



DISABILITY FEDERATION OF IRELAND

Submission on Community and Voluntary Strategy – Public Consultation

**Department of Rural and Community
Development and the Gaeltacht**

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A. The Vision

The vision of the current strategy was to create vibrant, sustainable, inclusive, empowered and self-determining communities that support the social, cultural and economic well-being of all members.

Is this vision still valid? Do you have any suggested changes to the vision?

This vision does remain valid, however there is an opportunity to build on and improve it.

The current Strategy does not sufficiently prioritise the inclusion and equal participation of people with disabilities. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), of which Ireland is a State Party, provides a comprehensive international framework to promote and protect the rights of people with disabilities, ensuring their full inclusion and participation in all aspects of society. Given that one in five people in Ireland have a disability, considering disability in all community initiatives is essential. A strengthened and more disability rights inclusive vision will be an opportunity to prioritise real inclusion of *all* community stakeholders.

In the development of the next Strategy, it is crucial to consider the changing political climate and international context, including the move across Europe towards the far right, the unfolding wars in Gaza and Ukraine, and the impacts of climate change. As a result, Ireland is experiencing economic instability, increasing racism, extreme weather events etc. and the most marginalised communities, including people with disabilities, are worst affected.

These factors are impacting on the resourcing allocated to community and social development initiatives. The community and voluntary sector, which has still not recovered from austerity era funding reductions, has already experienced cutbacks. Political commitment to social development is essential to ensure communities in Ireland can weather the current and

emerging national and international challenges. Moreover, there is clear public support for ensuring ongoing economic growth is channelled into supporting local communities and supporting those who are most marginalised, towards increased equality and inclusion.

A sustainable and vibrant community and voluntary sector should be key to the new vision. This sector, on which the state relies to deliver essential services across the length and breadth of the country, requires sufficient resourcing through sustainable, multiannual funding.

We are seeing a global trend towards the shrinking of civic space and threats to advocacy organisations. At a national level, there has been increasing anti-NGO dialogue from some parts of society. It is vital that the new Strategy explicitly acknowledges the essential role that community and voluntary organisations play, and that Government pledges to protect civil society organisations and civic space more widely, as well as resourcing them.

In the context of the above, a concrete commitment to social and community development is essential, equivalent to the levels of commitment to, and prioritisation of, economic development. The government should give the same levels of political and financial commitment to the community and voluntary sector, as it does to other sectors in Ireland, given the essential nature of the supports and services they provide in and to communities across the country.

B. Mission - what the strategy aims to achieve

The previous strategy identified six high level ambitions to be attained:

- **A thriving community and voluntary sector**
- **A strengthened partnership between Government and the community and voluntary sector**
- **Community supports underpinned by societal value and community need**
- **Resilient communities empowered to meet emerging challenges**
- **Empowered communities informing and shaping responses to their needs**
- **A thriving volunteering culture**

Taking account of the current environment, challenges and priorities for the C&V sector, do these six high level ambitions still reflect the priority for the sector, do you propose any amendments or additional ambitions be included in the new strategy?

A thriving community and voluntary sector can only be made possible if the Government sufficiently resources and supports the community and voluntary sector. At present, many community and voluntary organisations, including disability organisations, are overstretched and under-resourced, and facing continued recruitment and retention challenges. Ongoing multi-annual funding to cover the full cost of service delivery is essential. Only a fully supported and funded community sector can support the implementation of the rights enshrined in the UNCRPD. For instance, Article 19 states that independent living must be supported in part by mainstream services available in the community.

Currently, there are not enough community development and youth workers employed to work in marginalised communities. There is an urgent need to create more positions in each county to support this strategic aim, adequately resource their work and ringfence funding into the future. Otherwise, this objective will remain unrealised. Moreover, when hiring community staff, it is essential that disability rights training is provided, given that disabled people make up a significant portion of our communities (approximately one in five people). It is also essential to understand the social and other barriers that prevent people with disabilities from being able to participate in their communities equal to others. These include inaccessible transport and community infrastructure, low income and employment opportunities, and high poverty and deprivation rates due to the many extra costs of having a disability.

