

Home Sweet Home!

Moving out of home for the first time is a huge step in anyone's life. With so much to consider, it can be exciting and, yet, a very daunting time.

HOWEVER, THE SUMMER Accommodation Scheme, an innovative new pilot project introduced by National Learning Network in Hollyhill, Cork, has assisted a group of learners, many of whom had never lived away from their family before, with the opportunity to live independently with a group of their peers.

The concept for the project was simple. Pre-book some nice, clean, safe and accessible accommodation from University College Cork during the summer months, undertake some preparatory work and then hand over the keys.



Pictured: National Learning Network learner, Kieran Ryan, opening the door to his accommodation at University College Cork.

The extensive training programme, which all participants had to agree to undertake, was devised by Rehabilitation Officer, Maura Keane, in conjunction with instructors at the centre and featured a particular emphasis on safety issues and planned responses to different scenarios.

A single apartment, comprising four bedrooms and shared living room, bathroom and kitchen, was rented from the University for six weeks and learners could decide how long they wanted to stay in the accommodation – one learner stayed the full six weeks, others for between one and four weeks. Learners, who attended different courses at the Hollyhill centre as normal during the day, had to learn how to manage their own resources – dealing with practical issues such as cooking, cleaning and shopping. They also had to resolve any disputes that arose during the course of their stay.

According to Padraig Healy, Assistant Manager, National Learning Network, Hollyhill, many of the learners who participated in the scheme were very happy living at home, but this project gave them an opportunity to prove to themselves and to others that they can be independent. "Without a doubt, the learners who participated in the scheme gained a huge amount of practical experience and valuable life skills. What's more, their confidence levels really improved.

"The learners themselves weren't the only ones to benefit. For staff, there was real enjoyment in providing the training to learners who were

fully engaged with the process, knowing that they would soon be putting all they had learnt into practice. Parents and guardians also reaped the rewards as shopping and cooking skills were developed and learners gained a new appreciation of budgeting and the cost of living. Plus, there were benefits too for the centre at Hollyhill, as friendships grew among participants who were attending different courses. There was certainly a great buzz in the centre during the scheme."

Following the huge success of the pilot programme, it's no wonder that many external agencies and other National Learning Network centres are looking at the viability of introducing similar schemes. In the meantime, back at Hollyhill, planning is already well underway for next year's Summer Accommodation Scheme, which looks set to be bigger and better than ever. ■

Who to contact

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