

July 2023
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Local Government **COVID-19** Response Data



Data relating to the Community Call Initiative, the Keep Well Campaign, On-line Library Resources and Small Business Supports

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Foreword

The COVID-19 pandemic was an unprecedented world event that required a rapid reaction from government as well as the public. This involved a sudden and dramatic revision to how we engaged with each other, how we moved about, and how services were delivered and consumed. Public health was a key concern for government and the primary controls that people needed to adjust to related to restricted movement and limited contacts. The social and societal impact that resulted was quite dramatic with significant support needed by the public to cope with the new way of living and working. The impact was also felt economically as businesses needed to adapt and embrace, where possible, digital engagement and more innovative methods to assist customers to consume services.

Previous reports have illustrated local government's innovative work practice responses such as in the 2020 Overview of Local Authority Covid-19 Innovations report by the LGMA and the Covid-19 Innovation in Local Government: Case Study Series by the IPA, and the 2021 Local Authority Housing Innovation Case Studies by the LGMA and Innovation in Housing Services Case Studies, Lessons from examples of innovative practice by the IPA. However, this report aims to release key data that illustrates the levels of engagement with new and adapted services during the pandemic.

Local government had a key role to play in assisting the public to adjust to the required changes. Local authorities, in partnership with key stakeholders, delivered the Community Call Initiative that sought to

support people experiencing isolation or needing practical support to engage with critical services. Older people, people who were geographically isolated, and people with underlying medical conditions were particularly vulnerable but, as is illustrated in this report, the Community Call dedicated phone lines, set up by every local authority, were key to channelling the required supports to meet the specific needs of people. Through this initiative more than 70,000 calls for support were received and responded to, while 884 meetings were held by stakeholders to coordinate and manage these supports via the Community Forums set up and led by the local authorities.

In addition, the Keep Well Initiative, managed by local authorities, sought to support the public more generally through the provision of more than 10,000 events that encouraged people to keep active, switch off, be creative and stay connected. In total, there were just under one million attendees at these events which all took place during the first six months of 2021. Libraries have long been a key community resource and they were to the fore in providing services during the pandemic, despite being prohibited from providing access to buildings for much of the period. Libraries facilitated a huge increase in the provision of free digital products. There were approximately 10,000 eMagazine checkouts each week and demand for eBooks and eAudiobooks jumped from 7,500 and 10,500 respectively per week to a high of 25,000 and 30,000 in one week. Newspaper articles read online increased from a weekly average of 580,000 to a high of almost 6 million in a week at the height of the pandemic.

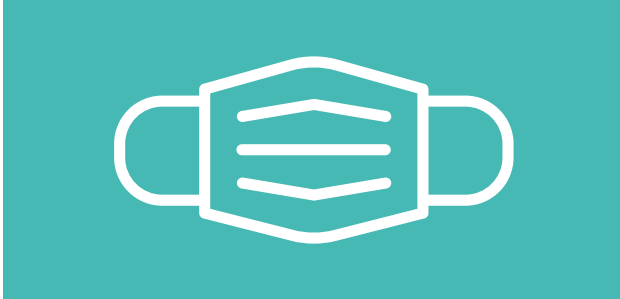
Similarly, and importantly, participation in online courses increased. The average number of lessons opened increased from 3,000 per week prior to the pandemic, to a high of 24,000 in a week in April 2020.

Remote working (due to a restriction of the use of communal in-door spaces) was one of the most visible and dramatic shifts that was embraced rapidly by both the public and private sector. This shift often resulted in previously bustling economic areas of activity, like city and town centres and industrial areas, emptying out, while demand for more locally based services increased in residential areas. One of the consequences was a need for businesses to adjust their service delivery models with digital service delivery and outdoor consumption of services increasing dramatically. Local authorities were the conduits for a range of practical supports to facilitate outdoor dining, revisions to how outdoor spaces were used, as well as providing direct support through rates waivers and small business support grants. Over the course of 2020 and 2021 over €1 billion was waived in commercial rates, and more than €600 million was paid to small and micro businesses in restart grants as well as €20 million in small business grants.

Overall, the data in this report helps us to document what was happening across specific local government services during a unique and challenging period of time. It complements existing research and makes visible some of the work of local government. As the demand for, and interest in statistics increases, the sector strives to make more of our data available.

Ann Doherty
Chair
CCMA Corporate Committee

Executive Summary



Introduction

From the beginning of the COVID-19 Pandemic in March 2020 Irish local authorities, in tandem with all sectors of Irish government and society, played a part in responding to the changing circumstances the State found itself in. Much data was collected by local authorities responding to the needs of the public during the pandemic that, when reviewed, provides useful and interesting information on levels of resource commitment and service engagement.

This report compiles and presents data in relation to the Community Call and Keep Well initiatives (which was submitted to the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (DHLGH) weekly and presented on the DHLGH Data Dashboard), the local authority on-line library resources (which was provided weekly by the on-line service providers) and the financial supports administered to businesses by local authorities (which was provided by the DHLGH).



Community Call

The **Community Call** campaign aimed to link members of the community with appropriate community services to meet their needs via a dedicated phone service which was made available in every local authority area. It involved collaboration between local authorities, community groups and other government services. Data on levels of engagement was gathered by local authorities and reported on via a Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage online dashboard between March 2020 and September 2021.

There were 70,297 calls made to local authorities through the Community Call helplines over the course of the Community Call Initiative. The campaign was characterised by a high volume of calls in the early months of lockdown, followed by a gradual reduction in call volumes. This pattern is exactly what would be anticipated from such a campaign, as the service successfully linked service users with the appropriate services in the early months of the campaign.

Community Call phone calls were categorised into the following topic areas:

Table 1 Number of Community Call phone calls by topic

| Mar-20 to Sept-21 | | Total no. of calls |
|--|--|--------------------|
| Meal service calls | Provision of hot meals via local meals on wheels services | 4,428 |
| Medical and health service calls | Wide range of medical and health support such as transport to medical appointments, or collection of prescriptions | 5,187 |
| Social isolation service calls | For those experiencing difficulty with low levels of social interactions or cocooning | 11,461 |
| Collection and delivery service calls | Help with shopping for food, fuel, and other essential household items | 13,702 |
| General requests | Miscellaneous requests that fell outside the above four areas | 34,085 |





Keep Well

The **Keep Well Campaign** ran for a six-month period from January to June 2021. The campaign was designed to support the physical and mental health and overall well-being of people in Ireland during the period, which included a particularly lengthy lockdown. There were events held

in every local authority, with thousands of people involved in these events every week. Data was recorded by local authorities and reported by the DHLGH via a national dashboard over the six-month period. The Keep Well data for this report was extracted from the online data hubs operated by the DHLGH.

The Keep Well Campaign comprised of three elements:

Table 2 Number of Keep Well events and participants

| January to June 2021 |  Total Events |  Total no. of calls |
|---|---|---|
| Keeping Active Events Local authorities worked with sporting organisations across Ireland to develop and implement ways to support keeping active in their local communities. | 3,195 | 278,729 |
| Switching Off, Being Creative, Minding your Mood Events The campaign focused on relaxation, nature, creativity, and learning. Local authorities and partner organisations (such as Creative Ireland) worked together to provide and support switching off events/activities to individuals and communities. | 3,661 | 281,893 |
| Staying Connected Coordinated between local authorities, volunteer groups, and other organisations. It focused on combating the social isolation many experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic through support helplines and befriending initiatives. | 3,459 | 437,011 |










Digital Library Services

For much of 2020 and 2021, in-person local authority library services were not possible due to national restrictions. During this time, **digital library services** became increasingly important and popular. Services such as eBooks, eAudiobooks, eMagazines and online learning resources showed

spikes in usage during the tightest phases of lockdown, and sustained higher use compared to before the pandemic through 2020 and 2021. Data was provided directly to the LGMA by each of the digital library service providers.

Table 3 Digital library services usage; pre COVID-19 and during COVID-19

| | | Pre COVID-19 01/01/2020 - 14/03/2020 | During COVID-19 15/03/2020 – 31/12/2021 |
|---|--------------------------|---|--|
| | | Average no. of online newspaper articles opened per week | |
|  | Online Newspapers | 580,488 |  1,839,177 |
| | | Average no. of online lessons viewed per week | |
|  | Online Courses | 3,089 |  3,733 |
| | | Average no. of eBook and eAudiobook loans per week | |
|  | eBooks | 7,651 |  16,640 |
| | eAudiobooks | 10,465 |  21,331 |

Unlike, the other digital library services, data for eMagazine checkouts is only available for 2021. The average number of eMagazines checkouts per week was 9,738 for 2021.



Financial Supports to Businesses

Over the course of 2020 and 2021, many businesses had to close for prolonged periods due to national COVID-19 restrictions. This was especially true for high-street businesses such as those in the service industry which rely on in-person trade. In this context, a range of financial supports for businesses were administered by local authorities. The

supports ranged from commercial rates waivers for businesses which were unable to operate, to grants to help businesses reopen as restrictions eased. In tandem with other government measures, the financial supports helped existing businesses to continue to operate. Financial data was collected by the LGMA Finance and Business team from the DHLGH.

Table 4 Financial supports for businesses during COVID-19

| | | |
|---|--|--|
| <p>Rates Waiver Commercial rates are a form property tax paid to local authorities and are used to fund a wide range of local services. In response to the pandemic and the mandated closure of businesses for public health reasons, a waiver was introduced. An initial three-month waiver was announced in May 2020 which was extended to the remaining quarters of 2020 and to Q1, Q2, and Q3 of 2021.</p> | <p>€717,661,651</p> | <p>Commercial rates waived by local authorities in 2020.</p> |
| <p>Restart Grants The Restart Grant was announced by the government in May 2020. The grant aimed to alleviate the costs for small and micro businesses of reopening and reemploying workers after COVID-19 closures.</p> | <p>€421,904,756</p> | <p>Commercial rates waived by local authorities in the first three quarters of 2021.</p> |
| <p>Small Business Grants 2021 The Small Business Assistance Scheme for COVID (SBASC) was launched by the government in March 2021. The scheme intended to assist businesses with their fixed costs during the economic disruption imposed by COVID-19 public health measures.</p> | <p>108,487 applications were accepted by the local authorities for the Restart Grant and Restart Plus Grant. Payment for both grants amounted to €632,266,393 paid to local businesses.</p> | <p>5,504 applications were accepted for SBASC and SBASC+ grants; with over €20 million awarded to small and micro businesses.</p> |

Introduction

On the 29th of February 2020, the first case of COVID-19 was confirmed in Ireland. By March 12th, 2020, all schools, colleges, and childcare facilities closed for two weeks. By the end of the month, all non-essential businesses were closed initiating level five restrictions¹ in Ireland. The lockdowns had implications for people and businesses across the State, and local authorities worked in several ways to mitigate some of these impacts. Much data was collected by local authorities responding to the needs of the public during the pandemic that, when reviewed, provides useful and interesting information on levels of resource commitment and service engagement. The objective of this report is to document the available data, making it available to key stakeholders and the public, so that the learnings can be transparently shared.

This report presents data collected by local authorities on levels of service engagement across new or amended services developed to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. The four services reviewed are:

- The Community Call Initiative
- The Keep Well Campaign
- Digital Library Services
- Financial Supports to Businesses.

The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdowns affected many individuals' ability to access local amenities and supports, as well as causing many to feel isolated. One part of the government response to mitigate

the impacts of COVID-19 restrictions on the public, was the **Community Call Initiative**. The aim of the Community Call was to put local people in touch with organisations who could help with their specific needs (i.e., meal service calls, social isolation calls and medical health service calls). To manage the initiative, each local authority established a Community Forum, where all key stakeholders from the Community and Voluntary sector as well as State agencies were represented. Each Community Forum established the protocols and operationalised systems locally and met regularly to monitor and oversee the implementation of the initiative from the end of March 2020 until August 2021.

In addition to the on-going Community Call Initiative, a once-off targeted campaign was also delivered by local authorities. The **Keep Well Campaign** was established to support peoples' physical and mental wellbeing and ran from January 2021 until June 2021. The Keep Well Campaign was comprised of three elements and data relating to the number of events and participants was collected by local authorities across each theme:

- Keeping Active,
- Switching Off, Being Creative, and Minding Your Mood,
- Staying Connected.

¹ During level 5 restrictions the public were asked to stay at home except for travel for work, education or other essential purposes, or to take exercise within 5km of home. Household visits were not permitted, and all non-essential retail remained closed.

The Keep Well Campaign included events under each heading which were held in every local authority in Ireland. The events brought together local authorities and partner organisations and were all based on one of the three themes above.

During the COVID-19 lockdowns, **digital library services** became increasingly important as members of the public could not always access physical libraries. This increase in importance is reflected in the rising popularity of digital services, especially during the initial lockdowns. Data on this increased usage was collected by each of the digital library service providers for 2020 and 2021.

The final area to be reviewed relates to the **business financial supports** provided by local authorities. During the COVID-19 pandemic many businesses were impacted financially by the widespread restrictions in place in relation to movement of people, business opening hours, access to materials/supplies, etc. A number of accommodations were made to assist businesses as much as possible, e.g., the introduction of legislation to facilitate outdoor dining, pedestrianising streets to facilitate outdoor dining, etc., as well as a package of financial supports. Data relating to three specific supports which were administered by local authorities, are presented in this report, namely:

- The Rates Waiver
- The Restart Grants
- The Small Business Grants.



Methodology

This section of the report details the collection method for each of the COVID-19 services as well as any data validation and transformation that was required. Data for this report was collected from a variety of different sources. Keep Well and Community Call data, which was submitted by local authorities weekly to the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (DHLGH), was aggregated and stored in a central data hub. The data was then made available via an online dashboard, that was visible to the public as well as the local authorities. The DHLGH provided the LGMA Research Unit access to the data in the hub, and data was extracted for analysis. Libraries data was provided to the LGMA by the relevant digital library service providers. Financial data relating to business supports based on local authority returns, was supplied by the DHLGH to the LGMA.

Community Call Initiative and Keep Well Campaign

Community Call and Keep Well data was extracted from online data hubs operated by the DHLGH. Both the Community Call and Keep Well data hubs have now been discontinued.

The Community Call COVID-19 hub was established by DHLGH to collect data from local authorities relating to the Community Call Initiative. The data collection began in March 2020 and finished in September 2021. For the Community Call Initiative, data was collected on the following:

- Number of calls made to the local authority Community Call help line
- Number of follow up calls made by local authorities

- Number of forum meetings held in each local authority to coordinate supports for Community Call
- Number of calls under each of the following categories:
 - o Meal service calls (provision of hot meals via local meal on wheel services)
 - o Medical and health service calls (a wide range of medical and health supports such as transport to medical appointments, or collection of prescriptions)
 - o Social isolation service calls (those experiencing difficulty with low levels of social interactions or cocooning)
 - o Collection and delivery service calls (help with shopping for food, fuel, and other essential household items)
 - o Other calls

The Keep Well Campaign was comprised of three main elements:

- Keeping Active,
- Switching Off, Being Creative, and Minding Your Mood (switching off),
- Staying Connected.

