

Stakeholder Consultation on a new Strategy to support the Community and Voluntary Sector in Ireland



An Roinn Forbartha Tuaithe agus Pobail agus Gaeltachta Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht

The Government's five-year strategy for the Community and Voluntary sector: Sustainable, Inclusive and Empowered Communities 2019-2024 set a general direction of travel for government policy in relation to the community development, local development and the community and voluntary sector in Ireland. It also provided an important strategic framework for engagement, support programmes, policies and research related to the sectors for both central and local government, over the past five years.

The strategy aimed to provide communities with both the means and opportunity to be involved in decisions that affect them. The high-level objectives and actions supported consultation, inclusion and participation of communities, particularly disadvantaged communities, in public policy and decision-making at all levels.

The strategy also copper-fastened the renewed relationship and partnership between government and the community and voluntary sectors which had developed during its preparation.

Implementation of the strategy was overseen by the Cross-Sectoral Group (CSG) on Local and Community Development, which includes representatives of community and voluntary organisations, Local Development Companies, Government Departments, Public Participation Networks (PPNs), local authorities and academics.

The development and implementation of the strategy included agreement and monitoring across Government of a set of clearly defined, shared Values and Principles for collaboration and partnership working with the community and voluntary sector. An annual Civic Forum has been held to enable dialogue between the state and the community and voluntary sector.

Over the lifetime of the strategy a range of support programmes and initiatives, have been put in place along with policies and strategies for volunteering, social enterprises, philanthropy and a roadmap for Public Participation Networks (PPNs). Additional support measures were introduced to compensate for the

suspension of fundraising during the Covid Pandemic and to compensate for higher energy prices.

Research and analysis on the commissioning of social, community and personal services was undertaken, along with analysis of the training needs of community and voluntary organisations, charity trustees and Local Community Development Committees (LCDCs).

The strategy has positively impacted on the relationship between the state and the community and voluntary sector, reinforced partnership arrangements and provided a framework for a wide range of structures, policies and support programmes at local and national level.

Towards a new strategy

Minister of State for Community Development and Charities Jerry Buttimer TD, has announced that the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht will lead on the development of a successor to Sustainable, Inclusive and Empowered Communities 2019-2024. The Department will work in partnership with the Cross-Sectoral Group (CSG) on Local and Community Development, adhering to the values and principles for collaboration and partnership working. This will build upon the existing structures, strategic objectives and achievements of the previous strategy, while taking account of new contexts, challenges and priorities for the community and voluntary sector.

An important part of the strategy development process will be inclusive consultation with stakeholders across the local development, community and voluntary and charity sectors in relation to the vision, objectives and actions to be included in the new strategy. We will also be consulting with Departments and Agencies across government and with local authorities.

We look forward to receiving your organisations' inputs in relation to the following key elements of the new strategy:

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?

500 words max

Carlow Public Participation Network (PPN) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the development of a successor strategy to Sustainable, Inclusive and Empowered Communities 2019 - 2024. We believe the original vision remains fundamentally sound: the aspiration to create vibrant, sustainable, inclusive, empowered and self-determining communities that support the social, cultural and economic well-being of all members still resonates strongly across Carlow's community and voluntary sector. However, the last five years have presented new challenges and shifts that warrant a refresh and strengthening of this vision. The experience of the COVID-19 pandemic, followed by an ongoing cost-of-living and housing crisis, a rapidly changing climate, and the increased arrival of people seeking international protection, have all significantly impacted communities. These developments highlight the urgent need for a strengthened emphasis on resilience, equity, and intercultural inclusion. Carlow PPN recommends that the successor strategy reframe the vision slightly to reflect these realities. We suggest the inclusion of explicit references to: resilient and adaptable communities, environmental sustainability and climate justice, intercultural belonging and diversity, and active civic participation and participatory democracy. The revised vision could therefore read: 'To create resilient, sustainable, inclusive and empowered communities, where all people - regardless of background - have the means, opportunities and supports to shape their futures, participate fully in civic life, and enjoy social, cultural, economic and environmental well-being.' Carlow PPN believes this wording would better capture the evolving role of communities as key partners in democratic decision-making, environmental stewardship, and social cohesion. Furthermore, in rural counties like Carlow, there must be a stronger acknowledgement of place-based disadvantage. The vision should recognise that sustainable development is not just about economics or services, but also about enabling rural communities to retain identity, thrive culturally, and access digital, transport and health infrastructure equitably. The values underpinning the vision - collaboration, transparency, equality, and empowerment - remain as essential today as they were in 2019. However, implementation needs to be more consistent. Carlow PPN encourages that the new strategy include measurable outcomes and stronger mechanisms for monitoring implementation and community engagement at local level. In conclusion, Carlow PPN supports the continuation of the existing vision in principle but recommends modest changes to strengthen its relevance and clarity. The next five-year strategy must actively enable communities to be not just recipients of services, but co-creators of solutions in a more resilient, inclusive and participative Ireland.

