutty. "There have been so many things from the LEO along the way that have made a big difference. I can honestly say I would not be where I am at all today without all of this support."

BREADTH OF ACTIVITY

Local Enterprise Offices deliver innovative programmes and initiatives in communities across the country, as these images show.



Ahead of Brexit, the first 'Prepare Your Business for Customs' workshop took place in Cavan in February 2019. These workshops are taking place throughout the country in 2019 with details of upcoming courses available from LocalEnterprise.ie/Brexit. Pictured at the Cavan workshop (from left to right) were: Mark Christal (representing Enterprise Ireland), Minister Paschal Donohoe TD, Marcella Rudden (LEO Cavan), Minister Heather Humphreys TD, Tommy Ryan (Cavan County Council) and Minister Regina Doherty TD.



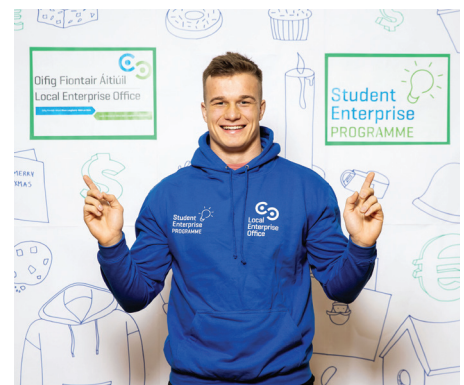
The Local Enterprise Village at the National Ploughing Championships in Carlow (17 to 19 September, 2019) will be home to more than 30 LEO-supported companies, with products and services aimed at rural and farming communities. Pictured (from left to right) are: Anna May McHugh, NPA Managing Director with Alexandra Kieldanowicz of Irish Socksociety, supported by LEO Galway.



IBYE (Ireland's Best Young Entrepreneur) is a €2m investment competition organised by the LEOs every year, supported by the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation, Enterprise Ireland, Google and local authorities. The 2019 IBYE National Final takes place on 15 September, involving 24 finalists from across the country aged between 18 and 35.



The hugely successful Food Academy Programme is now in its sixth year and this LEO training initiative for food start-ups is run in partnership with SuperValu and Bord Bia. Pictured (from left to right) are: Disin Geoghegan, Chair of the network of LEOs, Minister Michael Creed TD, Tara McCarthy, CEO of Bord Bia, Minister Pat Breen TD and Martin Kelleher, Managing Director of SuperValu.



Professional rugby star Josh van der Flier (pictured) was unveiled recently by the LEOs as the Ambassador for the Student Enterprise Programme. When Van der Flier was a student at Wesley College in Dublin, he participated in the programme, which now involves more than 26,400 students from 490 Irish secondary schools.



National Women's Enterprise Day (NWED) is taking place on 17 October and the 2019 theme is 'Making It Happen'. This will be the 13th annual NWED with events being organised by every LEO around the country.



At the publication of the 2018 Annual Employment Survey, the Local Enterprise Offices announced that there were now more than 36,000 people in Ireland employed by over 7,000 LEO-supported companies. Pictured (from left to right) are: Paul Reid (representing the County and City Management Association), Mark Christal (representing Enterprise Ireland), Minister Heather Humphreys TD, Minister Pat Breen TD and Disin Geoghegan (representing the network of Local Enterprise Offices).