Data for the Keep Well Campaign was collected from January 2021 when the campaign commenced and ended in June 2021. This data was recorded weekly. Within each of the three main elements of the campaign the following was recorded:

- The number of events/activities
- The number of individuals engaging in events/activities
- The number of groups/partner organisations involved in events/activities

All of the data was checked to ensure there were no anomalies or errors in the data. Any anomalies or potential errors were checked with local authority staff who had initially provided the data, and the necessary corrections were made to the datasets for both the Keep Well and Community Call Initiatives.

Weekly data was reformatted to ensure that all data ran on consistent days of the week. This was necessary as different datasets across Community Call and Keep Well were initially not recorded in consistent week formats. Reformatting to consistent weeks allowed for comparison between data sets over time.

Digital Library Services

For much of the pandemic period, in-person library services remained closed due to social distancing requirements. During this time, local authority libraries continued to offer digital services, which became increasingly important and popular while the public was asked to restrict their movements. A range of digital library services were tracked including:

- Online newspapers
- Online courses
- Books and eAudiobooks
- eMagazine

Data was provided directly to the LGMA by each of the above digital library service providers. Like the Keep Well data, weekly data needed to be reformatted to ensure that all data ran on consistent days of the week to allow for comparison between data sets over time.

Financial Supports to Businesses

Financial data was provided to the LGMA from the DHLGH. The figures were based on returns submitted by local authorities. This data required very little manipulation, compared to other data in this report. It was all given as annual totals so there were no adjustments to be made to weekly totals.

Community Call

Background

The Community Call Initiative was set up to coordinate local community assistance where needed from the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdowns. The initiative established local authority helplines and brought together key stakeholder organisations in a Community Forum. The helplines connected members of the community to the services which they needed during the pandemic. The forums allowed for coordination of community pandemic responses between state organisations, local community groups, volunteer organisations and local authorities.



The Community Call COVID-19 hub was established by DHLGH to collect data from local authorities relating to the Community Call Initiative. This data collection began in March 2020 and ended in September 2021.

Community Call phone calls were categorised into the following topic areas:

- Meal service calls (provision of hot meals via local meals on wheels services)
- Medical and health service calls (a wide range of medical and health supports such as transport to medical appointments, or collection of prescriptions)

- Social isolation service calls (those experiencing difficulty with low levels of social interactions or cocooning)
- Collection and delivery service calls (help with shopping for food, fuel, and other essential household items)
- General requests (miscellaneous requests that fell outside the above four areas)

Findings

From March 2020 to September 2021 there were a total of 70,297 calls made to local authorities through the Community Call helplines.



70,297
calls to the
Community
Call helpline

31,932
local authority
follow up calls

The total number of weekly calls peaked at 6,518 in early April 2020. The initial spike in calls, followed by a reduction in the later months, is to be expected given the nature of the service. Many members of the public were connected to relevant organisations in the early months of the pandemic through Community Call, but once the initial contact was made, direct contact with the organisations was possible for service users. Additionally, the changing patterns in the demand for this service may be attributed to the lockdowns that were introduced and later scaled back in accordance with the rise and fall in COVID-19 case numbers.



As illustrated in Figure 1, aside from the initial spike in calls, which exceeded 6,500 in the second week of service commencement, there are further (although smaller) peaks showing higher volumes of calls around the subsequent lockdowns, such as October 2020 where 546 calls were received in a week and the beginning of January 2021 when 699 calls were received in a week.

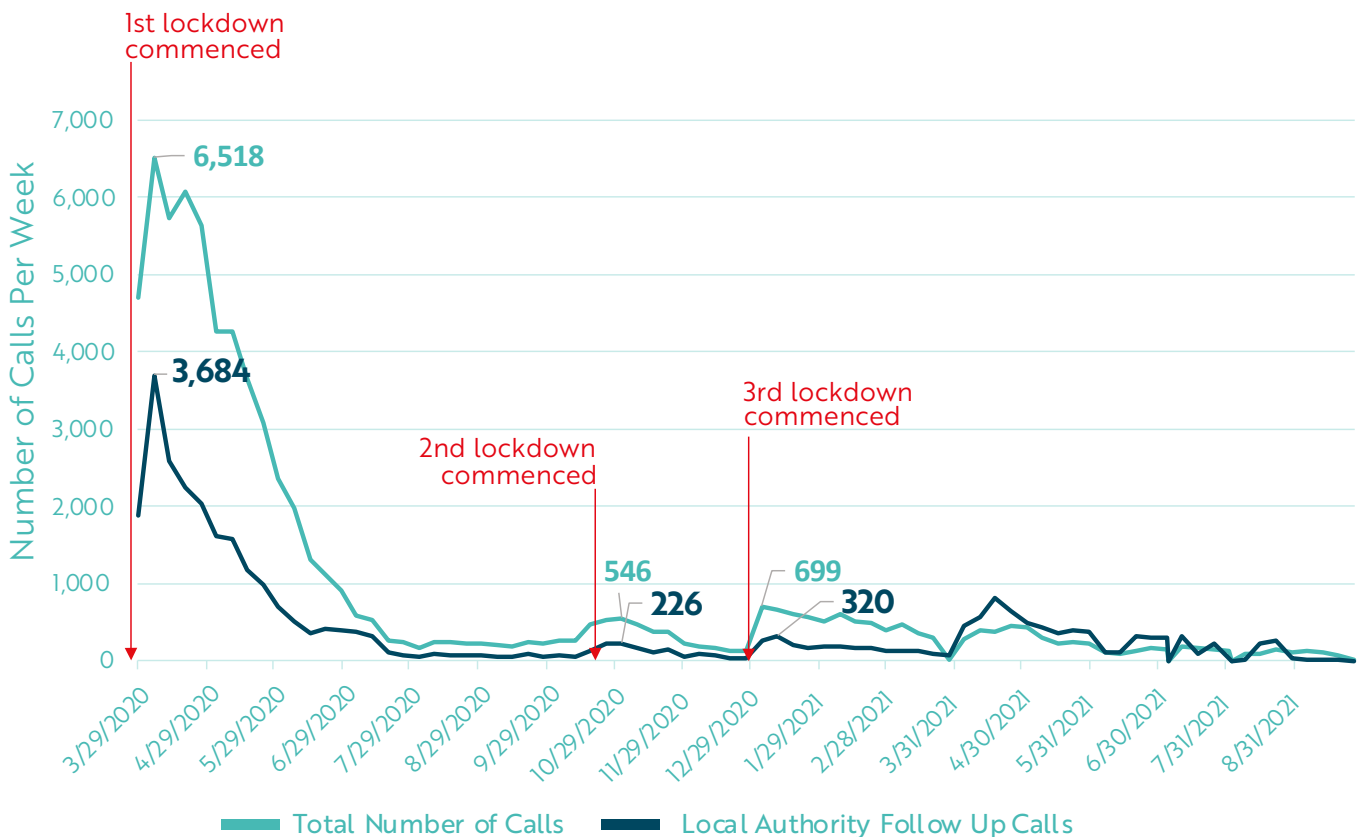


Figure 1 Total number of calls to local authorities and follow up calls made by local authorities by month²

² While the total number of calls was available for all weeks, there was data missing in relation to specific categories of calls for the weeks beginning March 28th, 2021, July 5th, 2021, and August 2nd, 2021. In addition, some calls were classified under more than one category as the caller had multiple needs. Therefore, the total number of calls categorised will not reconcile to total calls received.

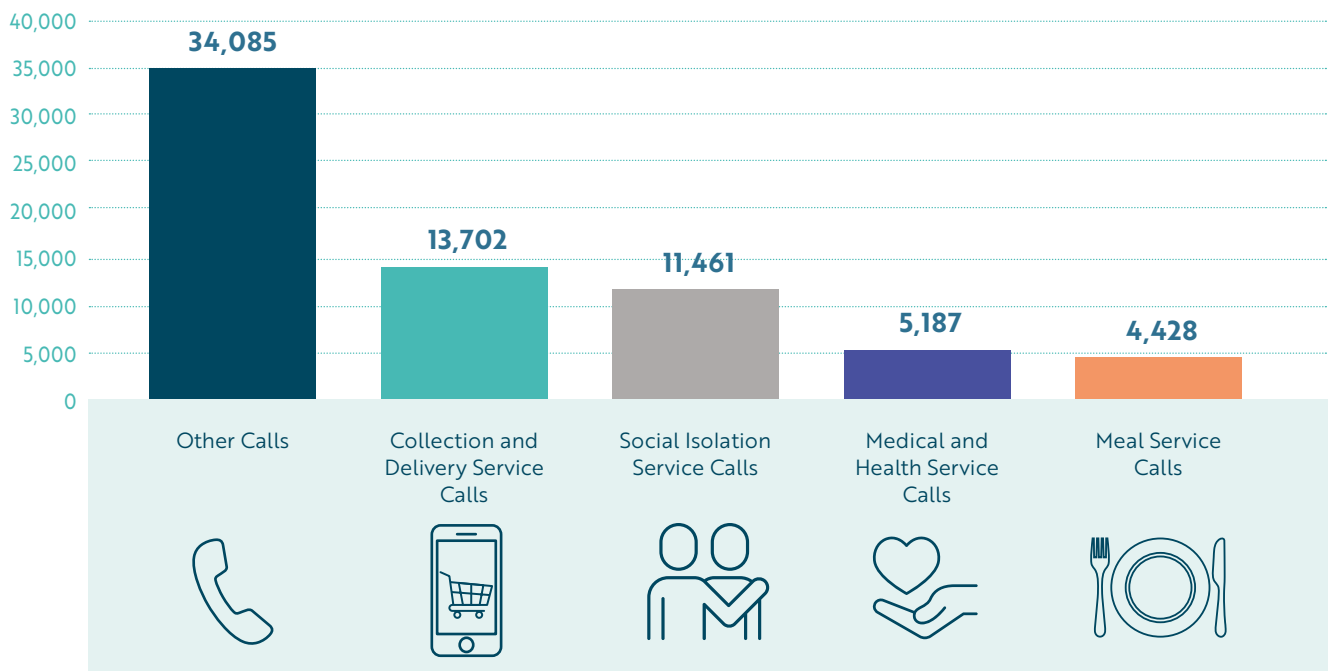


Figure 2 Total calls by category across 31 local authorities

When calls were received by the local authorities, they were categorised under the agreed headings, and details were submitted to the DHGLH weekly. As can be seen in Figure 2, apart from calls classified as ‘other’, the largest demand was for Collection and Delivery services with 13,702 calls classified under this heading. Social Isolation calls totalled 11,461 while there were 5,187 calls relating to support with Medical and Health Services and 4,428 relating to Meal Services between the end of March 2020 and September 2021.

When the phone call data is broken down by category of call, and considered across the timeline of the pandemic, as illustrated in Figures 4 to 8, we can see that the pattern of peaks is consistent across all categories of calls. Overall, the first lockdown resulted in the highest utilisation of the Community Call phone line, regardless of the type of service required. When lockdown 2 and 3 commenced, supports were already in place for the vulnerable service users who had contacted the local authorities during

lockdown 1, so a small number of additional users or users whose needs had changed, engaged with the Community Call helpline during these subsequent lockdowns.

As can be seen in Figures 4 and 8, Collection and Delivery calls and Other Request calls had the highest peak weekly calls at 2,127 and 2,705 calls respectively in the second week of the service operating. Figure 5 shows Social Isolation calls peaked at 1,359 approximately one month into the first lockdown. As demonstrated in Figures 6 and 7 Meal Service Calls and Medical and Health services called peaked at 450 and 382 respectively.

The initial high peak in the use of the phonenumber, followed by a relatively steep drop in calls, indicates that local authorities were able to rapidly and successfully direct service users to the right supports during their initial contact, thus reducing the need for repeat calls.

