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Government Begins the Process of Developing a New Policy Framework for Local and Community Development – Aiden Lloyd

Introduction

The process of preparing the promised policy paper on local and community development has finally got underway with the release of a draft paper '*Our Communities: A Framework Policy for Local and Community Development in Ireland*' by the department of the environment, community and local government. Submissions are invited by 10th April 2015. There is no indication as yet that the department will engage in a more intensive consultation with either the local development sector or the community sector.

Although not specifically stated, the policy paper is likely to replace the '*White Paper on a framework for supporting voluntary activity and for developing the relationship between the state and the community and voluntary sector*' which was finalised in 2001 after a long process of intense consultation with the community and voluntary sector.

While the paper is a draft document, subject to changes following submissions, it is clearly focused on consolidating '*Putting People First: an action programme for effective local government*' published in 2012 and subsequently implemented with 'The Local Government (Reform) Act 2014'. This process has resulted in new structures and processes at local level including:

- The Local Community Development Committee (LCDC), with management responsibility for the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP) and the development of a 6 year Local Economic and Community Plan (LECP).
- The Public Participation Network (PPN) through which the local authority will interface with community organisations.

Key principles

The draft paper commits government to the following key principles underpinning the Framework as:

- Strong community participation and leveraging the capacity within communities to make a difference, with 'bottom-up' or community development approaches retained as integral features of local and community development.
- A strong local government system securing and supporting citizen and community engagement and participation in policy development, planning and delivery, and decision-making processes in respect of local and community interventions and supports at a local level
- Meaningful engagement with local communities, local development organisations and state bodies to ensure that the best outcome for the citizen is achieved;
- Robust local collaboration structures that encourage transparency, democratic legitimacy, accountability, participation and evidence-based decision making;

- Support for voluntary activity and active citizenship, underpinned by supporting the capacity of communities to pro-actively engage, as vital elements of flourishing communities.
- Economic development, training and education opportunities are key drivers in creating self-sufficient vibrant communities.

Core objectives

The paper then sets out the core objectives and measures of the framework:

1. **Engaging with Communities** – Local authorities and appropriate government agencies will involve communities in planning and decision-making regarding policies, interventions, programmes and actions that affect them; this will involve meaningful consultation via PPN and other mechanisms.
2. **Working with Partners** – Pursuing a ‘whole of government’ approach at local/national level; develop resources and skills within local government and local/community development organisations; establishing and supporting LDCs to find shared solutions to locally identified needs.
3. **Planning for Local and Community Development** – Supporting an integrated, coherent approach through Local Economic and Community Plans; ensuring priorities match needs analysis and available resources; ensuring local planning is supported and facilitated by local authorities; local and community sectors will be supported to mobilise community participation
4. **Delivering** – (National level) Establishing a National Policy Group on Local and Community Development to oversee development of effective arrangements for communication, consultation and coordination between national, local and community levels; monitoring and reviewing the Framework in regard to the realisation of a ‘whole of government’ approach; agreeing clear national priorities to be targeted by local and community development interventions, programmes, actions.

(Local level) Local authorities will work with state agencies, local and community development bodies through Local Economic and Community Plan in line with national priorities; exercising effective leadership to ensure greater coherence of service delivery; delivering an integrated approach to economic development and community development within LA area; managing the delivery of interventions that provide positive action programmes to most marginalised.

(Local level) In relation to community level work, local authorities will develop effective relationships between national and local government and communities and improve community participation through the PPN and other mechanisms; improving the targeting of resources to meet needs and priorities of communities; through outcome focused interventions and enhanced links between practice and policy; supporting voluntary activity and community self-reliance in identifying needs and solutions.

5. **Evaluating, Monitoring and Reviewing** – Government, acting primarily through local authorities, will implement monitoring evaluation and review approaches that focus on learning/feedback from performance and outcomes; involving communities and citizens in this process; designing appropriate outcome evaluation processes that balance accountability, administration, delivery of services

Comment

The paper outlines the difference between community development and local development but is distinctly woolly as to their separate role and function other than to declare that 'both the community development approach and community-statutory partnership is central to the work of many bodies providing social, health and educational services and/or working for social, cultural and economic development'. This clearly avoids the reality that community development is about social change linked to social justice, whereas local development seeks to garner, coordinate and direct resources towards local and regional development priorities, including addressing social exclusion – but that is dependent on the strength of the community sector and the resources dedicated to that purpose.

The key intention behind the paper is quite clearly to support the objective to move local authorities from 'a peripheral involvement in local development programmes' to being the 'primary vehicle of governance and public service at local level'. The previous absorption of the Community Development Programme projects within the local development companies, and the changes introduced under *Putting People First*, facilitates this change.

The best way to assess the framework document is by setting it against the 2001 White Paper which sets out agreed principles on the relationship between the state and the community and voluntary sector. Agreed principles are usually the result of direct consultation between both parties. Hopefully, the consultation process around the Framework document will not be confined to written submissions.

Compared to the 2001 White Paper there is little understanding that community development is based on independence and choice. Civil society organisations, in common with religious and business organisations, cannot be organised and directed by the state without negotiation and consent. In addition, the draft Framework doesn't appear to accept the state's responsibility to fund the sector by stating that community development organisations 'have become overly dependent on statutory funding'.

In contrast to the 2001 White Paper, there is no acceptance of the right of the state and the community-voluntary sector to constructively critique each other, something that is essential to achieving better services and better outcomes for disadvantaged people. Neither is there an acceptance of the structural nature of social exclusion and inequality as in the 2001 White Paper. Finally, the draft Framework doesn't outline the role of community development and local development in pioneering new approaches. The document is all about coordination and efficiency.

Conclusion

This is a draft paper for consultation, so there is an opportunity to inform its development. Given the omissions and variances with the principles informing the 2001 White Paper, which was a well-informed document, it is extremely important that this draft Framework is influenced and improved. Based on past practices of government, whereby there was little consultation with the sector in the processes leading up to this draft framework - i.e. the 'alignment' process and the implementation of the *Putting People First* policy - there is every reason to have concerns about the degree of consultation government is likely to embark upon.

The sector does, of course, have the right to reject the final Framework policy should it not sufficiently acknowledge its role, function and priorities.

The new policy framework for local and community development is available on the website of the department of environment, community and local government.

www.environ.ie/en/Community/AlignmentofLocalGovtLocalDev/PublicConsultations/