

PRESS RELEASE; FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE- MARCH 15TH 2021

Thousands of Family Carers Turn to Online Supports Through Covid-19

Innovate Online Support Group Celebrates it's One Year Anniversary

In mid-March 2020, as Covid-19 struck, Liam O'Sullivan and Zoe Hughes knew they needed to do something and do it quickly.

The organisation they work for, Care Alliance Ireland, was traditionally focused on the big picture stuff, making policy submissions to government departments, collaborating with Universities on research about family carers, and encouraging their 95 member organisations to do more to support Ireland's 500,000 Family carers.

As Covid-19 restrictions took hold, supports for family carers were literally shut down overnight. No respite, no carer support groups, no dementia cafes, no day centre, no special educational supports.

O'Sullivan says *"We had dipped our toes in the water in the online space, and luckily both Zoe and I were reasonably tech savvy, with Zoe in particular having volunteered in online group moderation for the past 10 years."*

So it was on March 16th 2020, the Online Family Carer Support Group was born. During the first week, the group was inundated with requests to join from family carers across Ireland. Over 500 joined in the first week, the group now has 2,100 members, from every county in Ireland.

"It soon became apparent that we needed more than the two of us if we were going to be able to sustain a high level of professional support and moderation." O'Sullivan asked health and social care professionals that he had an existing relationship with to volunteer, and whom were only too glad to support the project.

"We noticed pretty quickly that there was a group of family carers within the group who were really good at commenting and supporting other carers who were really struggling with the lockdown. In time, we recruited seven of these volunteers, and one has gone on to manage the project."

What started off as an attempt to respond to Covid-19, has emerged now into one of the leading online carer support groups internationally. Indeed, it has attracted considerable interest from the HSE Mental Health services and from organisations abroad.

Membership is open to family carers living in the Republic of Ireland.

Tara O'Connor, Project Worker with the group says

"We take the moderation part really seriously – we have strict rules around confidentiality and being nice to each other; and its amazing to see how the peer support aspect of the group is so powerful and beneficial."

The groups online activities have now expanded into monthly quizzes, a regular book club (the group posts out complimentary books and chocolates to every member who wants them), a gardening club, chair yoga, and a weekly drop in coffee/chat. They hold regular raffles and light hearted competitions. They also direct members to an increasing array of online supports being delivered by other not-for-profit organisations.

The group also has access to professional social work and counselling services, and guide members through accessing these supports as necessary.

O'Connor says " *The Community Foundation have been really supportive to be fair, and we are now hoping that the HSE will step up and provide ongoing financial support*"

Notes to Editors

Some Figures About the Group

March 16th 2020-March 15th 2021

- 2,100 Members
- 94% have stayed in the group
- 2,329 Posts
- 26,810 Comments
- 850 care packages/hampers/resource books distributed across Ireland

The moderated support group is delivered through the Facebook platform, in a closed/private group format. Users will need a Facebook account to participate.

The objectives of the group are; to mitigate the impact of the withdrawal of face-to-face support services; provide a safe virtual space for family carers to seek reassurance, ask questions, receive peer support and contain raised anxiety; encourage members to consider and create a back-up plan should they fall ill.

Feedback from Family Carers who have Joined the Online Family Carer Support Group

(shared with each of their explicit permission)

"Thank you so much for setting up this group. I've searched for one for years"

"Many many thanks for creating this support group. I, like many family carers, can feel rather invisible and isolated. I care 24/7 for my beautiful 86 year old little Mam."

"It's a lifeline for so many of us. I don't post much but I do read often and there's so much helpful advice and support, which is what we all need right now when we feel forgotten and lost."

"You guys sure know how to cheer us all up running little raffles like this, without you all I'd be lost. It's great knowing that we are not alone"

"Thank you all for just being there for all of us. You have helped to keep us going in a difficult year."

Individual family carers are available to speak with the media.

Link to the

Group <https://www.facebook.com/groups/FamilyCarerOnlineSupportGroupIreland/>

For more information about the support group please contact Liam O'Sullivan (087 207 3265) or email info@carealliance.ie