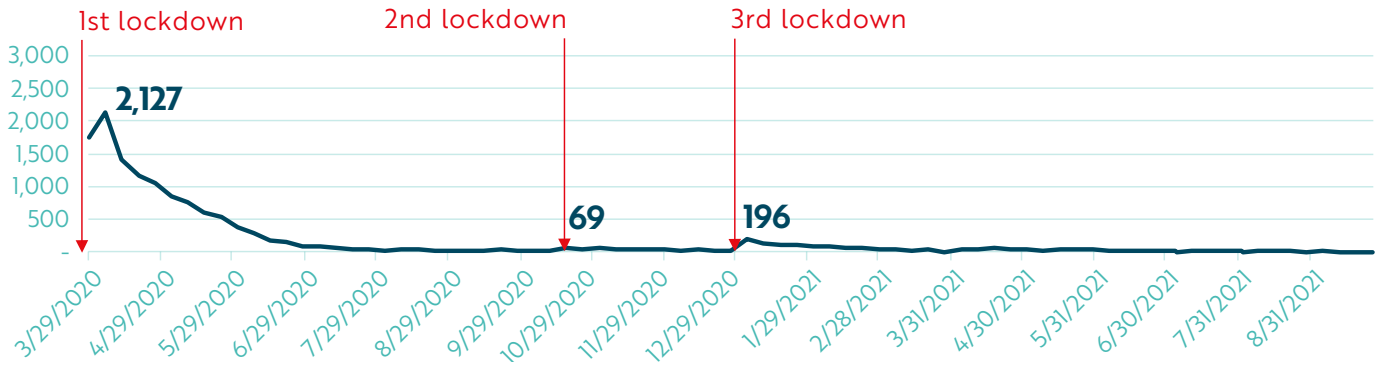


Figure 3 Collection and Delivery Service Calls across 31 local authorities

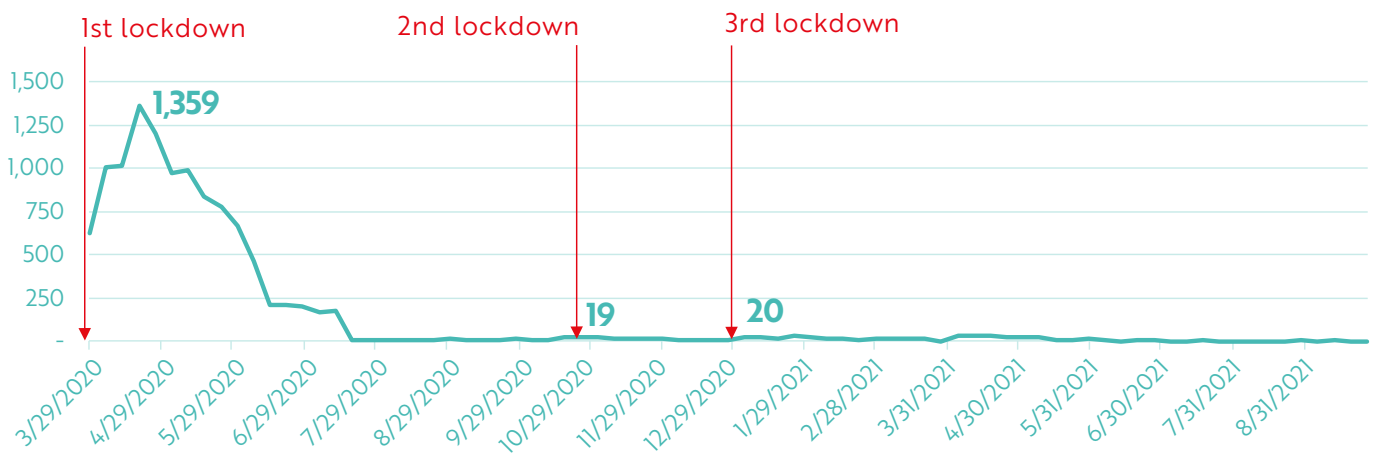


Figure 4 Social Isolation Service Calls across 31 local authorities

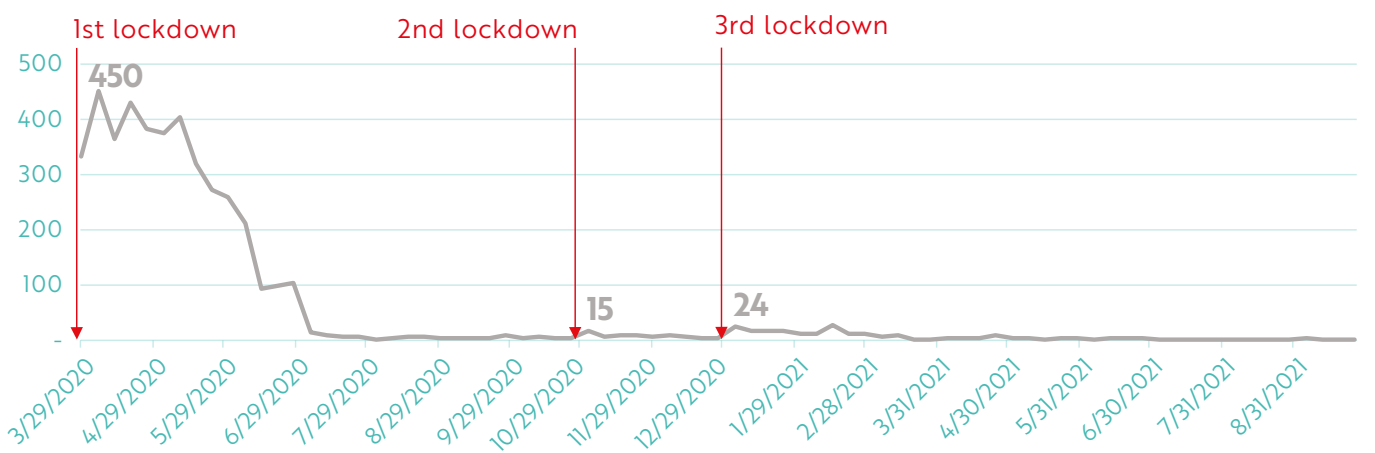


Figure 5 Meal Service Calls across 31 local authorities

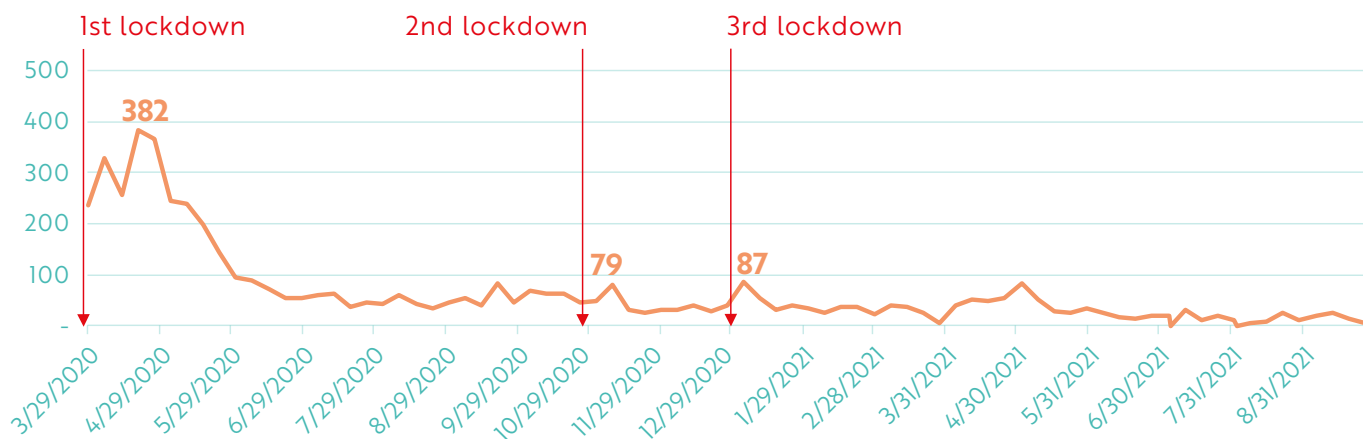


Figure 6 Medical and Health Service Calls across 31 local authorities

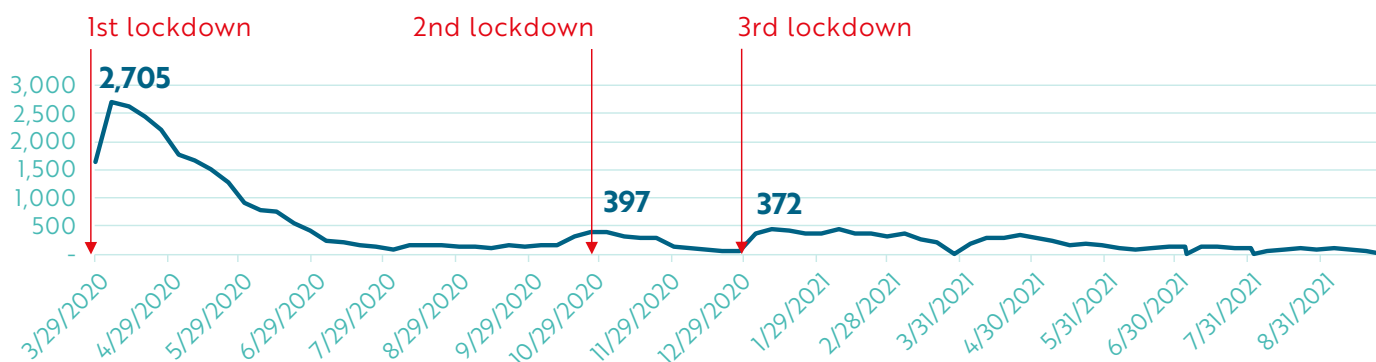


Figure 7 Other Request Calls across 31 local authorities

Local Authority Activity

Given the unique ways in which each local authority³ was able to adapt and engage with their local partners, there is a lot of variation in the number of calls coming through the Community Call phone lines. While every local authority established a dedicated 'Community Call' phone service, in some areas, community partners or local authority staff were already utilising existing systems to engage with the community, which reduced their reliance on the 'Community Call' phone service.

As can be seen in Figure 9, there was a lot of activity across all local authorities, but there was also a lot of variation in volume of activity. While utilisation of existing local authority support infrastructure can explain some of this, there are other variables that are difficult to quantify such as access to alternative services or proximity to family and friends. As is the case with many local authority services, each Community Call service adapted to meet the needs of their local community.

³ Figures for Limerick City and County may be different to those previously published due to a data entry error that was corrected.

70,297
Calls made
to local
authorities

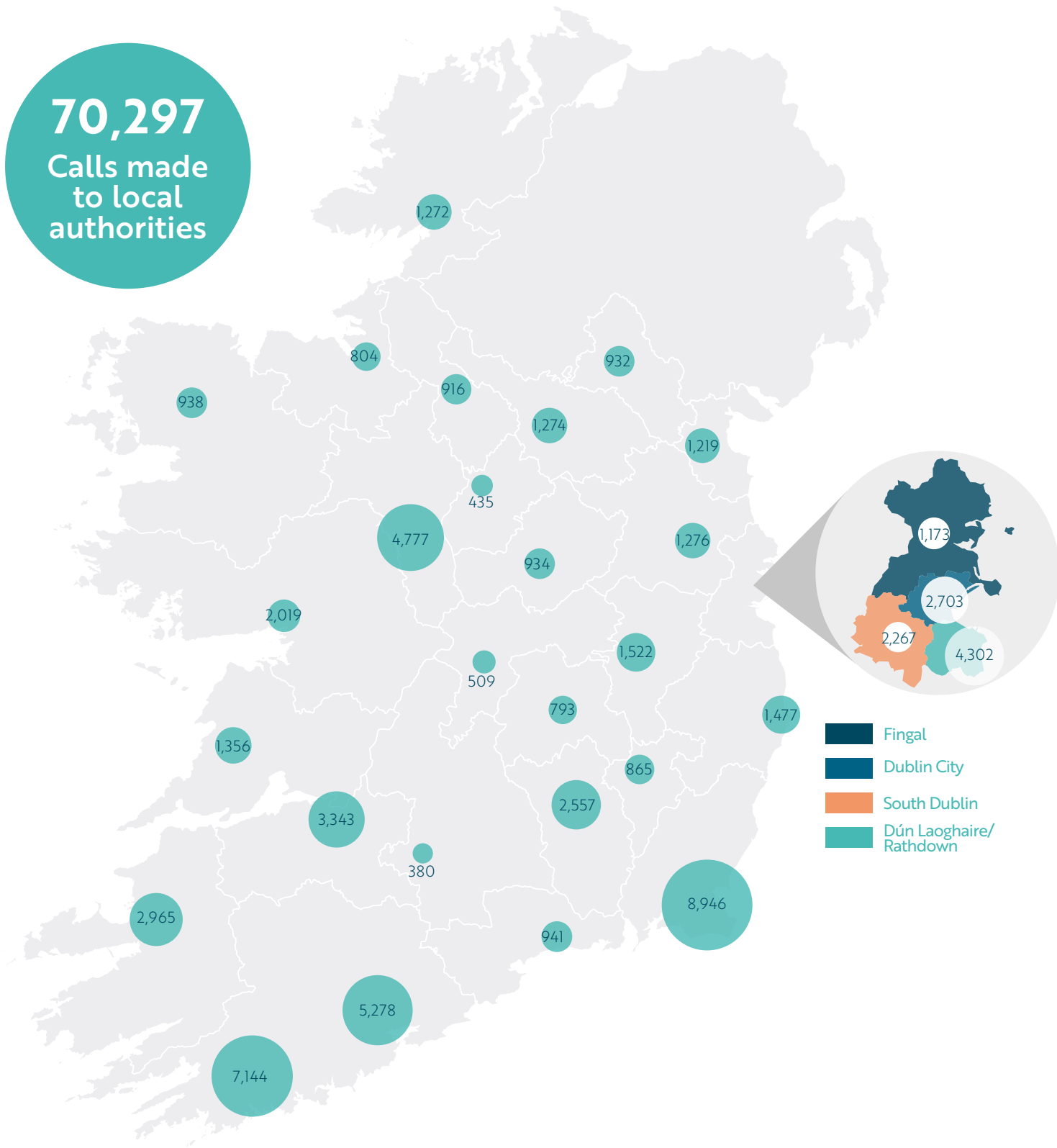


Figure 8 Total number of calls made to local authorities by local authority

In addition, some local authorities took on a lead role in follow up calls, while others had agreed that partner organisations or voluntary groups would undertake this roll. Once again, this resulted in variances in the number of follow-up calls being made between local authorities. Added to this is the variation in population size and age profile between local authorities, which impacted on the number of citizens needing support. A total of 31,932 follow up calls were made across all local authorities.

Community Call Forum Meetings

Each local authority established a Community Call Forum that had members drawn from relevant community and voluntary organisations as well as statutory agencies. Meeting of these forums took place in every local authority in the State to

agree work processes and monitor progress. In total, 884 meetings were held between March 2020 and August 2021, with the largest volumes taking place during the set-up phase at the beginning of the Covid-19 restrictions. However, as illustrated in Figure 10, the number of meetings also peaked after the start of lockdown 2 and 3.

The number of meetings held varied from local authority to local authority as illustrated in Figure 11. This variance was influenced by a number of factors including existing support infrastructure, the number of stakeholders and the profile of service users and the complexity of their needs.

