

The **DARA Project** is a CE scheme specialised drug rehabilitation service for people in recovery from substance misuse. It provides a range of supports to people who seek recovery from addiction. It believes that recovery from addiction is possible for all who seek it and aims to support, empower and equip each person to live a drug free life and become mentally sound, emotionally balanced, socially adjusted, physically well, and spiritually alive.



What was the need?

The DARA Project, based in Athy and Kildare Town in County Kildare, was established to provide a holistic support system for individuals recovering from substance misuse. The project is a drug-free structured day programme sponsored by the County Kildare Leader Partnership (CKLP), funded by the Department of Social Protection DSP in collaboration with the Substance Use Regional Forum (SURF).

The DARA Project was established with the idea that effective rehabilitation entails more than just treating addiction but also reintegrating individuals into their communities through meaningful employment and educational opportunities. Thus it provides a safe and supportive environment for participants to develop their resilience to external factors and build their recovery capital. Participants were encouraged to express their needs and contribute to the design of the program. This engagement has fostered a sense of ownership and empowerment among participants in recovery, making them active participants in their rehabilitation journey. This methodology is concurrent with the Asset Based Community Development Model (ABCD) which considers the project's participants and their lived experiences a valuable resource to be developed within the project and mobilised within the community, thereby leveraging their strengths as a means of personal and community development.

Additionally, The DARA Project offers its participants a variety of career and educational advancement options through its collaboration with County Kildare Leader Partnership (CKLP).

What does the project do?

The DARA Project adopts a multi-faceted approach to drug-free rehabilitation, focusing on three main pillars:

- 1. RECOVERY SUPPORTS:** A dedicated team of experienced recovery professionals, including psychotherapists, CE supervisors, and project workers offer regular support to help participants navigate challenges and maintain their recovery. Other services include Group Therapy, one to one Key-Working, Relapse Prevention Workshops, Randomized Drug & Alcohol Testing Reflection & Reviews and therapeutic activities such as Group Cycles and Walks
- 2. SKILL DEVELOPMENT AND TRAINING:** Participants engage in various workshops that enhance their employability skills, career guidance, and life skills development. This is provided via collaboration with various educational and training services that provide courses which are QQI accredited as well as lessons in Personal Development.
- 3. EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES:** The project collaborates with local community services and organisations committed to providing opportunities for participants seeking to progress. These partnerships create a supportive landscape of employment opportunities where recovering individuals can find meaningful work.

Additionally, the program emphasises peer support, allowing participants to connect with others who are facing similar journeys, thus building both individual and collective recovery capital by fostering a spirit of community and accountability.

Key Learning

The DARA Project's experience underscores several key learnings:

- 1. SERVICE USER INVOLVEMENT IS CRUCIAL:** Involving individuals with lived experiences in the design and implementation of a recovery project ensures that the services are relevant and effective. This approach has been essential in fostering trust and engagement among participants.
- 2. HOLISTIC SUPPORT WORKS:** Addressing both the personal/therapeutic and professional needs of individuals in recovery is vital to their success. Providing ongoing support ensures participants can sustain their recovery and education or employment through a regular review and reflection process.
- 3. COMMUNITY COLLABORATION IS KEY:** Building partnerships with local services and organisations creates a network of support that is beneficial not only for participants but also for the community, as it fosters a culture of inclusivity and understanding, thus reducing the stigma that associated with addiction.
- 4. CELEBRATING SUCCESS:** Sharing testimonials and success stories not only motivates participants but also raises awareness in the community about recovery, reducing stigma, and encouraging more individuals to seek help.
- 5. CONTINUUM OF CARE:** The DARA Project has addressed the demand for a community-based structured day program that is drug-free and recovery-focused. It has, however, also brought attention to the necessity of a need for a community-based stabilisation program in County Kildare in order to close the gaps in existing services and maintain an unbroken continuum of care for those seeking to stabilise and recover from substance misuse.



What impact has the project had?

(Qualitative) Individual Testimonials:

My addiction began around the age of sixteen, initially fuelled by peer pressure with friends around me drinking. I joined in and found that alcohol made it easier for me to be open, something I normally struggled with.