Moreover, a preventative approach is essential to plan for unforeseen developments. For example, during the Covid-19 pandemic, the community and voluntary sector were forced to react quickly to the situation on the ground with limited resources. The experience of the pandemic demonstrated how capable and essential community and voluntary organisations are, despite the resourcing challenges. If a response plan and corresponding resources for national emergencies/incidents had been in place, the response would not have been reactive, but rather responsive. Under Article 11 of the UNCRPD, the State is required to "*take all necessary measures*" to protect people with disabilities during natural disasters and other situations of risk. For instance, DFI suggested the establishment of the Community Response Forums during the pandemic. This initiative is an excellent example of what a preventative approach looks like in practice.

There is a lack of recognition and political prioritisation of the community and voluntary sector as an essential social partner. Ireland cannot achieve this or other inclusion ambitions without investing in and prioritising its community and voluntary sector, and acknowledging the essential role it plays in sustaining Irish society. Real partnership involves meaningful and early consultation, open and transparent discussions and policy development processes, co-creation of initiatives, clear accountability and coordination mechanisms for policy implementation, amongst others. The Government must also do more to involve people with disabilities in the process of developing and supporting the community and voluntary sector. Equally under Article 4.3 of the UNCRPD, DPOs (Disabled Persons Organisations) have a right to be involved in policies that affect people with disabilities, which includes how sectors function and are funded.

C. Strategic Objectives

The strategic objectives which define the scope of the previous strategy were:

- **Strengthen and develop participative approaches to the development of public policy and programming underpinned by an autonomous community and voluntary infrastructure**
- **Support and facilitate communities to participate in community development and local development**
- **Develop and strengthen processes and mechanisms to secure meaningful consultation, inclusion and participation in local, regional and national decision-making structures, particularly by non-engaging and marginalised communities and their representative organisations**
- **Develop capacity of organisations supporting communities to participate in community development and local development, with a specific focus on marginalised communities**
- **Supporting commitments in Our Public Service 2020, develop the strategic and operational capacity of Local Community Development Committees (LCDCs), including in coordinating, monitoring and supporting community development and local development**

- **Strengthen and build understanding and capacity to meet Public Sector Duty obligations in local government and community and voluntary organisations**
- **Supporting commitments in Our Public Service 2020, continue to develop and strengthen Public Participation Networks as the primary mechanism for communities to engage with local government decision-making**
- **Strengthen and build understanding and capacity to support the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) National Implementation Plan**
- **Strengthen the Local Economic and Community Plan process, enhancing community participation in the development and implementation of plans and securing more effective collaboration and partnership working nationally, regionally and locally.**
- **Support, develop and enhance capacity in the local government sector in community development and local development.**
- **Support community development and local development to engage with Climate Change adaptation and mitigation strategies.**

Which of these strategic objectives do you consider to be most relevant and are there further objectives that should be considered?

DFI suggests including the following strategic objective in the new Strategy: ***"Ensure an intersectional approach to inclusion and participation is taken in all community initiatives"***. Currently, certain groups are being excluded from full inclusion e.g. people with disabilities. For instance, a specific programme for older persons – the Age-Friendly Programme – exists in every county, in addition to programmes for other minority groups. But there is no such programme for people with disabilities, despite the high and increasing levels in every community. Ensuring disability inclusion and equal participation of disabled people is a legal obligation under the UNCRPD. Equally, intersectional issues of equality should always be considered, where disability intersects with other identities such as gender, ethnicity or socio-economic status, amongst others.

We also suggest including the following strategic objective in the new Strategy: ***"Ensure a human rights-based approach to inclusion of people with disabilities is mainstreamed throughout community and voluntary initiatives."*** DFI has published relevant research on disability inclusion at community level: *"Bridging the Gap: Local Authorities and Disability Inclusion"*. This research aimed to bridge the gap and provide evidence about how disability rights are and can be supported by local authorities. While it is essential that the UN CRPD framework is reflected in State policy and legislation, inclusion and participation of people with disabilities should be realised in their local communities across the country. It is thus important to embed a human rights approach to disability inclusion at local authority and community level.

