

Submission to
Seanad Eireann
Public Consultation on the Future of Local Democracy

By
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Introduction

Local authorities form an essential part of Irish life. Ahead of local elections next year, the Seanad Public Consultation Committee is interested in exploring the Future of Local Democracy across a number of themes:

- Public engagement and participation in the local government process and functions
- The powers of local authorities
- The impact of changes to the local government process, such as the abolition of town councils and the introduction of directly elected mayors

There has been a reduction of powers to councillors and towards central government and local authority executives through various forms such as the Local Government Reform Act 2014 and overarching national policy documents and frameworks. The time is ripe to conduct such a public consultation on the future of this most important arm of government. In particular, ways should be sought in which gender balance can be achieved on local authorities, encouraging representation on local authorities from minority groups in Ireland and ensuring that decisions impacting local people are made at a local level.

Seanad Public Consultation Committee Objectives

The Seanad Public Consultation Committee will look at issues in relation to the future of local democracy including the below:

- Challenges of getting candidates for local elections
- Representation of women, minorities, and new Irish groups
- Powers of local authority members
- Impact of overarching legislation and national policy documents on the functioning of local authorities and the role of its elected members and executive
- Comparisons with other countries' local democratic structures
- Consideration of the time involved in the role of councillors and how this impacts on their careers, family life and wellbeing
- How local government can play a greater role and have a positive impact on the challenges we face such as in the areas of climate action, housing, infrastructure, regional development, etc.
- Cross border cooperation at local government level across the island of Ireland
- Supports available to councillors
- Address the powers and functions between the executive and the elected council
- Examine devolving more powers to the local authorities through the legislative process to strengthen and enhance local democracy
- Examine training provided to elected members of local authorities in order to discharge their duties; and
- Addressing the issue of abuse, threats and harassment in local government, and the importance of civility in public life.

Seanad Consultation Process:

The Seanad Public Consultation Committee is particularly interested in hearing from, and the views and/or experiences of:

- Members of the public and local community groups
- Those representing minorities, women for election and young people, and reflective of the diversity of Irish society
- Academics and experts in the field of local democracy
- Ministers and members of local authorities past and present
- AILG & LAMA and their counterparts in Northern Ireland and other jurisdictions
- Secretaries General and representatives of political parties
- Responsible Departments
- Current and former local authority CEOs/Directors of Service; and those working in local government

In addition, the Committee may invite witnesses to make oral presentations to the Seanad Public Consultation Committee in public hearings.

The Seanad Public Consultation Committee will draft and publish a report in which it will make findings and recommendations. When its report has been published, the Committee will present findings and request a debate with the Minister or relevant Ministers in the Seanad.

Carlow PPN Basis for Submission

Carlow Public Participation Network (PPN) is a network of community, voluntary, social inclusion, and environmental organisations that seek to improve communities around the county. Carlow PPN has around 370 member groups, who represent community-based organisations, associations, clubs, societies, and charities. Through representation on Council committees, consultation processes, policy submissions, and other means, we aim to enable the community to be represented in decision-making processes that affect people.

During 2019, Carlow PPN brought community groups together to develop *a shared vision for community wellbeing* for the County of Carlow. Through these meetings and online consultations, community groups were asked what their aspirations were for their community for generations to come. These contributions have formed the '**Vision for Community Wellbeing for the County**'. This guiding Vision informs the work of Carlow PPN Representatives on county policy and decision-making bodies.

What is this Vision for Community Wellbeing?

Although we often think about wellbeing in terms of good physical and mental health, it is also a combination of social, economic, environmental, cultural, and political conditions identified by individuals and their communities as essential for them to flourish and fulfil their potential. It can describe the wider conditions needed by individuals and communities to have a better quality of life, a healthier environment and increased prosperity.

Considering all aspects of community wellbeing helped identify actions that can be undertaken by communities alongside local and national government.

It was developed through an open, participative, transparent process which involved all member groups.

Participation, Democracy and Good Governance: Vision:

In the County of Carlow there is meaningful participation in civic society across all age ranges where transparency and accountability are held in high regard. Citizens are properly informed and understand the structures and processes of government and actively engage in these. Proactive local government communicates and engages with communities and demonstrates that it prioritises their wishes and wellbeing. Resources and supports are available for the effective operation and administration of community groups.

- There are mechanisms in place to ensure the voices of all groups in our community are included in decision making that affects them.
- Relevant best practice is adopted in all agencies, organisations and voluntary groups.



Carlow PPN facilitated open consultations across the three Carlow Municipal Districts as follows:

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| 1. Monday 23 rd September at 1pm | Seven Oaks Hotel, Carlow |
| 2. Tuesday 24 th September at 1pm | Tullow Library, Tullow, Co. Carlow |
| 3. Wednesday 25 th September at 4pm | Lord Bagenal Hotel, Leighlinbridge, Co. Carlow |

This submission is based on what we heard from PPN member groups based in County Carlow.

1. Public engagement and participation in the local government process and functions

Carlow PPN facilitated 3 consultations on *The Future of Local Democracy*. The role of the PPN is to advance community and voluntary interests using community development principles. The PPN works in partnership with Carlow County Council and local development agencies to deliver meaningful community led participation that benefits Carlow local communities.

When it comes to participative democracy and voting, PPN member groups we met felt there is insufficient knowledge about who can vote in local elections particularly amongst new Irish groups such as Ukrainians, Syrians, Spanish and Polish nationalities, who seem to be unaware of their voting rights.

PPN members suggested that an information campaign in different languages needs to be carried out to inform people of their democratic right. For example, in Carlow there are two mosques, a strong Latvian community, and two Polish schools, where there is a captive audience who could be informed of the process to register to vote. Printed material in various languages could be made available about registering to vote, and the benefits of voting could be given to school-going children to bring home to their parents.