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?

500 words max

Carlow Public Participation Network (PPN) broadly supports the six high-level ambitions outlined in the previous Sustainable, Inclusive and Empowered Communities strategy. These ambitions continue to reflect the core priorities of the community and voluntary (C&V) sector in Carlow and nationally. However, in light of evolving challenges and community dynamics, we believe that some ambitions could be strengthened and additional focus areas incorporated.

1. **A Thriving Community and Voluntary Sector** This ambition remains central. However, the reality on the ground in Carlow and elsewhere is that many community and voluntary organisations are struggling to remain viable due to rising operational costs, funding uncertainties, and volunteer burnout. According to the Carlow Local Economic and Community Plan (LECP) 2023 - 2028, 'resource constraints are limiting the capacity of community groups to respond to local needs, particularly in rural areas.' A stronger emphasis on core funding, multi-annual supports, and governance capacity-building is essential if the sector is to thrive.
2. **A Strengthened Partnership Between Government and the Sector** Partnership must move beyond consultation to shared decision-making and co-production of policy. Carlow PPN sees potential to enhance this ambition through greater recognition of the role of PPNs and other local engagement structures as conduits for civic voice, especially in influencing local policy through Local Community Development Committees (LCDCs) and Strategic Policy Committees (SPCs).
3. **Community Supports Underpinned by Societal Value and Community Need** This remains vital. However, we suggest the inclusion of data-informed planning and inclusive digital access as core tools for aligning supports with real need. Carlow LECP notes that access to services and digital exclusion are ongoing issues in both rural and urban disadvantaged areas in the county. Targeted responses must be informed by local evidence and inclusive consultation.
4. **Resilient Communities Empowered to Meet Emerging Challenges** This ambition needs to explicitly include climate resilience and social cohesion, given Ireland's national and international commitments. The Carlow LECP highlights sustainability and climate action as cross-cutting themes. Communities must be supported to build local green initiatives, prepare for climate impacts, and ensure inclusion of new communities, including migrants and asylum seekers, in local responses.
5. **Empowered Communities Informing and Shaping Responses** This remains critical, and Carlow PPN strongly supports investment in capacity-building for democratic participation, especially for disadvantaged groups. Mechanisms to ensure that consultation leads to action must be embedded in the strategy.
6. **A Thriving Volunteering Culture** Volunteerism is at the heart of community life in Carlow, but retention is a growing challenge. We recommend embedding volunteer succession planning, youth engagement, and employer-supported volunteering in the new strategy. This aligns with the LECP's priority of strengthening social capital and connectedness.

Suggested Ambition: We propose a seventh ambition: 'Inclusive and Equitable Communities Free from Structural Barriers.' This would recognise the need to tackle persistent inequalities related to income, disability, ethnicity, age, and rural isolation — priorities also reflected in Carlow LECP goals to 'address deprivation and social exclusion' and 'foster intercultural understanding.' In conclusion, Carlow PPN supports the retention of the six original ambitions, with revisions to reflect current realities and the addition of a seventh ambition focused on equality and inclusion.

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?

500 words max

Carlow PPN welcomes the opportunity to reflect on the strategic objectives of the current Sustainable, Inclusive and Empowered Communities strategy. We believe many of the existing objectives remain highly relevant and should be retained, with some strengthened and others expanded to address emerging challenges. Most Relevant Objectives Strengthening Participative Approaches and the Role of PPNs The objective to 'develop and strengthen participative approaches to the development of public policy and programming', underpinned by a strong and independent community and voluntary infrastructure, is of central importance. This is closely linked to the objective to 'develop and strengthen Public Participation Networks (PPNs) as the primary mechanism for communities to engage with local government decision-making.' Carlow PPN sees these two as foundational. PPNs provide the structure for genuine bottom-up engagement, and their development must remain a key strategic focus. Investment in PPNs' staffing, capacity, and visibility is vital for enabling meaningful participation. Supporting Marginalised Communities to Participate The strategic objective focused on securing meaningful consultation, inclusion and participation, particularly by non-engaging and marginalised communities, is essential in addressing long-standing inequalities. In Carlow, the LECP 2023–2028 highlights challenges for one parent families, Travellers, migrants, and people with disabilities, who often face barriers to engagement. Targeted resources, outreach, and culturally competent approaches are needed to ensure these groups are not just consulted, but empowered to influence policy and planning. Capacity Development for Organisations and LCDCs Strengthening the capacity of organisations supporting communities, as well as the operational capacity of LCDCs, is crucial. Carlow PPN notes the need for continued training and resources for both statutory and community actors to support inclusive engagement, particularly where volunteer-led groups are struggling with administrative burdens and compliance demands. The LECP also stresses the importance of strong collaborative governance, which LCDCs are well-placed to deliver, if properly resourced. Climate