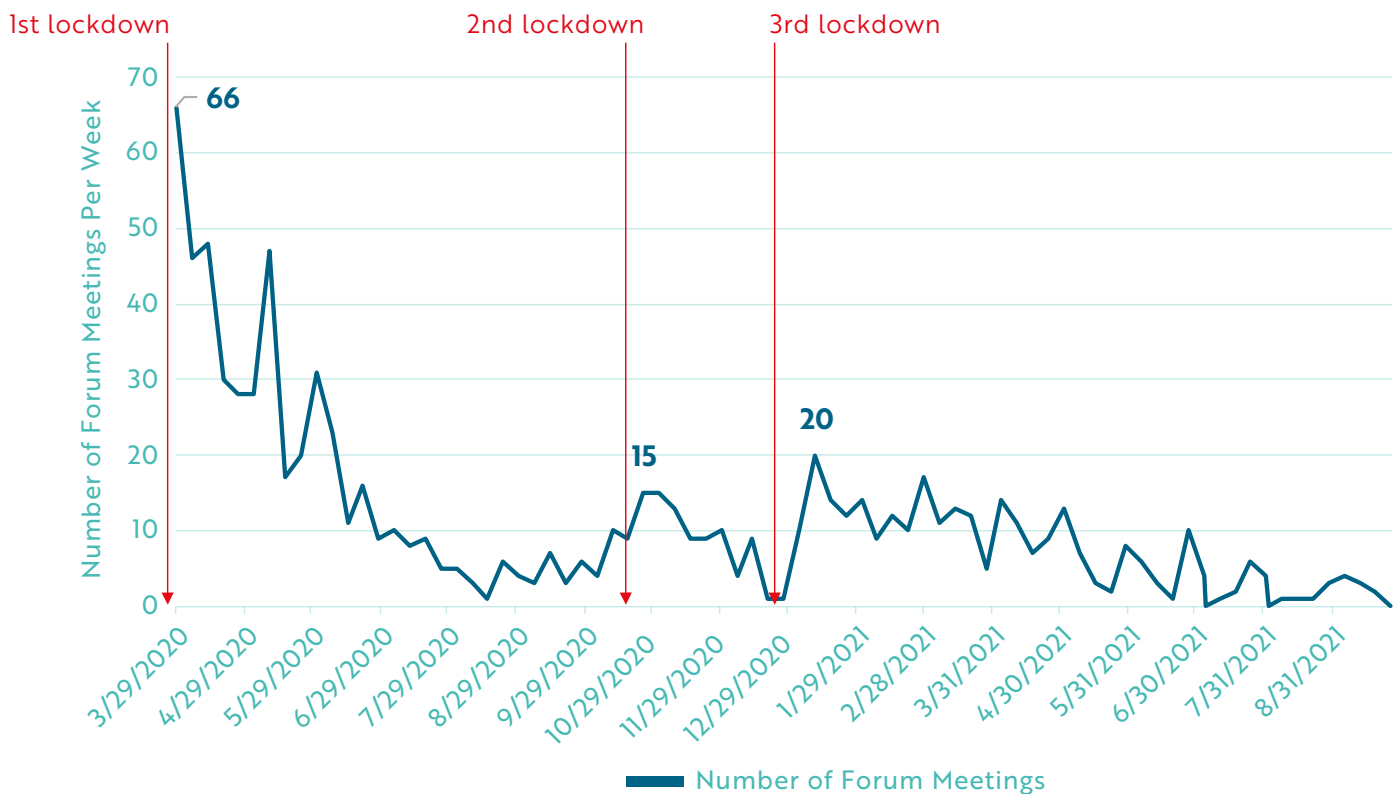


Figure 9 Total number of Forum Meetings across 31 local authorities, March 2020 to August 2021

884
Forum
Meetings

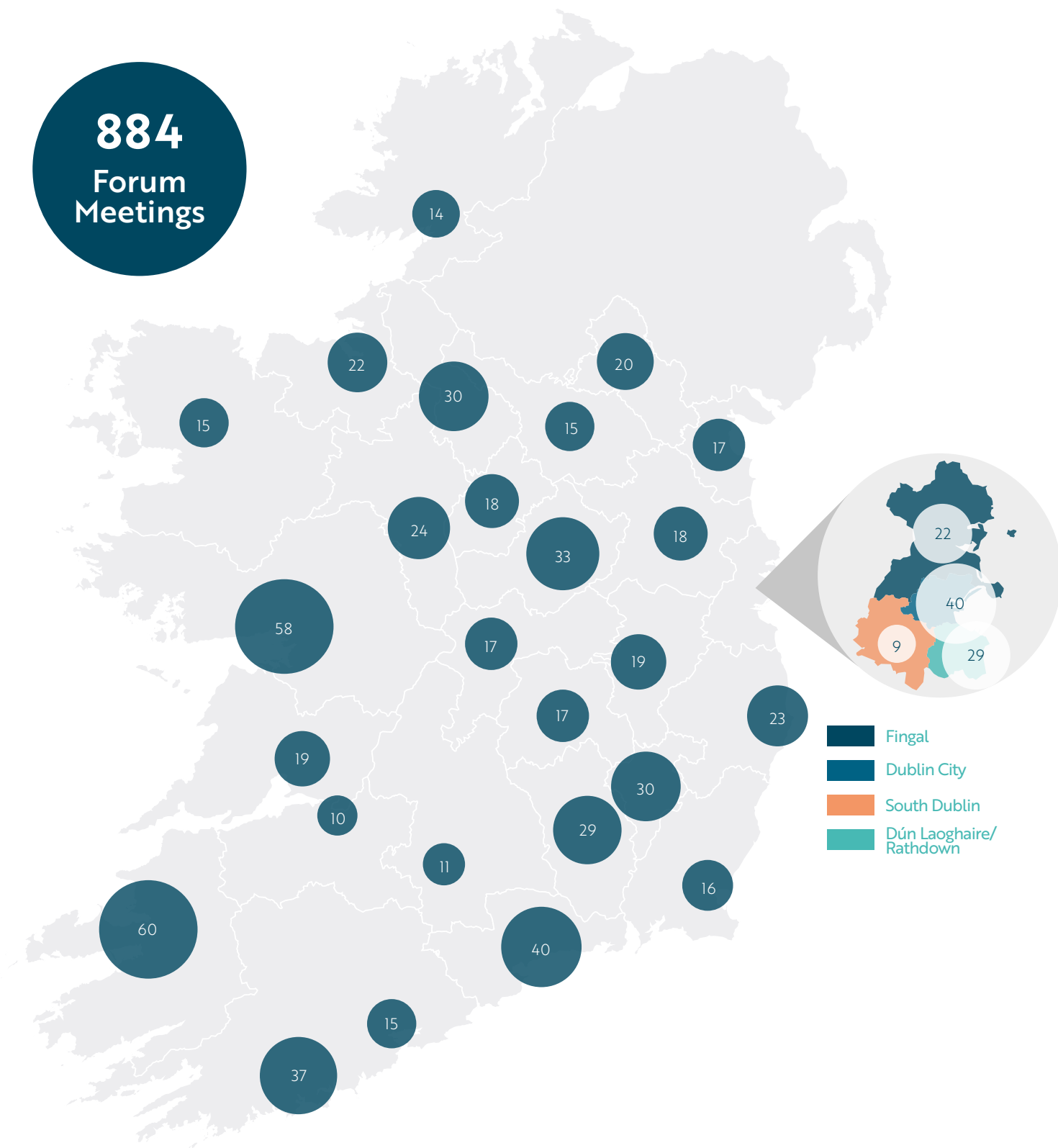


Figure 10 Total number of Forum Meetings by local authority

Keep Well

Background

Forming part of the overall local authority and governmental response to the COVID-19 Pandemic, the Keep Well Campaign ran for 26 weeks from January to June 2021. The Keep Well Campaign is comprised of three elements:

- Keeping Active
- Switching Off, Being Creative, and Minding Your Mood
- Staying Connected

Each of these elements aimed to support the physical and mental health and overall well-being of people in Ireland during the COVID-19 pandemic. Each initiative approached this goal differently. In the Keeping Active campaign, local authorities worked with sporting organisations across Ireland to develop and implement ways to support keeping active in their local communities.

The Switching Off campaign focused on relaxation, nature, creativity, and learning. Local authorities and partner organisations (such as Creative Ireland) worked together to provide and support switching off events/activities to individuals and communities.

Building on the Community Call response earlier in the year, the Staying Connected element was coordinated by the local authority and brought together the local authority, the volunteer groups, and other relevant stakeholder organisations. It focused on combating the social isolation many experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic through support helplines and befriending initiatives.

The data collection ran from the beginning of the Keep Well Campaign in January 2021 and ended in June 2021. This data was recorded weekly each Sunday. Within each campaign the following elements were recorded:

- The number of events/activities
- The number of individuals engaging in events/activities
- The number of groups/partner organisations involved in events/activities

Findings

Keeping Active

In total, there were 3,195 Keeping Active events across the State over the six-month period, and 278,729 people participated in these events. These events focused on sport and physical activities, with events such as 100km a month walk/run challenges, free outdoor exercise classes in parks and other outdoor areas, free online exercise and dance classes, supporting Operation Transformation activities, etc.



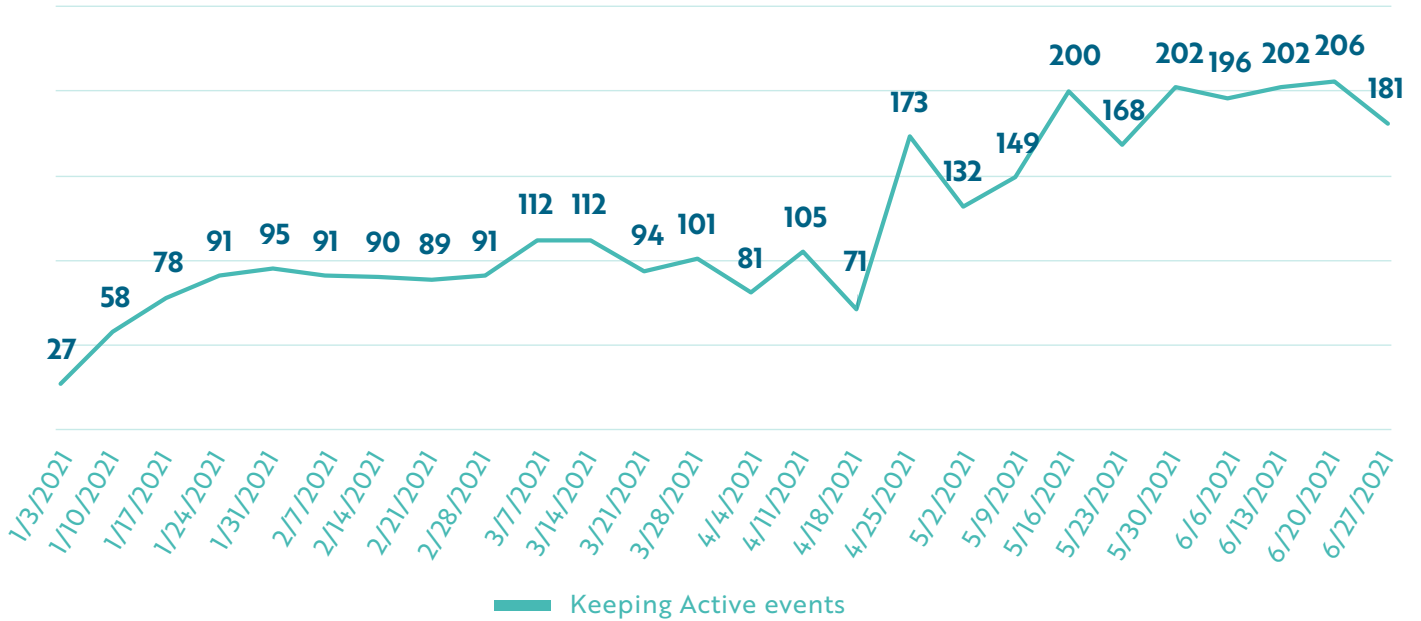
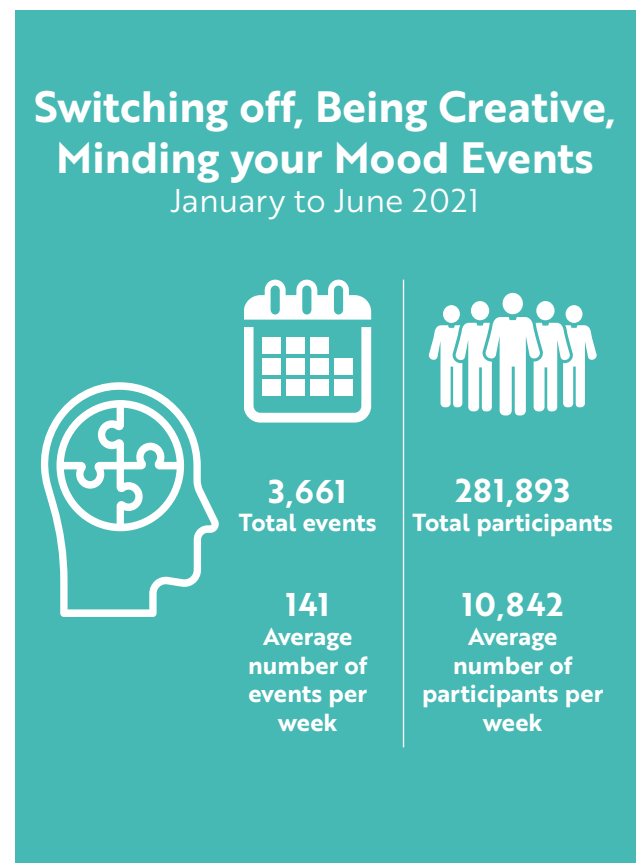


Figure 11 Number of Keeping Active events each week

As can be seen in Figure 12, the number of Keeping Active events steadily grew over the 6-month period. A total of 27 events took place during the first week of the campaign that commenced on January 3rd, 2021, while 181 events were held during the last week of the campaign in June 2021.

Switching Off, Being Creative, and Minding Your Mood

Switching off focused on taking time out from the pressures of work and the stress of the pandemic, isolation, or caring responsibilities. The local authority arts offices, libraries, and outdoor services were key drivers of a range of events including ‘Ireland Reads’ library activities, concerts, and arts events. In total, there were 3,661 Switching Off, Being Creative and Minding your Mood events across the State for the 26 weeks of the campaign, and 281,893 people were recorded as taking part in these events.



As can be seen in Figure 13, the total number of weekly events peaked at the end of January, where 492 events took place, and

again at the end of May 2021 where 438 events took place in the final week of that month.