An interesting talking point with people would be to ask them about the local democratic structures in their country of origin compared to in Ireland.

In discussing the impact of overarching legislation and national policy documents on the functioning of local authorities and the role of its elected members and executive, PPN members felt that statutory documents are too long, meaningless, unreadable and repetitive. Documents need to be written in plain English to make them accessible to the ordinary person. PPN members also felt there are too many county plans that don't connect together, such as the County Development Plan, the Local Economic and Community Plan (LECP), Local Development Plans. All plans have to include Natura 2000, and in cases environmental impact statements which relate back to development plans – the question arose then '*when are departments going to start coordinating themselves to eliminate these repetitive consultations and documents*'?

PPN representatives and member groups felt Local Government don't pay attention to the Public Participation Networks (PPN) and are not using the PPN as the main vehicle to carry out consultations. While elected members have a political agenda set by their political party rather than the community they represent; the PPN is more community focused – when the local authority is putting consultations together, the PPN needs to have input at the earliest stage so that the consultation that follows is feasible – that obstacles are identified and dealt with at the earliest stage – political agendas can be a barrier to this.

The time commitment was also discussed as a deterrent to getting involved in politics, elected members are 'on call' 24 hours a day and this is not feasible for Councillors with young families.

In discussing representation of women, minorities, and new Irish groups members felt as we still live in a patriarchal society, opportunities for women entering politics is an ongoing problem with lack of support when on maternity leave and no creche facilities available. These concerns are deterrents to women entering local politics and also raise the concern of achieving a gender balance in local authorities. These concerns need to be facilitated by providing wrap around supports at a local level.

In running for office; issues which arose were limited access to resources, even at local level, can be expensive. Potential candidates may not have the financial resources to run a campaign, which can deter them from participating. The nomination process can be complex, requiring nomination by a political party. Meeting these requirements can be a barrier for potential candidates. Many citizens may not be aware of the opportunities to run for local office or may not understand the importance of local elections. Educating potential candidates and voters about the significance of local government can be a challenge as can ensuring diversity in local government and gender representation.

Some suggested solutions to these concerns are encouraging women, minorities, and underrepresented groups to run for office is essential for a more inclusive democracy. To address these challenges and encourage greater participation in local elections in Ireland, efforts should be made to simplify nomination procedures, provide financial support or incentives for candidates, increase civic education, and promote the importance of local government. Additionally, measures to enhance diversity and reduce the influence of negative campaigning can contribute to a more inclusive and robust local electoral process.

2. The powers of local authorities

PPN members voiced their opinion that the Cathaoirleach and the Leas Cathaoirleach should be in a position to speak more freely without having to consider their role versus their political viewpoint as a public representatives.

Members also raised concerns around harassment of elected members in carrying out their duties, and the risks being associated with the job. In relation to the forthcoming local elections, in a few months' time political parties will be organising their hustings for their candidates. After what was witnessed at the Dail last week where Dail members were harassed leaving the Dail, there is concern that there may be hooliganism present at the hustings that they may have to be abandoned. The issue is if more people are attending with a different 'agenda' - people from other communities may be afraid to attend. A suggestion which was made follows Minister McIntee's recent comment about considering the Irish Terrorism Act legislation in these cases. These new issues in our community could be dealt with via the Seanad and/or Members of the Dáil to introduce a new law or amend an existing law by bringing forward a Bill for discussion.

Members felt the Local Authority should have more power to make their own decisions relating to their own county. As many Government Departments are based in Dublin, sometimes there is a lack of awareness in rural areas. What works in urban areas may not work in rural areas.

3. The impact of changes to the local government process, such as the abolition of town councils and the introduction of directly elected mayors

In 2014, the Irish government made significant changes to the local government system, including the abolition of town councils. Prior to this reform, Ireland had a tiered local government system that included county councils, town councils, and city councils. The decision to abolish town councils and reduce the number of local authorities was primarily driven by the need to streamline local governance and reduce costs during a period of economic austerity. PPN members have stated that they would like the Local Authority to have more power in their local areas and need to be leading the way/ showing communities best practice when it comes to community development.

It was also said that if the council could bring back the '*old housing schemes*', that seemed to work well in the 1970s/1980s where people were offered the opportunity to purchase their home from the local authority. This point comes back to the earlier point about local issues being dealt with locally, rather than nationally.

Another matter that was raised was around the constant re-election of the same people over and over at local elections. If women are to enter the political arena, there is no place for women when outgoing Councillors 'hold seats' through family legacy which leaves no space for women coming forward. It was further suggested that there needs to be a discussion around how to implement a 50/50 gender bias on local councils.

PPN members noted that the elected members and PPN representatives have the power to influence government to change national policy. Local Government has become very dependent on community volunteers to do the work of the Local Authority, for example, due to staff shortages in Carlow Local Authority, the community groups rally around in the evenings and at the weekends doing clean-ups, collecting rubbish, planting areas in estates, keeping the towns and villages tidy, highlighting problems in communities.

Members felt that a public information campaign would be useful to inform people of the work of the Local Authority, what their role is and what the role of the elected members is.

Members felt that the Local Authority aren't leading the way in terms of supporting communities and that this comes back to the abolition of the town councils which led to a weakening of local democracy, many members felt that a restoration of local democracy and town councils would be welcome. In previous years, we have seen rising centralization in Ireland. The question rose about how to make sure that Ireland has true local democracy and that local council members make choices on a variety of matters that have an influence on their communities. Many other countries have local governments that have more influence over things like housing provision, older persons care, social care, policing, education, and health services.