Change and the SDGs The objective to support engagement with Climate Change adaptation and mitigation strategies and to strengthen understanding and capacity for SDG implementation is increasingly urgent. Carlow PPN supports stronger integration of climate justice into community development practice, and the recognition of the vital role local communities play in delivering environmental sustainability. Carlow's LECF highlights 'Just Transition' as a guiding principle, calling for climate action to be both inclusive and equitable. Proposed Additional Objectives Digital Inclusion and Capacity Digital exclusion is a persistent issue in rural counties like Carlow. A new objective should focus on digital inclusion and capacity-building, ensuring communities have the skills and access to participate fully in online consultations, training, and services. This includes investment in digital literacy, broadband infrastructure, and accessible platforms for civic engagement. Resilience and Community Well-being We recommend the inclusion of a strategic objective focused on building community resilience and well-being, with a holistic understanding of health (mental, social, environmental). This should support communities in responding to trauma, social fragmentation, and ongoing crises such as housing and energy poverty. Conclusion Carlow PPN supports the retention of most existing objectives, particularly those linked to participative democracy, inclusion, climate action, and capacity-building. However, we urge that digital inclusion and community resilience be recognised as core strategic pillars in the next phase. The strategy must be future-proofed to support communities in navigating rapid change while fostering meaningful and inclusive participation at every level.

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?

500 words max

Carlow PPN welcomes the review and renewal of strategic actions - the previous strategy laid strong foundations, but the next strategy must be more action-oriented, better resourced, and more responsive to the evolving needs of communities in the current social, economic and environmental context. Priority Strategic Actions for Inclusion Introduce a Sustainable Core Funding Model Carlow PPN strongly supports the continuation and expansion of the commitment to 'introduce a sustainable funding model for the community and voluntary sector.' Many local organisations in Carlow, including volunteer-led groups, experience serious funding insecurity, which undermines their ability to plan, retain staff and deliver consistent services. The next strategy must prioritise: Multi-annual funding streams Core operational support (not only project-based funding) Simplified and harmonised reporting mechanisms Strengthen Participatory Infrastructure – especially PPNs To ensure that community voices shape public policy, greater investment in PPNs is needed. This includes: Clear

statutory recognition of PPNs' role Adequate staffing and funding to support outreach, inclusion, and capacity-building Stronger integration between PPNs, LCDCs and other local decision-making structures PPNs should be supported to develop stronger local linkages with groups who are under-represented in participatory processes, such as youth, new communities, and people living in Direct Provision. Inclusive and Ongoing Capacity-Building Training must be sustained and inclusive. The next strategy should include: A national framework for ongoing education and training for volunteers, community workers, and board members Access to governance, financial, legal and digital skills training Targeted leadership development for under-represented groups, including women, migrants, Travellers, and people with disabilities Digital and Communications Infrastructure for Community Participation A new strategic action is needed to address digital exclusion and ensure equitable participation in a digital-first society. This includes: Investment in community digital hubs and training Development of accessible, multilingual digital consultation platforms Resources for small organisations to build digital communication capacity Resilience, Climate Justice and Just Transition Given the climate crisis and rising cost of living, the new strategy must link community development with climate action. Actions should include: Community capacity-building on climate adaptation, circular economy and energy efficiency Funding for local sustainability initiatives Support for community-owned renewable energy and biodiversity projects Carlow's LECP prioritises "Just Transition" and "Environmental Sustainability" as cross-cutting themes. Strategic actions must enable local responses to national targets. Support for Intercultural Community Development With increasing diversity in counties like Carlow, targeted actions must: Promote anti-racism and intercultural understanding Support community integration of asylum seekers and refugees Ensure cultural competence training is embedded in state and community services Conclusion Carlow PPN urges that the next strategy be ambitious, practical, and inclusive. Specific actions must focus on sustainable funding, participatory infrastructure, digital inclusion, intercultural work, and climate resilience. With the right supports in place, communities across Ireland can continue to be drivers of innovation, inclusion, and collective well-being.

Name of Organisation:

Carlow Public Participation Network

County:

Carlow

The Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht, together with the Cross-Sectoral Group on Local and Community Development, wish to thank you for completing this online stakeholder consultation.

Contact

communitypolicy@drcdg.gov.ie