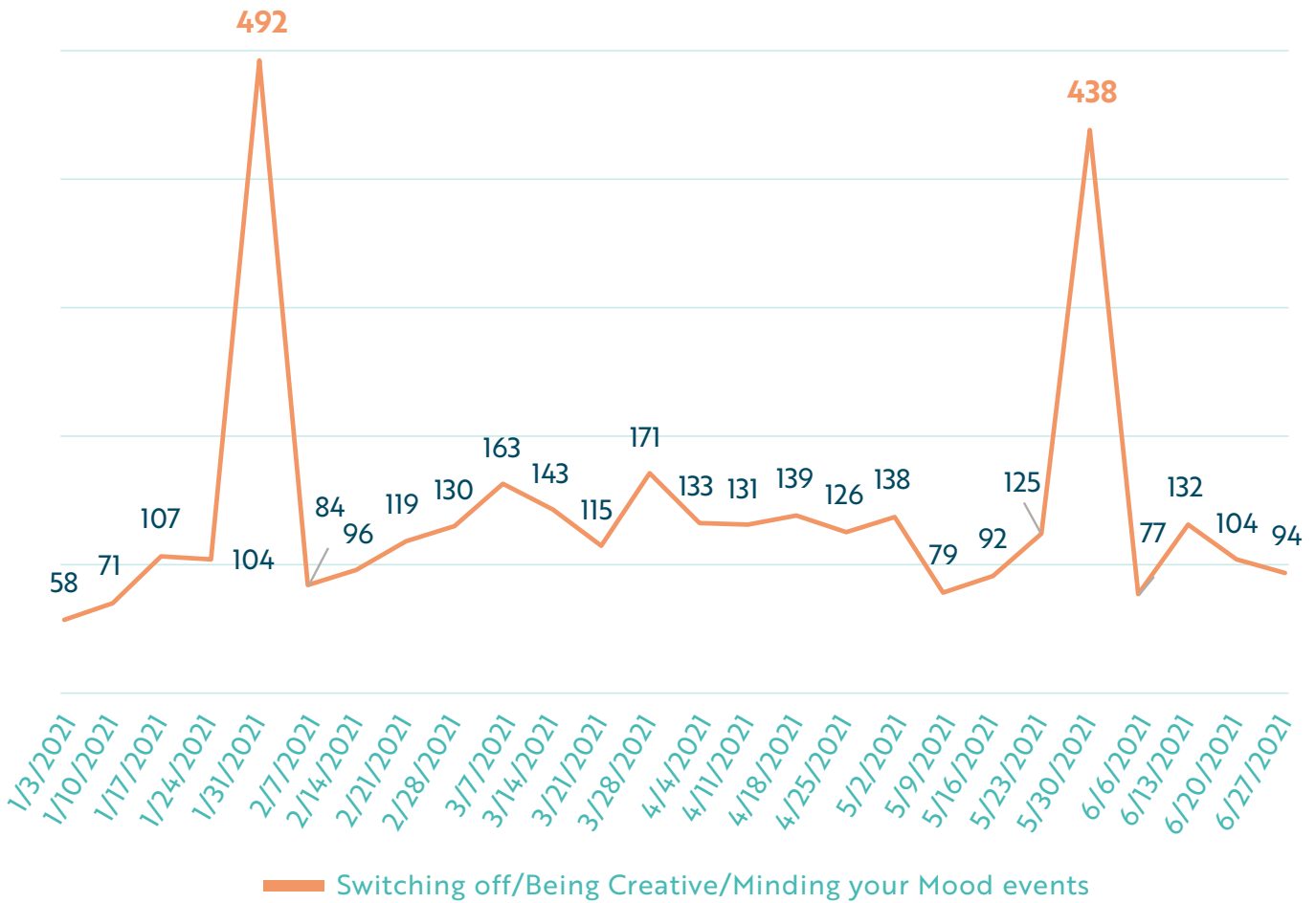


Figure 12 Number of Switching Off, Being Creative, and Minding Your Mood events each week

Staying Connected

Events under this theme included promotion campaigns to reach out to neighbours and similar befriending services. In total, there were 3,459 Staying Connected events across the 26 weeks of the campaign.

The number of Staying Connected events was relatively stable for the first three months of the campaign. As seen in Figure 14, the number of Staying Connected events had an initial peak at 515 events during the week commencing April 4th, 2021. This was followed by a second peak during the week commencing July 13th, 2021, when 797 events took place.

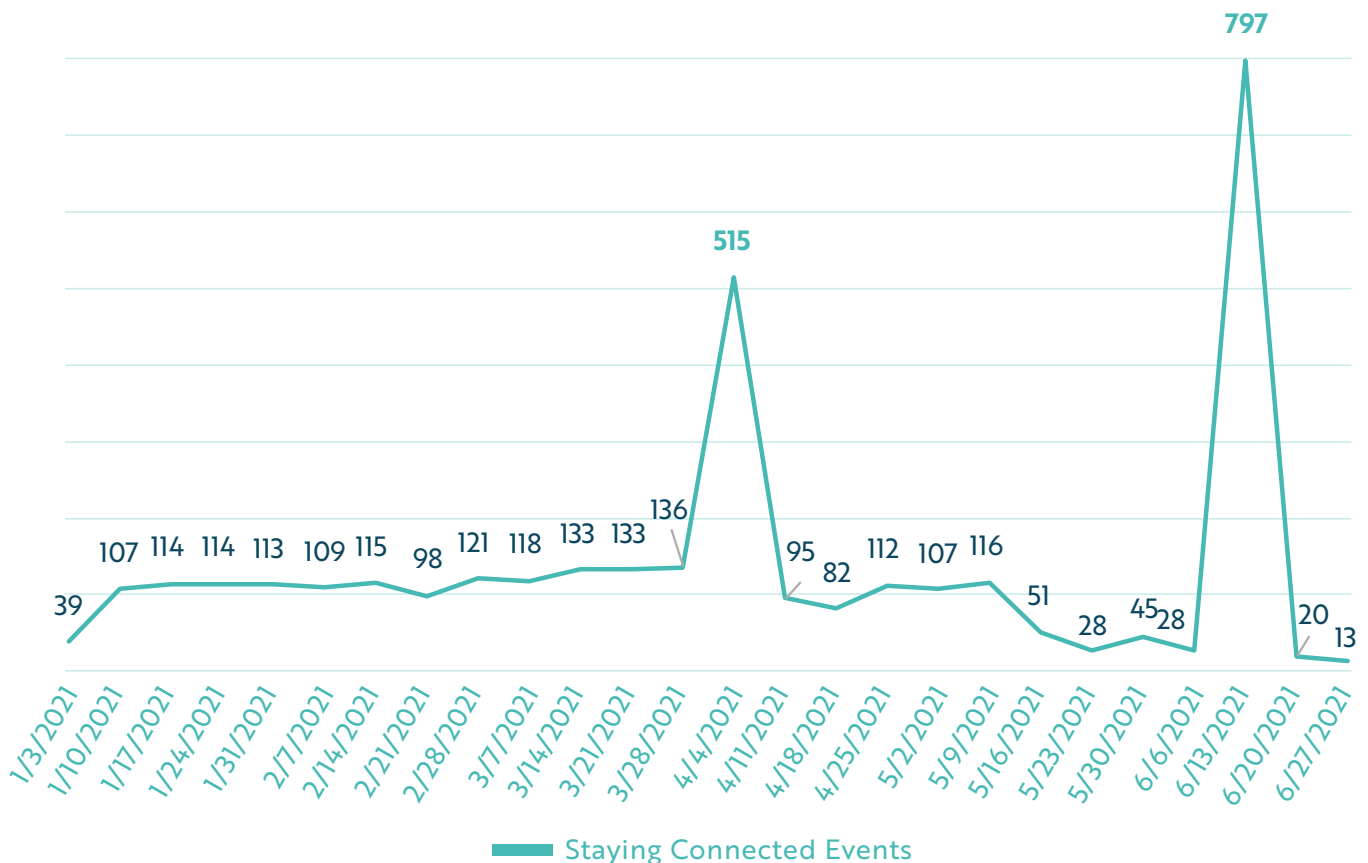
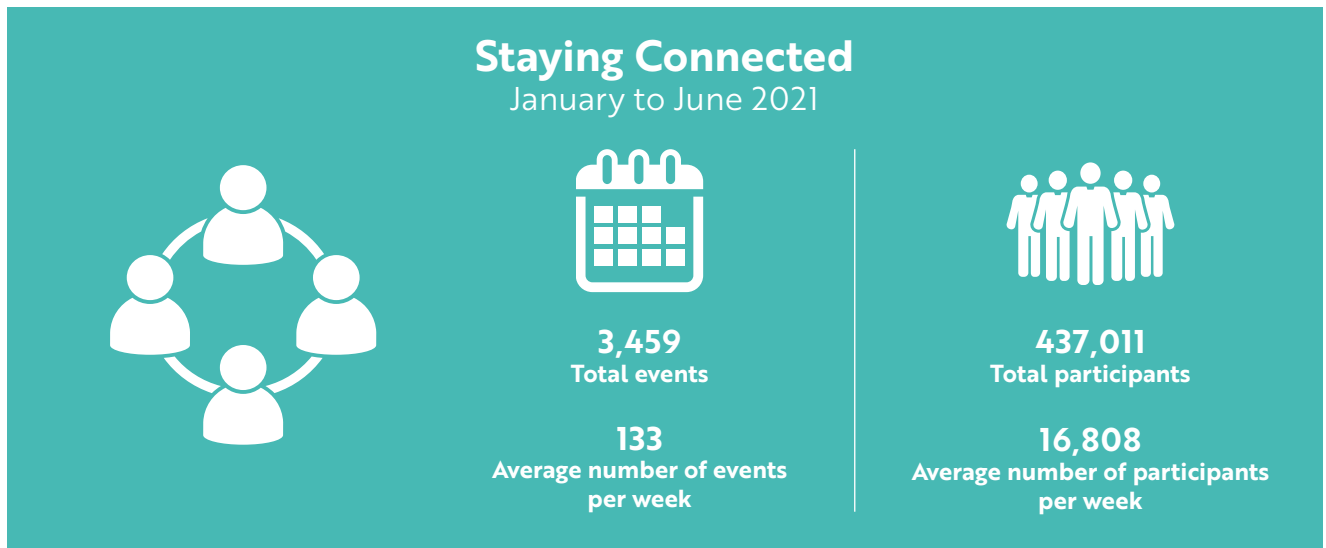


Figure 13 Number of Staying Connected events each week

Total Keep Well Events

Across the five elements of the Keep Well campaign, there were 10,315 events held and 997,633 people recorded as participating in these events, as demonstrated in Figure 15.

The number and scale of these events varied widely, and once again, this variance is due to the methods of engagement, recording data, and local need.

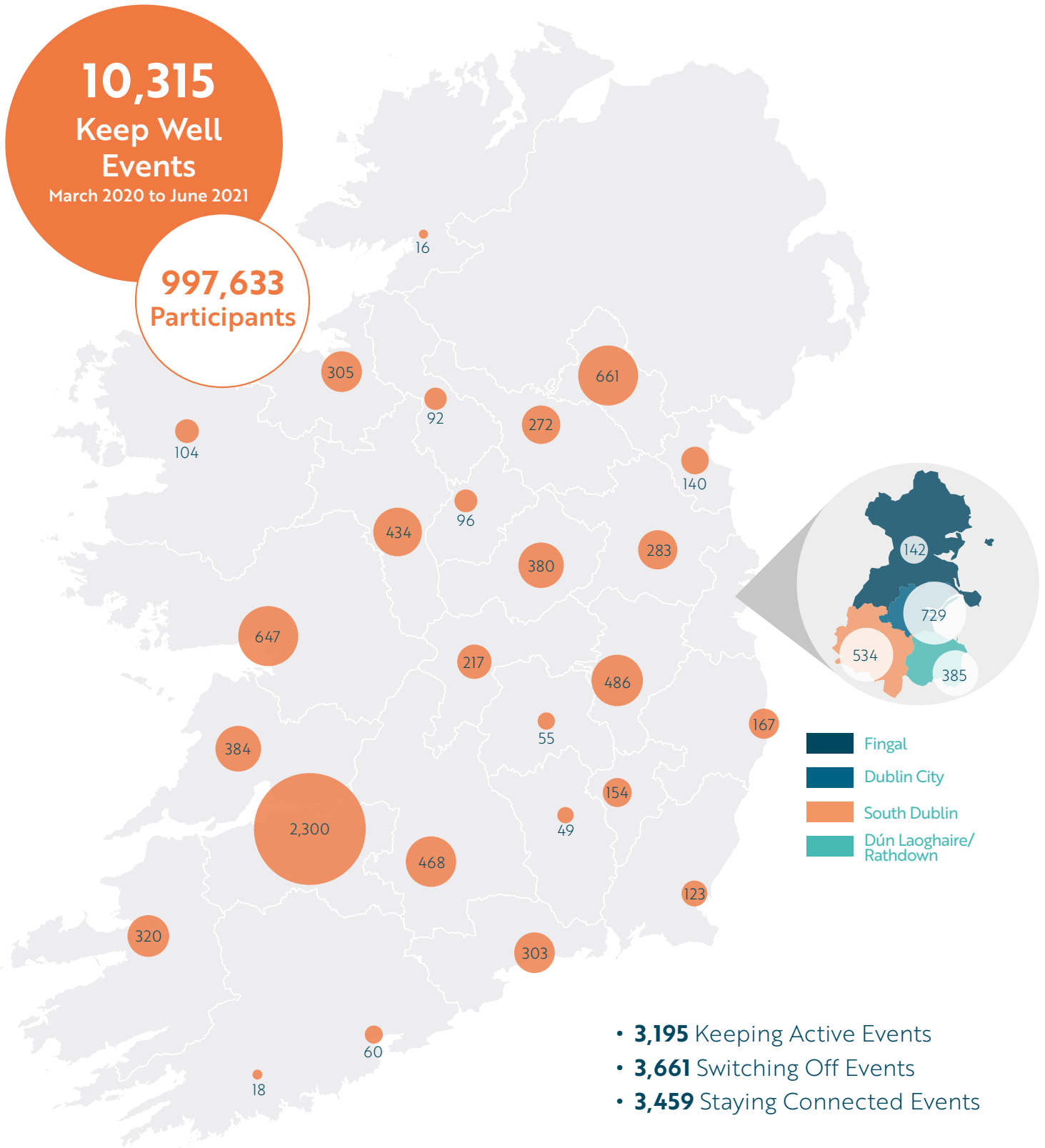


Figure 14 Number of Keep Well events by local authority

Awareness Campaign

The Keep Well campaign also included an awareness campaign, which both promoted events and activities offered and Keep Well topics. Awareness campaign metrics

over the January to June 2021 period were collected. Local authorities reported in excess of 30,000 media posts resulting in approximately thirty million impressions.



Digital Library Services

Background

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Irish libraries were already offering digital versions of key services. Among the major digital services available to the public were Online Newspapers, Online Courses, eBooks and eAudiobooks, and eMagazines.



Online Newspapers



Online Courses



eBooks & eAudiobooks



eMagazines

During the COVID-19 lockdowns, digital services became increasingly important as public access to public library buildings was very restricted. This is reflected in the rising popularity of digital services, especially during the initial lockdowns.

Findings

With the initial implementation of COVID-19 restrictions on March 12th, 2020, followed by full lockdown measures introduced on March 29th, 2020, each of the online library services saw major uptakes in engagement.



Online Newspapers

Press Reader is an online newsstand application with thousands of newspapers and magazines, including both Irish and international publications, which users can access through signing with their local library service.

Data available details how many people used the news reader each week, how many times each reader started a session to read the paper (total number of sessions), and how many papers were opened.

