



Galway City Community Network
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Galway City Community Network CLG

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The Public Participation Network in Galway City

Department of Rural and Community Development: Statement of Strategy

GCCN Submission

March 2023

Preface

Established in 2014, **Galway City Community Network (GCCN)** is the Public Participation Network in Galway City. It represents 168+ groups and organisations in the community, voluntary and environmental sectors in Galway City. The twin objectives that GCCN pursues are to:

- Advance the values of sustainability, equality, culture, community, empowerment and inclusivity and embed these in the policies, programmes and practice of local government, state organisations, national government and civil society.
- Develop and implement progressive models of, and approaches to representation, participation and engagement for civil society in informing and shaping policy development and implementation.

Submission to the DRCD Statement of Strategy

GCCN welcomes the opportunity to make this submission to the DRCD Statement of Strategy for the years 2023-2025, and hope that this statement will reflect the importance of attending to societal change, and the development of strong inclusive communities in these challenging times.

How we engage with our partners, stakeholders and the general public

GCCN would like to point out that effective engagement takes time, and this particular consultation falls short of this goal. This consultation itself was published with only 10 working days allowed to deliver a submission. This short turn around prevents the meaningful engagement of communities, particularly those who are marginalised, or may need technical support, through consultation and feedback processes. This is not in line with the ethos of public participation, and the suppression of bottom-up community involvement means that lived experience may not be captured in policy and planning objectives for this department.

This is a crucial issue across many particular policy domains, and in particular any policy that aims to promote community development. We are beginning to see fracture lines formed in our communities driven by groups who feel they are left behind by policy and society. Participation in the policies and strategies that affect their lives can be a useful tool in healing the schism between communities, and the erosion of trust in democracy that is posing such a threat to social cohesion in many north-western democracies.

Our ability to deliver programmes and policy interventions efficiently and effectively for rural Ireland and communities

The range of programmes and interventions that are available is an acknowledgement that inequalities persist, and the social and economic benefits are not dispersed evenly throughout society. The work of the public participation networks needs to be supported by a strong community work infrastructure supporting and empowering communities so that they can engage with the PPN and local democratic processes.

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This infrastructure has been deeply affected by cuts and policy changes. GCCN acknowledges and supports the commitments in *Sustainable, Inclusive and Empowered Communities: A five-year strategy to support the community and voluntary sector* to support autonomous community work. This needs to be a starting point to support the most marginalised communities to address the issues affecting them and to deepen their engagement with decision-making and policy-making structures.

GCCN firmly believes that Public Participation Networks work best when they are independent of the local authority, as this prevents conflict of interest when responding to, and advocating for community interests.

Our independent status has enabled us to focus on priorities as set by the GCCN membership and the Secretariat while working collaboratively with other organisations and groups, including the local authority, with which we have a number of joint initiatives. This independence must be maintained and the choice to become independent should be provided to others PPNs.

New policy and/or programme opportunities for the Department to consider as part of the 2023-2025 Strategy

Sustainable, Inclusive and Empowered Communities is a critical strategy for the community sector, the voluntary sector and the environmental sectors where that latter overlaps with the other two, setting out an ambition for the sectors and for the achievement of a range of objectives. It is imperative that the department prioritise the strategy, formulating new policies and programmes where appropriate to ensure its full implementation.

The Local Economic and Community Plan and the process involved in developing and implementing the plan has enormous potential. However, the GCCN experience suggests that this potential is not being reached. There is a need to ensure that there is an imperative on all state agencies to engage meaningfully with the plan and to support and resource its implementation. GCCN also suggests that a budget to support co-ordination and implementation should be made available, similar to the model employed by Healthy Ireland.

GCCN urges DRCD to prioritise Objective 8 in *Sustainable, Inclusive and Empowered Communities*, and support *meaningful* engagement with the SDGs.

This issue must be addressed as Social Justice Ireland’s Sustainable Progress Index 2022¹ ranked Ireland 10th of 14 comparable EU countries (Sweden, Denmark, The Netherlands, and Finland were the top four countries in that order) in terms of progression towards SDG attainment.

The SDGs are an integral part of the urgent and time sensitive response to climate change², one of the greatest challenges to economic and social development. In addition to driving action for climate change, the attainment of the SDG’s can drive wellbeing, and inclusion in the public sphere³, in addition to sustainable infrastructures and economic growth. This is in line with the overall goal of LECP’s to promote the social, economic, and environmental interests of local communities⁴.