DFI further recommend including the following strategic objective in the new Strategy: ***"Prioritise the accessibility of the sector, and of all community initiatives, to all relevant stakeholders"***. It is essential that, to enhance community participation in decision-making, development and implementation of plans, there are accessible ways to engage with such processes. People with disabilities are often excluded from equally participating and engaging in such processes. Under Article 9 of the UN CRPD, the right to accessibility applies not only to infrastructure, but also to information and services. It is the responsibility of Government to ensure that all aspect and benefits of the community and voluntary sector, and the services and supports it delivers, are accessible and open to people with disabilities. It is essential that disabled people have real and meaningful influence over policies that affect them and can hold those in power accountable if objectives are not achieved – in line with the core principle of the disability movement: "nothing about us without us".

D. Strategic Actions

The previous strategy included 43 strategic actions/commitments, summarised here:

- **Develop processes for meaningful consultation, inclusion and participation of all communities in decisions that affect them**
- **Develop capacity in community and voluntary organisations to support communities**
- **Support education and training opportunities for community workers, volunteers in community organisations and voluntary board members**

- **Ensure local decision-making and participatory structures are fit for purpose (e.g. PPNs, LCDCs)**
- **Introduce a sustainable funding model for the community and voluntary sector**
- **Develop capacity at all levels to deliver key policy initiatives including UN SDGs, Climate Action and Public Sector Duty**

Considering the current context, challenges and opportunities, what specific strategic actions/commitments do you consider could be included in the new strategy?

The following strategic action/commitment should be included in the new Strategy: ***“Achieve inclusion and equal participation of all community stakeholders.”*** To bridge the inclusion, participation and accessibility gap for people with disabilities at community level, each county must establish a Disability Inclusion Strategy. Disability actions and programmes at local level will require structural coordination supported by a sufficiently funded programme and a Local Coordinator in each county. The Local Coordinators should sit on the Local Community and Development Committees (LCDC). This position can coordinate and mainstream the disability actions across the other programmes representing different minority groups, enhancing the intersectional approach. Another crucial new action is to establish a full-time Access Officer role in each local authority. Indeed, it is a legal requirement for all public bodies to establish this position, under the Disability Act, 2005, however it remains an add on part time role in most councils. While we are aware that this area of policy is governed by the Department of Housing and Local Government, it is highly relevant in the context of any strategy to support community and rural development – emphasising the need for cross-departmental approaches and initiatives.

To enhance community participation in decision-making, development and implementation of plans, accessible ways to engage with such processes are essential. Indeed, people with disabilities experience structural barriers, such as inaccessible transport options, inaccessible buildings, lack of access to Irish Sign Language Interpreters or to easy-to-read resources, amongst others. The recently commenced European Accessibility Act and the EU Web Accessibility Act oblige all public bodies, including local authorities, to ensure all digital and web services, public services and infrastructure are accessible to people with disabilities. Therefore, accessibility in its broadest definition must be prioritised under this strategic action for Ireland to fulfil its EU obligations.

The inclusion of a specific action on measurement and review of the Strategy is required, and ideally all actions should be SMART. We recommend including one action committing to regular measurement and review of the Strategy. This should also include reference to other relevant strategies and cross-departmental objectives. Furthermore, all actions should be flexible to strategic re-direction, based on the emerging social reality. The continued relevance of an action should also be examined as highlighted by reviews, and funding/resourcing should be flexible enough to be redirected when needed.

The strategy should include tangible actions on cross-departmental collaboration. This is essential to achieve any meaningful change for communities through the Strategy. The Values and Principles developed by DRCDG is a strong document - its adoption across Government and other Departments should be prioritised. Communities do not exist in a vacuum and outcomes are intrinsically linked to healthcare, housing, social protection, education etc. In this context, a mainstream approach in the next Strategy is essential, to ensure the avoidance of a siloing the various sectors of Irish society.

The strategy should include an action that supports the We Act campaign, enabling organisations to promote the work of the sector and tell positive stories.