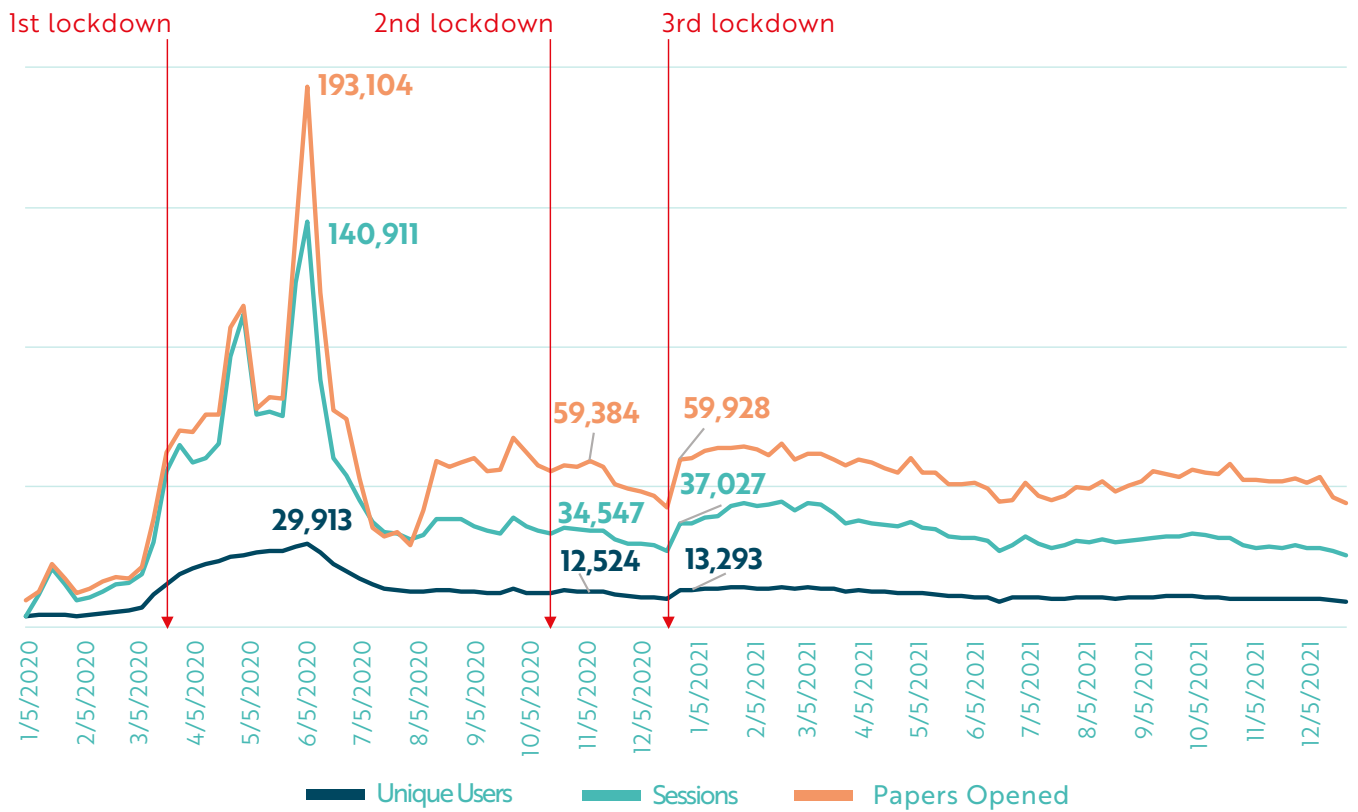


Figure 15 Number of unique users, sessions, and papers opened each week for 2020 and 2021

As can be seen in Figure 16, following the introduction of COVID-19 restrictions on March 12th, 2020, engagement with the online newspapers grew on all metrics and remained high during the following months. During the first week in June 2020, the highest figures were recorded. There were 193,104 papers opened, during 140,911 sessions by 29,913 unique users.

The number of newspaper articles read jumped dramatically as illustrated in Figure 17, with 5,918,121 articles being read during the first week in June 2020.

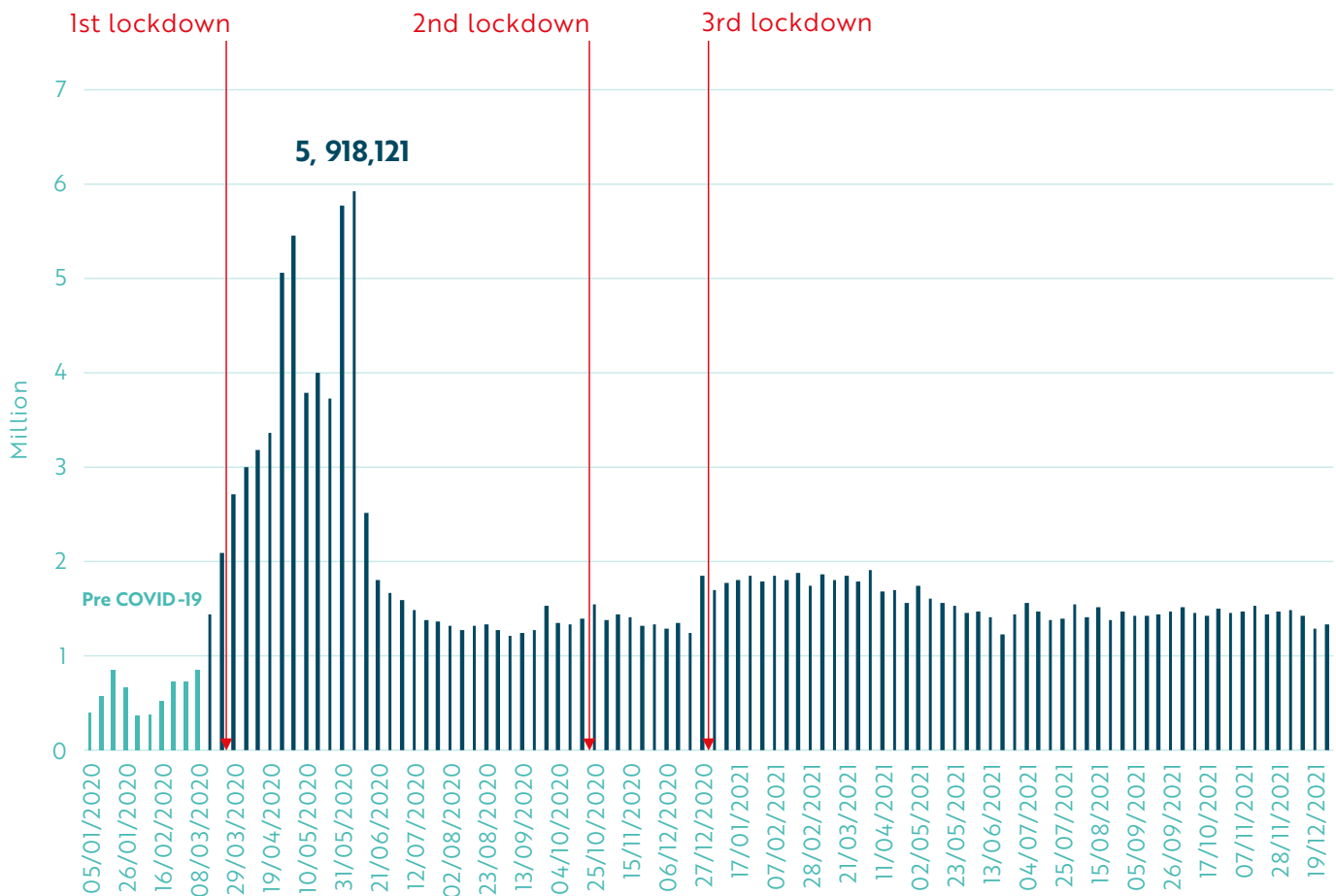


Figure 16 Average number of newspaper articles opened per week

Table 5 Average number of newspaper articles opened per week; pre Covid-19 and during Covid-19

| | | Average No. of Online Articles Opened |
|--------------------------|---|--|
| Pre COVID-19 2020 | In the first nine weeks of 2020, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, an average of 580,488 online articles were opened. | 580,488 |
| 1st Lockdown 2020 | From the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 until the end of June 2020 (17 weeks), the average number of articles opened each week grew to 3,331,342 . This represented a 573% increase in weekly articles viewed compared to the previous two months. | 3,331,342 |
| Remainder of 2020 | From July 2020 until the introduction of restrictions at the end of 2020 (25 weeks), the number of articles opened levelled off to an average of 1,361,014 per week , a 234% increase from the months prior to the introduction of restrictions. | 1,361,014 |
| 2021 | From the beginning of the new lockdown measures introduced after Christmas 2020 until June of 2021 (27 weeks), the Press Reader was used to view an average of 1,690,111 articles per week . | 1,690,111 |
| | For the remainder of 2021, July to December (26 weeks), the average number of articles viewed on Press Reader fell slightly to an average of 1,451,059 articles per week . The Press Reader thus retained a substantial number of users who were introduced to it during the pandemic. | 1,451,059 |



Online Courses

Free online courses accessed through local library barcodes online, 'Universal Class.'

Universal Class, used for online courses, followed a trend of high usage coinciding with the introduction of COVID-19 restrictions in March 2020. The number of lessons viewed peaked at 24,224 during the last week of April 2020 while the number of student submissions peaked at 15,129, the number of videos watched peaked at 14,866 and the number of login sessions peaked at 14,071.

As with other services, there was a decline in engagement numbers as the lockdowns were lifted. For instance, the number of lessons viewed drops to 4,085 during the first week in August 2020, however, engagement peaked again subsequent to the October 2020 lockdown and lessons viewed during the first week in November 2020 increased to 10,913. Similarly, following the lockdown in December 2020, lessons viewed jumped to 13,210 a week by mid-January 2021, as illustrated in Figure 19.