I came from a loving family but for more reasons than one, I sought ways to escape reality and alcohol provided that escape. At first alcohol provided this escape for me, but looking back now I realize it never truly did. In fact, it became a severe problem eventually turning into a physical need.

For the last 16 years I have been in and out of addiction and sobriety, navigating a challenging and overwhelming cycle. Thankfully, I was fortunate to discover The Dara Project, a recovery day program for people in recovery from drug and alcohol misuse. The Dara Project has become a lifeline for me. The program offers not only a structured path to recovery but also community employment, group therapy and essential relapse prevention tools. These resources have given me a sense of purpose and belonging, helping me to build a stable foundation for long-term sobriety while connecting with others who share similar struggles and goals. I have made some lifelong friends here. It has honestly changed my life for the better.

As I near 1 year of sobriety, this journey has been anything but easy, but with the support of everyone at The Dara Project, the support of my family, fellow AA members, I have managed challenges that once seemed impossible.

Each day of sobriety is a victory. I remain deeply committed to maintaining this path of recovery. The person I am today is no longer defined by addiction but by resilience, gratitude, and the determination to live a life of purpose, sobriety, and connection. This would not be possible without the help and support of everyone at The Dara Project.

I have recently secured my own apartment and look forward to building my future here.

Going forward, I plan to continue my journey in addiction studies in Maynooth University. For me, this is just the beginning. With the tools I have gained and the people standing by my side in all aspects of my life, especially The Dara Project, I am confident in the future that lies ahead.

Without The Dara Project I would not be where I am today and I am forever grateful for the second chance I have been given in life.

Shane McNulty, 42 years old.

1. How I came to be addicted

My father's alcoholism disrupted our home a lot when I was growing up. My mother was compelled to leave our village in order to safeguard my brothers and I, which resulted in the split of my parents. After we relocated to a new place, I felt obligated to take up my father's responsibility of watching out for my brothers and mother. As a result, I tried to act strong in front of others, but this was only a façade, inside I remained a scared child until early adulthood. Throughout this period, I used drugs to prevent me from having to process my emotions and portray a false sense of confidence. Then I tried Heroin, this drug numbed my emotions and made me feel like I was wrapped in a warm blanket safe from any sadness, anxiety or stress. Heroin made me feel like I had been reunited with a part of me that had been missing since early childhood almost like a security blanket that would protect me from having to face the source of my insecurities.

2. How the project helped and supported me

The DARA project gave me a safe, accepting space to talk about my experiences with addiction and to

listen to my peers as they shared their stories, which allowed me to reestablish my connection with myself and others in recovery. The project became a supportive community, providing encouragement in times of doubt, and empathy in times of emotional pain, without which I'm not sure if I would have made it through college.

3. What I now have back in my life

After completing college, I now have hope back in my life, a future that's there for the taking, and friendships that replace the void I once used drugs could fill. I also have a loving wife and a place to call home.

4. My hopes for the future

My future hopes are to use my personal experience to assist those who are struggling with addiction. In addition, I hope to carry on with my studies and get a master's degree in addiction studies or another related field like psychotherapy and counselling. These hopes now drive my recovery just as fear once drove my addiction.

Paul Mitchell



(Quantitative) Progression Rates Pie Chart:

The DARA Project has experienced promising outcomes since its inception. Based on program statistics collected over the past three years September 2021 – September 2024, the following progression rates were observed among participants:

- **23.1%** Secured Employment
- **9.2%** Enrolled in Further Education or Training
- **18.5%** Engaged in Volunteer Work
- **18.5%** Continued to Access Health or Support Services
- **7.7%** Relapsed
- **15.4%** Completed
- **7.7%** Prison

These statistics indicate a high rate of success in obtaining employment, advancing education, continued engagement with services, and reciprocity through volunteer work, thus demonstrating the efficacy of the project in facilitating recovery and improving life circumstances.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the DARA Project represents a successful model for drug-free rehabilitation that prioritises the voices of service users and the importance of community involvement. In addition, the success of the project emphasises the value of an Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) approach toward recovery at an individual and community level. This model harnesses participant's social capital and encourages them to become connectors in their community thereby reducing the stigma of addiction and setting an example for others to follow.