GCCN urges the Department to take action to ensure that the SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals) are integrated in their entirety through all actions, policies and processes undertaken during the period of this strategy statement. Further, GCCN supports the DRCD intention to embed this area of work in the Local Economic and Community Planning process but would caution that pressure needs to be put on the local authority to *meaningfully* engage with this ambition.

It is also important to note that the aspirations expressed in the SDGs cannot be separated from the framework of human rights⁵. The Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty is a legal obligation derived from Section 42 of the Irish Human Rights and Equality Act 2014. This Act places a statutory obligation on public institutions to protect the human rights of those to whom they provide services in the execution of their functions.

GCCN has worked with Galway City Partnership and Galway City Council on a number of initiatives to embed the Public Sector Duty in Galway City and to provide support to public bodies to engage with the duty.

GCCN suggests that the Department of Rural and Community Development should demonstrate its commitment to the Public Sector Duty by ensuring that all its strategies, including the Statement of Strategy, are subject to the PSD. In addition, the department needs to implement the commitment of Objective 6 in *Sustainable, Inclusive and Empowered Communities* to support implementation at local level in a coherent way.

1 Clark et al. ‘Measuring Progress: Economy, Society and Environment in Ireland’ 2022.

2 <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/climate-action/>

3 A Wellbeing Framework towards the SDGs | Social Justice Ireland

4 Department of Rural and Community Development and the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (2021) Local Economic and Community Plans Guidelines.

5 https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/MDGs/Post2015/SDG_HR_Table.pdf.

Ways in which our existing supports and funding can be directed to best support communities, particularly in respect of the emerging challenges of Brexit, Climate Action and Covid-19

GCCN was an active member of the Community Response Forum in Galway City, supporting the identification and development of referral pathways, convening an NGO Forum to identify the issues emerging for marginalised groups and supporting Galway City Council to develop the interactive map of services. This collaborative approach needs to be maintained and have the ability to increase its capacity to respond to needs as restriction levels increase.

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The focus on volunteering during the initial stages of the response to the pandemic was appropriate for that time. However, the focus now needs to shift to a model that supports local community organisations to formulate community work, and professional responses that are based on best practice and are more sustainable. Moreover, there is a need to support community responses that facilitate transformative action through needs led programme design.

As Crowley (2022) has noted, the current funding environment for community organisations is restrictive, as in order to survive organisations must align their activities with top-down funding requirements based on identification of social issues of concern at a policy level.

While this approach has utility in that it prompts a focus on important issues, it also prevents the community sector from responding to need in place and taking innovative action to work for the local good.

The LECP consultation process provides a unique opportunity to identify issues of local concern, to which funds can be allocated outside of the narrow scope provided by SICAP. However, having an adequate response to the inputs of communities requires funding to be ringfenced for emerging actions.

Meaningful engagement with the SDGs is key to a just transition to a sustainable future in order to ensure that no one is left behind and development promotes social, environmental, and economic wellbeing. This requires supports that are appropriate to place, and should include community, social enterprises and cooperatives that address local needs, stimulate the local economy and offer quality employment to marginalised communities.

This will ensure an adequate response to emerging challenges, including potential economic instability, and the transition to a no carbon future.

Developing the ways in which the Department measures the performance of our supports and programmes

The SDG global framework of indicators can serve multiple functions, framing reports, measuring progress and performance, and as a management tool for the development of implementation strategies and the allocation of resources⁶.

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To support local community groups and interests to influence the work of community development organizations and harness the benefit of participation at local levels to drive innovative local actions, and improve their impact, the development of community level indicators, and sources of data in collaboration with civil society can enhance buy in and promote trust in a deliberative democracy⁷. These indicators should encompass dimensions of wellbeing as outline by Social Justice Ireland, as this aligns with the principles of the SDGs⁸.

Further details on the Department's functions and responsibilities are available [here](#), while the Department's current Statement of Strategy can also be found [here](#).

⁶ Stina et al. 'Governance for sustainable urban development: the double function of SDG indicators' 2019.

⁷ Philips., R. (2003) Community Indicators, Available at :[Untitled-2 \(ri.gov\)](#)

⁸ [A Wellbeing Framework towards the SDGs | Social Justice Ireland](#)