



Community Work Ireland is the new name for the
Community Workers' Co-operative
Continuing to work collectively to support and
promote community work as a means of
addressing poverty, social exclusion and
inequality and advancing human rights

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Our Communities: National Framework Policy for Local and Community Development

Update

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Introduction

Community Work Ireland has had a number of meetings with officials from what is now the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government over recent weeks. This note is to ensure that CWI members are as up to date as possible with developments.

Our Communities: A Framework Policy for Local and Community Development

Our Communities, the National Framework Policy for Local and Community Development, was published in January. Despite indications from the Department of Environment, Community & Local Government that there would be significant changes to the draft policy framework following the consultation process¹, there were few changes to the published policy.

Community Work Ireland had voiced significant concern to the then Minister Ann Phelan at the process underpinning the policy and have had two subsequent meetings with what is now the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government.

The Department organised a bi-lateral meeting with the Community & Voluntary Pillar to discuss the policy on May 27th. Community Work Ireland attended as a member of the Community Platform and lead organisation for these particular bi-laterals. At that meeting, CWI and others critiqued the framework policy. The department acknowledged that there were flaws with the policy and said that they were considering a National Forum for Local and Community Development to develop an implementation plan for the framework policy. At that stage they didn't have any further detail but committed to a follow-up meeting.

The Department organised the follow up meeting with the C&V Pillar on May 6th to discuss the Forum further. The Department acknowledged that there were flaws in both the process and the framework policy itself but

¹ Read the CWC/CWI submission here - <http://communityworkireland.ie/making-a-submission/>

explained that presentation of the framework policy to cabinet and its publication was expedited they presented in a bid to get it approved before the General Election. They agreed that there needed to be remedial action to address these flaws. It asked for input from the C&V Pillar. The following points were made:

- It is critical for the Department to speak directly and to give primacy to the input from the organisations that represent both community development and local development and not to see the discussion with the C&V Pillar as a substitute for this process. In this regard, it was useful to hear that the Department recognise the need to speak to other stakeholders. Community Work Ireland and ILDN were two suggested by the C&V Pillar members.
- The Forum will be an important element in hearing the voices of those who are engaging, or even have difficulty engaging with the new structures and programmes at a local level.
- There is an ongoing need to recognise that Local Development and Community Development, while complementary, are both separate and valid values and approaches. Community Development has been eroded and undermined at a local level, resulting in disadvantaged communities and groups not having the capacity to effectively engage and have their voice heard. If the new local decision making structures are to be inclusive and effective in addressing poverty and social exclusion, then Community Development needs to be supported and resourced. While active citizenship is important for all individuals and communities the focus in implementation of the Framework Policy must be on ensuring the effective participation and engagement of the most marginalised communities and groups.
- **This principle needs to be reflected throughout – the Forum, for example, should be referred to as a Forum for Community Development and Local Development not a Forum for Local and Community Development.**
- The commitment of Government Departments and agencies to an interagency, co-operative approach is essential if the Local Economic and Community Plan and LCDCs are to be effective.
- In the context of scarce resources, priority must be given to marginalised communities to ensure that their capacity is built to an extent that they can participate in the aspirations outlined in the Framework. This will mean resourcing community development.
- Actions need to deliver inter-agency, cross-sectoral collaboration.

At a meeting between the department and CWI in Ballina on May 25th the Department restated their intention to organise a Forum on Local and Community Development that would develop an implementation/action plan for the Framework Policy. While they haven't concluded the planning for this Forum, they clarified some of their intent at the meeting, stating that they intended to organise the following:

- A day-long Local and Community Development Forum, the objective of which would be to identify actions to implement the five objectives included in the framework policy. This is likely to take place in October. There will be a moderator assigned for the day – CWI strongly argued for the moderator to come from the community sector as opposed to a member of the department;
- The development of the action plan by a Standing Working Group to be established that will report back to the Interdepartmental Group, who are responsible for the Framework Policy. The department will consider giving this group a role in monitoring the framework policy;
- A review of the framework policy after eighteen months;

The department are to work on a guidance document outlining what can be expected on and from the day. It is important to understand that the Department are explicitly holding the position that it is appropriate, even imperative, that local government be assigned a central role in "local and community development". CWI has consistently argued and reiterated at the meeting:

- that strengthening local government should not be at the expense of civil society, the independence of which is critical to a well-functioning society
- in most areas local authorities would not have a good track record of working with community organisations;

- local authorities do not have the experience, expertise or institutional culture required for community work.

Reconfiguration of Departments

Following on from the agreement of the Programme for Partnership Government² the Department of Environment, Community and Local Government has been reconfigured as follows:

- Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government - Simon Coveney
- Minister Regional Development, Rural Affairs, Arts & the Gaeltacht - Heather Humphreys
- Minister of State for Housing and Urban Renewal – Damien English
- Minister of State for Communities and the National Drugs Strategy - Catherine Byrne

In some instances, responsibilities still have to be assigned but the LEADER programme (funding to LEADER is to be increased by between €50 and €100 million), the Dormant Accounts, Social Enterprise and the Western Development Commission have been assigned to Minister Heather Humphreys. It is unclear yet what responsibilities will be assigned to Minister Catherine Byrne.

While *Community* has been removed from the title of the Department of for Housing, Planning and Local Government, the department will retain the Community division as one of its seven divisions. Internally, Caroline Clarke has been moved to social housing and Paul Geraghty has been assigned to the community division.

Public Participation Networks

Public Participation Networks (PPNs) were introduced in all local authority areas following the enactment of the Local Government Act, 2014. The Department has developed a draft PPN User Guide³ to provide practical advice to all stakeholders on the operation of PPNs. This guide addresses a number of relevant issues including membership of PPNs, PPN activities, database management and includes advice on topical areas such as how to manage a flat structure, or dealing with requests for PPN representation.

As this document is currently in draft form, the department state that they welcome feedback on any of the material or suggestions as to any other issues which should be addressed in this context. Ultimately, it is intended that this document will effectively be a “live” document, updated regularly to reflect emerging issues. Any feedback on this matter should be provided to Niall Hayden at Niall.Hayden@environ.ie

National PPN Advisory Group

A National PPN Advisory Group is also being established, chaired by the Department, which will include invited representative of relevant stakeholders. The first meeting of this group took place on Friday 13 May. This group will address any PPN issues arising from the User Guide or from other sources.

² Download the PfG and the CWI extracts document here - <http://communityworkireland.ie/programme-partnership-gouvernement/>

³ To download the User Guide please follow - <http://communityworkireland.ie/8379-2/>