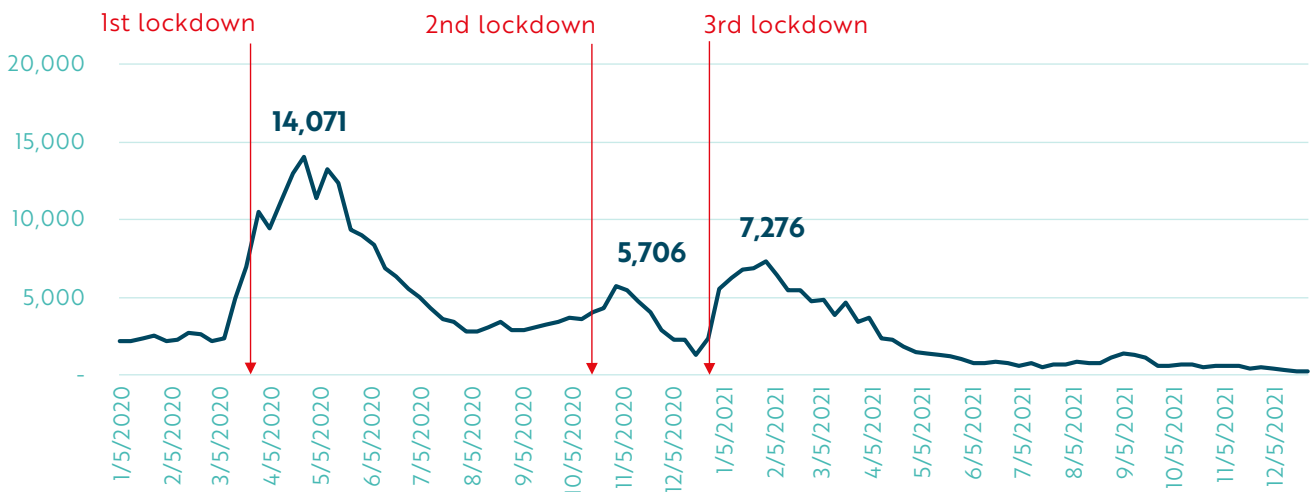


Figure 17 Online Courses login session per week for 2020 and 2021

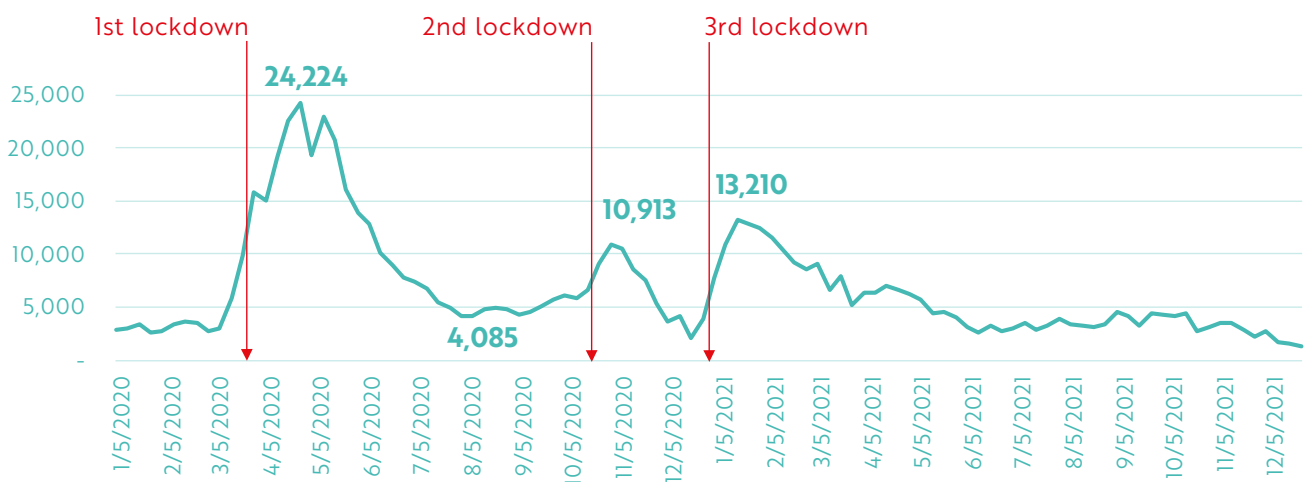


Figure 18 Online Courses lessons viewed per week for 2020 and 2021

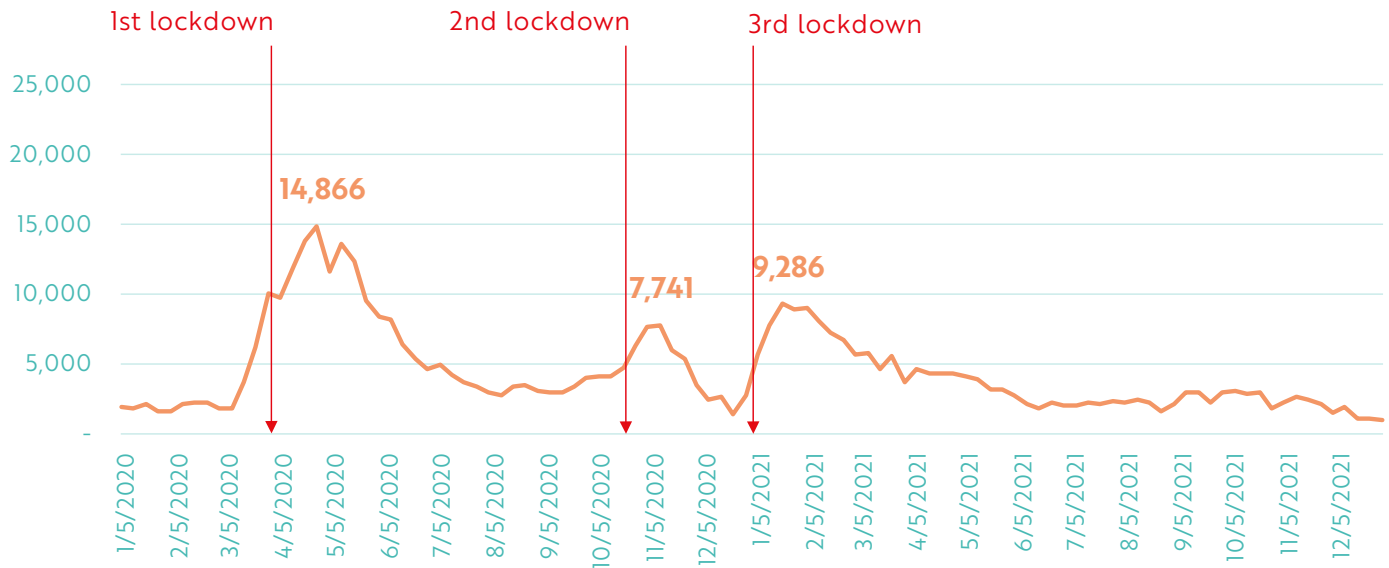


Figure 19 Online Courses videos watched per week for 2020 and 2021

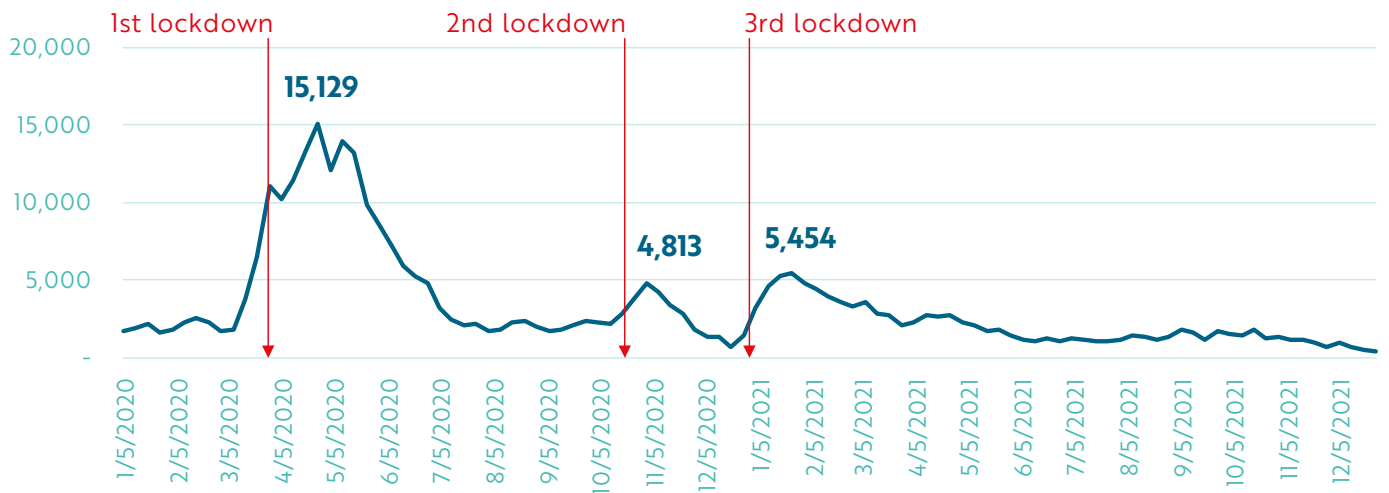


Figure 20 Online Courses student submissions per week for 2020 and 2021

Table 6 Average number of lessons viewed per week; pre COVID-19 and during COVID-19

| | | Average No. of Lessons Viewed per week |
|--------------------------|---|--|
| Pre COVID-19 | In the first nine weeks of 2020, prior to the pandemic, an average of 3,089 lessons were viewed per week. | 3,089 |
| 1st Lockdown | From the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 until the end of June 2020 (17 weeks), this increased to an average of 14,594 lessons viewed per week – an almost five-fold increase in usage. | 14,594 |
| Remainder of 2020 | From July 2020 until the reintroduction of restrictions at the end of 2020 (25 weeks), the number of lessons viewed each week levelled off to an average of 5,880 lessons per week . | 5,880 |
| 2021 | From the beginning of the new lockdown measures introduced after Christmas 2020 until July of 2021 (27 weeks), the average number of lessons viewed per week rose to 7,133. | 7,133 |
| | For the remainder of 2021, July to December (26 weeks), the average number of lessons viewed fell to an average of 3,227 lessons per week. | 3,227 |



eBooks and eAudiobooks

Users can borrow eBooks and eAudiobooks from their library's services catalogue through an app called 'Borrow Box.'

The trends regarding eBook and eAudiobook loans followed a similar pattern to the online newspapers and courses. Both saw periods of growth coinciding with the introduction of restrictions in March

2020 and January 2021. However, as can be seen in Figure 22, the periods of decline coinciding with the ease of restrictions, were more modest compared to the trends for online newspapers and courses. After the first lockdown in March 2020, eBook and eAudio weekly loans had both increased by approximately 4,000 per week to 20,615 and 18,896 respectively by April 26th, 2020. Usage remained relatively stable until just before the third lockdown in January 2021 when numbers dropped over Christmas but peaked to their highest levels by February 21st, 2021, with weekly loans of eBooks reaching 29,011 and eAudio 24,178.

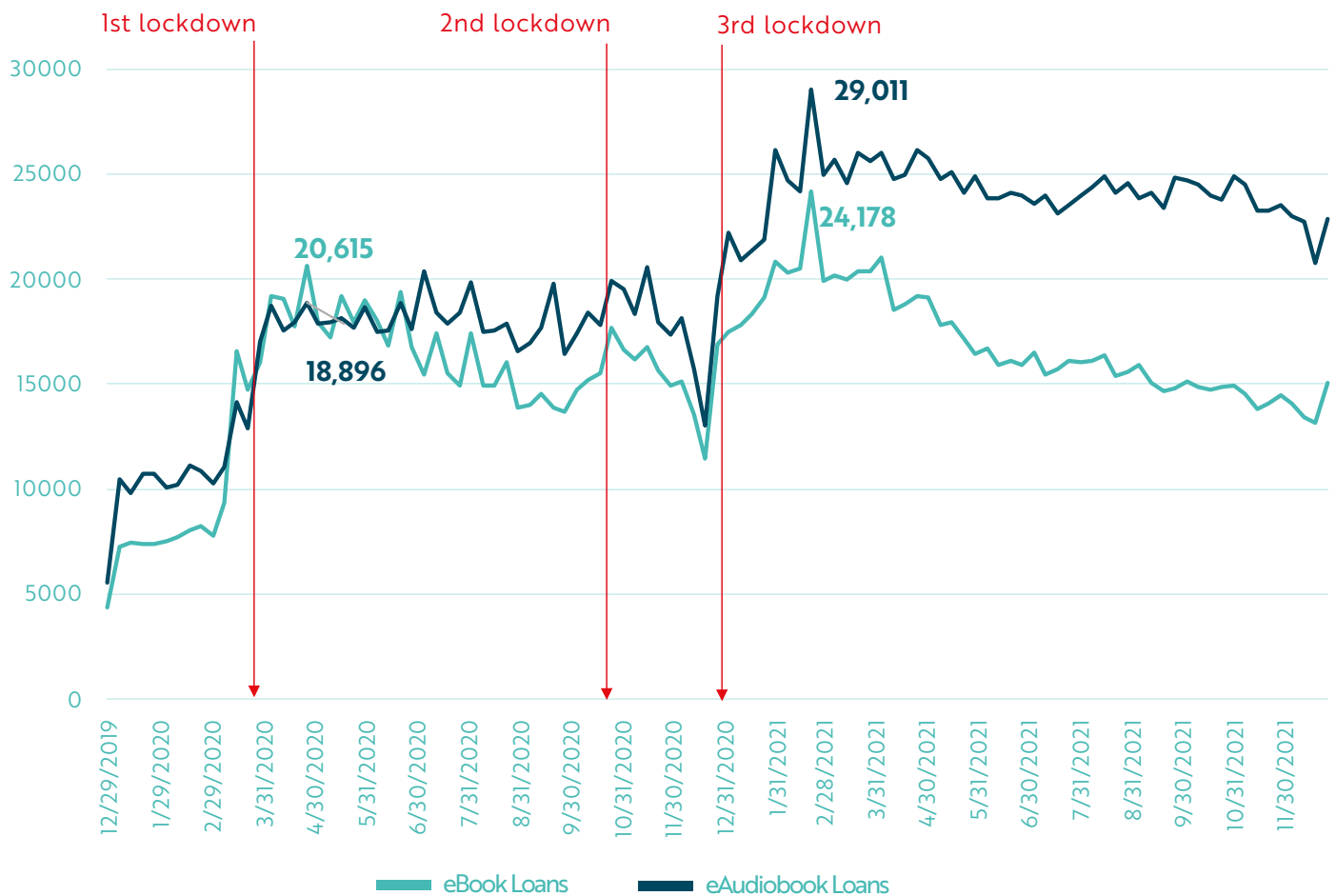


Figure 21 Weekly eBook and eAudiobook loans for 2020 and 2021

Table 7 Average number of eBook and eAudiobook loans per week; pre Covid-19 and during Covid-19

| | | Average No. of Loans per week | |
|--------------------------|--|-------------------------------|---------------|
| | | eBooks | eAudiobooks |
| Pre COVID-19 | In the first nine weeks of 2020, prior to the pandemic, an average 7,651 eBooks and 10,465 eAudiobooks were loaned per week. | 7,651 | 10,465 |
| 1st Lockdown | From the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 until the end of June 2020 (17 weeks), eBooks and eAudiobooks averaged 17,393 and 17,072 loans per week respectively, representing substantial increases of 227% and 163% respectively from before the pandemic began. | 17,393 | 17,071 |
| Remainder of 2020 | From July 2020 until the reintroduction of restrictions at the end of 2020 (25 weeks), an average of 15,553 eBooks and 17,972 eAudiobooks were loaned per week. From the beginning of the new lockdown measures introduced after Christmas 2020 until the end of 2021 (53 weeks), an average of 16,939 eBooks and 24,182 eAudiobooks were loaned each week. | 15,553 | 17,972 |
| 2021 | The remarkably high levels of users retained perhaps reflects that reading eBooks and listening to eAudiobooks were activities that users were likely to maintain once they started. | 16,939 | 24,182 |





eMagazines

eMagazines could be accessed through an app called 'RB Digital.' In May 2021, the eMagazine service transitioned to the 'Libby' app.

Unlike, the other digital library services, data for eMagazine checkouts is only available for 2021. As seen in Figure 23, checkouts were relatively stable throughout the year, with the peak coming the week of May 2nd, 2021, during which 11,323 eMagazines were checked out.

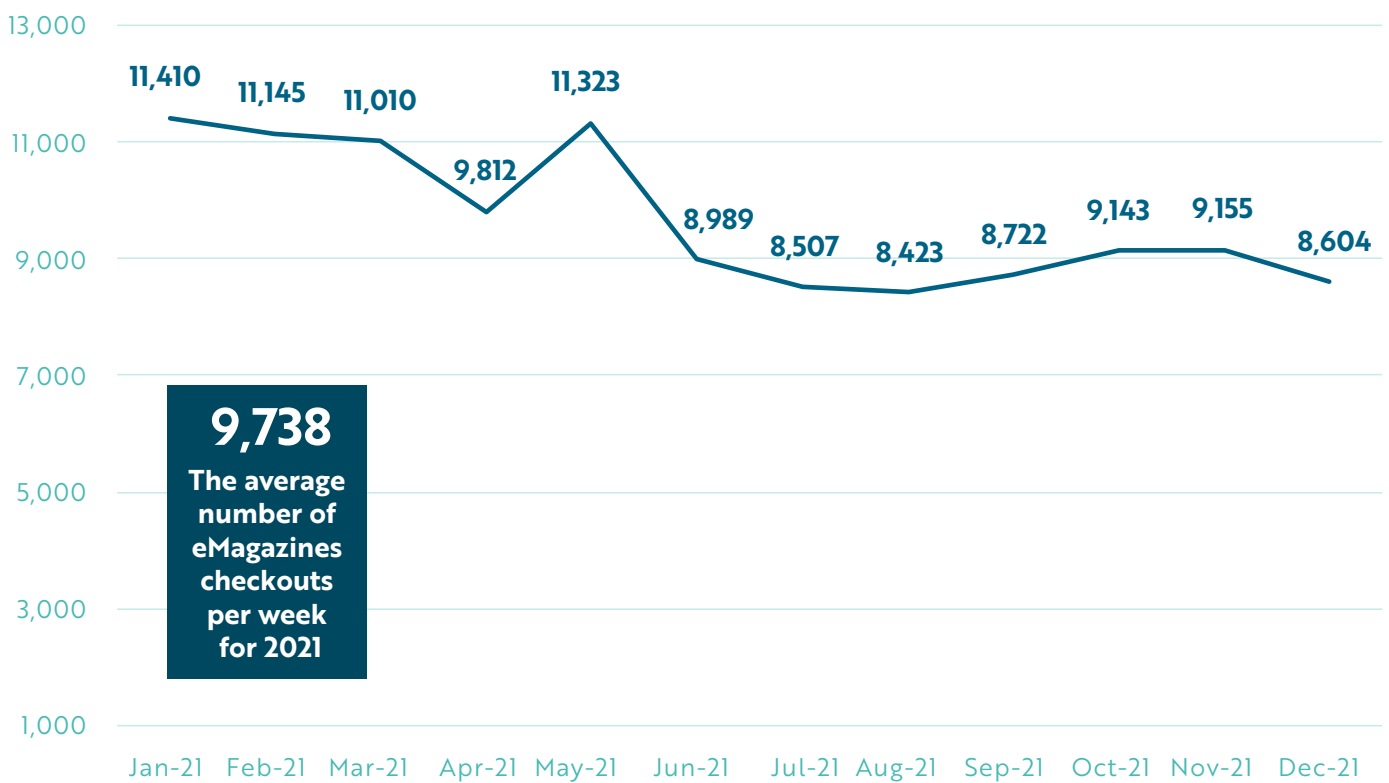


Figure 22 Four week average eMagazine checkouts for 2021 ⁴⁵

⁴ Data from the weeks of January 3rd till April 18th represents weekly eMagazines checkouts from RB Digital, while the remaining dates, from the weeks May 2nd till December 26th represents eMagazine checkouts from Libby.

⁵ Full data was not available for the week April 25th to May 1st.

Financial Supports for Businesses

Background

During the COVID-19 pandemic many businesses were forced to fully close for periods of time, or to curtail their operations. As a result of this, the Irish government brought in business supports to alleviate some of the burdens placed on businesses during the lockdowns. The supports included a Rates Waiver, Restart Grants and Small Business Grants, all of which were administered by local authorities. This section details the supports given via local authorities as well as the levels of financial backing offered.

Rates Waiver

Commercial rates are a tax paid to local authorities by businesses and the payments received are used to fund a wide range of local services. In response to the pandemic and the mandated closure of businesses for public health reasons, in May 2020 the government announced an initial three-month waiver of commercial rates for the second quarter of 2020 (April to June). The waiver covered one hundred per cent of rates due and was applied to all businesses, with a small number of exceptions such as banks, supermarkets, and large utilities (businesses that were generally able to remain open during the lockdowns). In light of on-going pandemic conditions, this initial three-month waiver was extended to the

end of the year and continued on for the first nine months of 2021⁶. The funding to cover total rates waived from April 2020 through to September 2021 inclusive, was recouped to local authorities by the central government.



€717,661,651
Commercial rates
waived by local
authorities in **2020**.

€421,904,756
Commercial rates
waived by local
authorities in the **first
three quarters of 2021**.

⁶ Information from <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/3ac02-support-for-businesses-impacted-by-covid-19-through-the-commercial-rates-waiver/> [Accessed 17-05-2022]

Restart Grants 2020

The Restart Grant was announced by the government in May 2020. The grant was intended to alleviate the costs for small and micro businesses of reopening and reemploying workers after COVID-19 closures. The grant was available to businesses with a turnover of less than €5 million and 50 or less employees, who experienced closures or a 25% reduction in turnover.

Interested businesses applied through their local authority and had to be within the authority's commercial rates system to be eligible. The grant was calculated to be equivalent to commercial rates businesses paid in 2019, with a minimum of €2,000 and maximum of €10,000 available⁷.

In August 2020, the government announced the Restart Grant Plus scheme. Restart Grant Plus was available to medium and large businesses, with up to 250 employees and a turnover of up to €25 million, who experienced a 25% reduction in turnover. The grant was a minimum of €4,000 and maximum of €25,000. Like the original grant, interested businesses applied through their local authority and had to be within the authority's commercial rates system to be eligible⁸.

Between both grants, local authorities accepted 108,487 applications out of a total of the 122,185 that were made. Payment for both grants amounted to €632,266,393 paid to local businesses.

Table 8 Number of grant applications, accepted applications and total amount awarded, Restart Grants 2020

| Pre COVID-19 | Number of Grant Applications | Accepted Applications | Total Amount Awarded |
|--------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------|----------------------|
| Restart Grant | 57,345 | 49,205 | €194,974,399 |
| Restart Grant Plus | 64,840 | 59,282 | €437,291,994 |
| Total | 122,185 | 108,487 | €632,266,393 |

⁷ Information from <https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/2bd283-government-approves-details-of-restart-grant-for-small-businesses/> [Accessed 17-05-2022]

⁸ Information from <https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/a6ac3-restart-grant-plus-will-help-businesses-reopen-tanaiste/> [Accessed 17-05-2022]

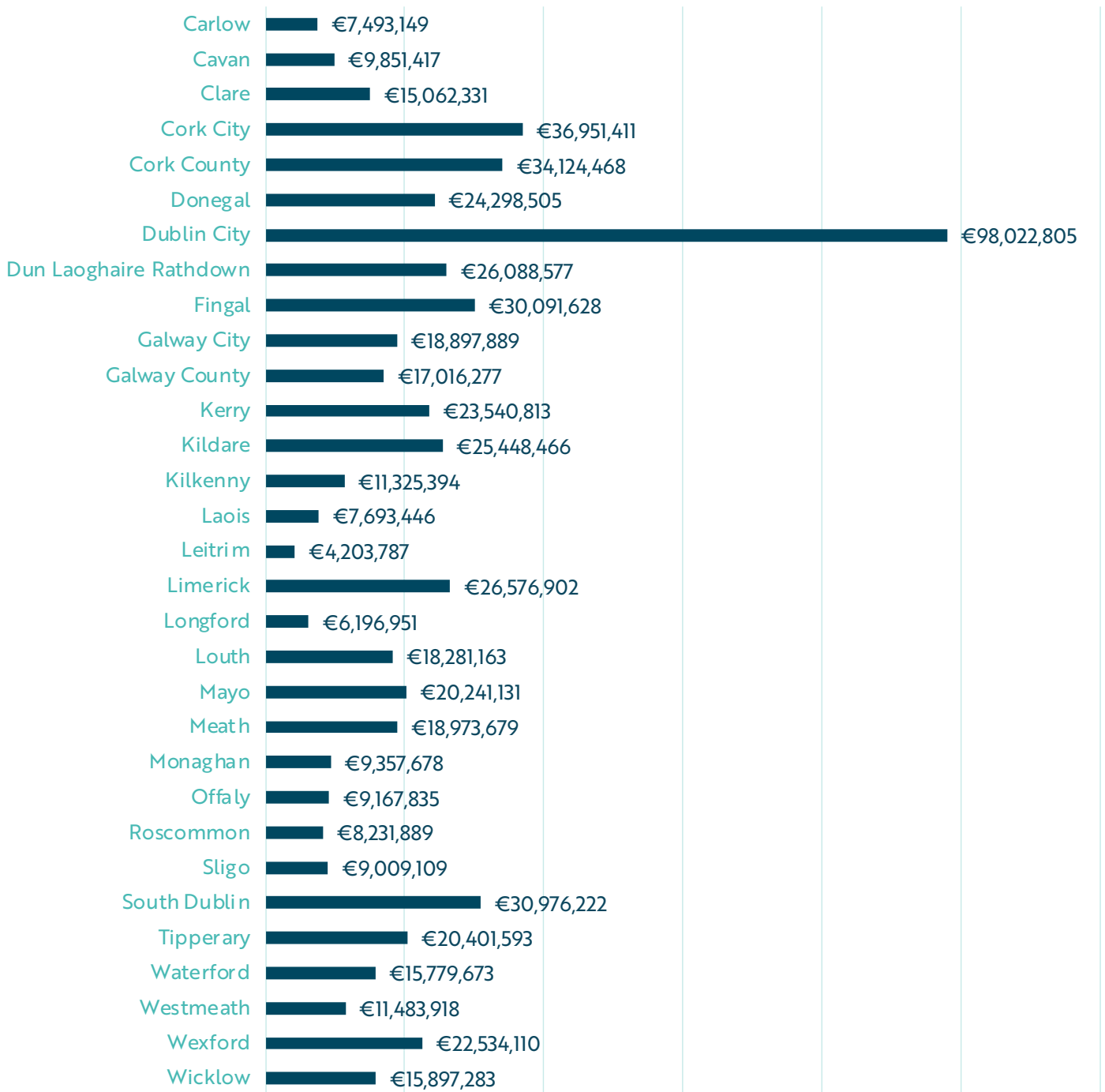


Figure 23 Total amounts paid by each local authority for Restart Grant and Restart Grant Plus

Small Business Grants 2021

The Small Business Assistance Scheme for COVID (SBASC) was launched by the government in March 2021. The scheme provided a grant of €4,000 for Q1 of 2021, intended to assist businesses with their fixed costs during the economic disruption imposed by COVID-19 public health measures. It was available to businesses with less than 250 employees and annual turnovers between €50,000 and €25 million, who had experienced a reduction in turnover of 75% or more. Businesses who continued to meet the criteria could receive a second instalment of €4,000 for Q2 2021⁹.

In June, the government launched a Phase 2 of the scheme with expanded eligibility criteria. Businesses working from non-rateable premises could apply for the €4,000 grant. Phase 2 also launched SBASC+, a smaller €1,000 grant, available to micro businesses with a turnover between €20,000 and €49,999 if they met other eligibility criteria¹⁰.

Table 9 Small Business Grants 2021: Number of grant applications, accepted applications and total amount awarded, Small Business Grants 2021

| | | Grant Applications | Accepted Applications | Total Amount Awarded |
|-------------------|--|---------------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Q1-Q2 2021 | SBAC €4,000 grant Small businesses Turnover: €50,000 - €25 million 75% reduction in turnover | 8,513 | 5,155 | €20 million + |
| Q2 2021 | SBAC+ €1,000 grant Micro businesses Turnover: €20,000 -€49,999 75% reduction in turnover | 436 | 349 | €349,000 |

⁹ Information from <https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/16d20-tanaiste-opens-applications-for-phase-1-of-8000-grant-under-new-small-business-assistance-scheme-for-covid-sbasac/> [Accessed 17-05-2022]

¹⁰ Information from <https://www.dublincity.ie/business/economic-development-and-enterprise/local-enterprise-office/small-business-assistance-scheme-covid> [Assessed 17-05-2022]

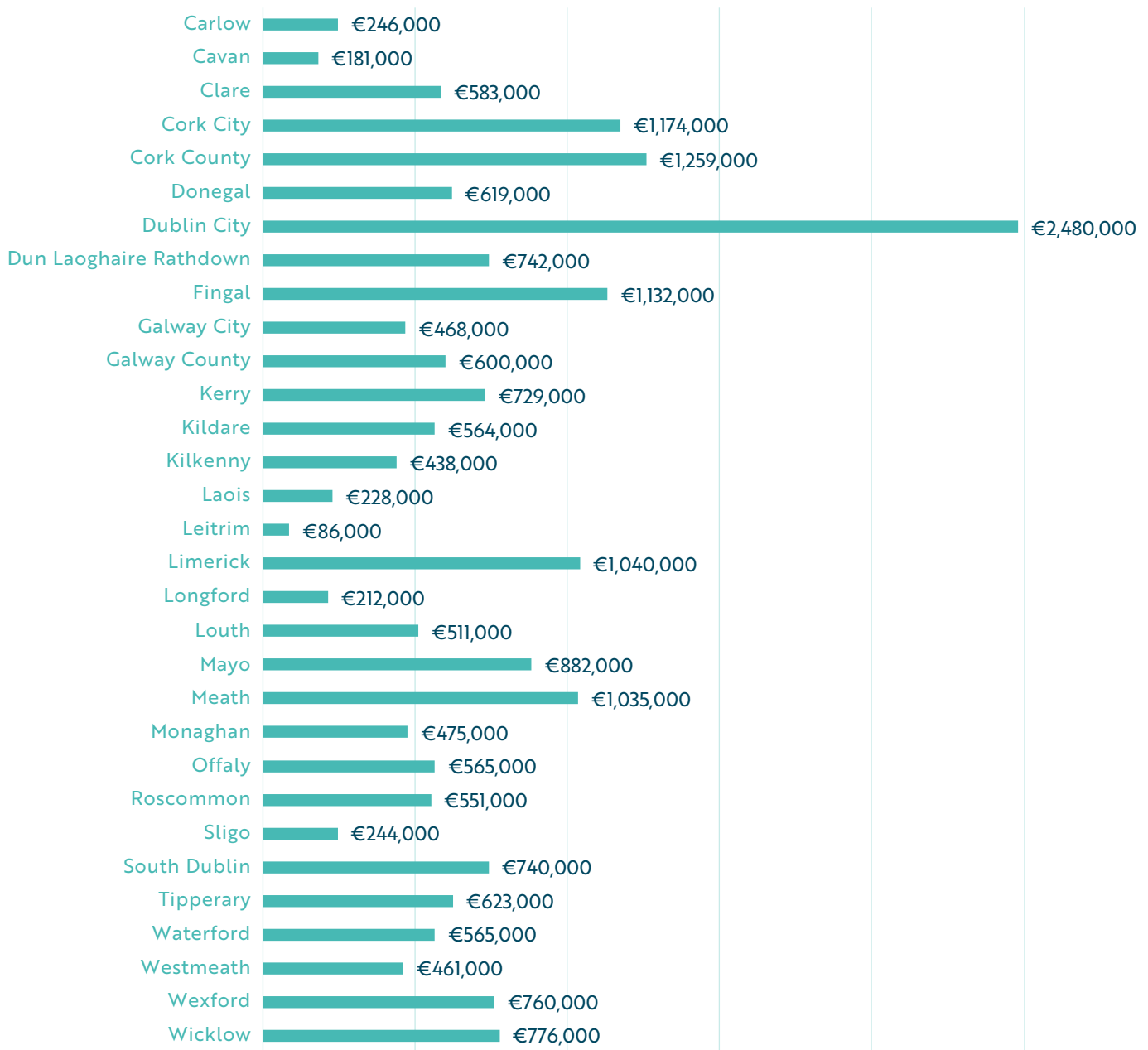


Figure 24 Total amounts paid by each local authority for SBASC and SBASC+

Conclusion

The Community Call Initiative was a major national initiative that sought to ensure there was a central point of contact in each local authority area, for the myriad of supports and services available to the vulnerable and isolated across the State. Local authorities, with their local networks, were an obvious lead for this initiative. Dedicated phone lines were set up by each local authority and collectively, over 70,000 calls for support were responded to between March 2020 and September 2021. To ensure effective co-ordination, local authorities worked in partnership with stakeholders through local community forums, and in total, these forums met a total of 884 times in order to ensure effective management and coordination of the service.

In addition, a Keep Well Campaign was designed to encourage active participation in activities and to address the stress and isolation being experienced by a lot of the public. It ran for the first six months of 2021, during which time local authorities organised more than 10,000 events and almost one million people participated in these events. A further summary of the individual elements of the Keep Well campaign can be found in Table 10 below.

As libraries were forced to close their doors, library online services saw unprecedented engagement levels over the course of the pandemic. Within two months of the first lockdown in March 2020, online course lessons viewed peaked at almost 24,000 lessons a week compared to 3,000 lessons a week prior to the pandemic. By June 2020 almost 6 million newspaper articles a week were being viewed compared with less than 600,000 per week prior to March 2020. Loans of eAudiobooks and eBooks increased from circa. 10,500 and 7,500 per week prior to the pandemic, to weekly peaks of almost 30,000 and 25,000 loans, respectively, in February 2021. In addition, almost 10,000 online magazines were being borrowed weekly.

The business community were helped financially through the provision of grants and rates waivers. In total, over €1.1 billion in commercial rates were waived while over €630 million was issued in the form of Restart or Small Business Grants. The data in this report highlights the rapid response of local authorities to the pandemic. Initiatives were put in place quickly, and data was captured that enabled the sector to track their impact and progress.

Table 10 Number of Keeping Active, Switch Off and Stay Connected events and participants

| | Keeping Active | Switch Off | Stay Connected | Total |
|---------------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| Events | 3,195 | 3,661 | 3,459 | 10,315 |
| Participants | 278,729 | 281,893 | 437,011 | 997,633 |

