

Department of Rural and Community Development Statement of Strategy 2021-2023

A Submission by the Citizens Information Board (October 2020)

Introduction and context

The Citizens Information Board (CIB) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission on the Department of Rural and Community Development Statement of Strategy (DRCD) 2021-2023. The role of the Department will be particularly important in ensuring that rural communities remain resilient, vibrant and inclusive during the difficult Covid-19 period and afterwards. In particular, there will be a need to ensure that all citizens remain socially engaged through work, volunteering or training/education and, for more vulnerable groups, through the availability of strong social networks. This will be especially important for younger age cohorts. Also, the principle of inter-generational solidarity should underpin the new Strategy with a particular emphasis on harnessing the skills and talents of young people to support vulnerable older people.

CIB delivery services – the national network of Citizens Information Services (CISs), the Citizens Information Phone Service (CIPS), the Money Advice and Budgeting Service (MABS) and the National Advocacy Service for people with disabilities (NAS) – have significant engagement with individuals and local communities through their information, advice and advocacy roles.¹ These services deal on an ongoing and regular basis with people who experience significant difficulties relating to transitioning from welfare to work, housing, over-indebtedness, transport and mobility difficulties and accessing supports and services. The engagement with clients typically involves multiple information requests, requests for advice/assistance and advocacy supports (CISs and CIPS)), rescheduling personal debt with multiple lenders (MABS) and complex interventions on behalf of people with disabilities (NAS).

CIB has a strong commitment to social inclusion and to developing the potential of local communities in that regard. CIB services broadly reflect the principle of empowerment and people being able to self-advocate and they facilitate people in overcoming access blockages to services including those arising from the digitalisation of vital services. MABS promotes an inclusive approach to people who experience financial exclusion and/or indebtedness. The availability (or lack

¹ CISs dealt with over half a million clients and over 1 million queries in 2019; CIPS had some 143,000 callers; MABS helped over 42,000 people helped with problem debt through its services and helpline; and NAS provided representative advocacy support to over a 1,000 people and information and advice to over 3,000.

thereof) of quality public services and supports is a key concern for many of the people who use CIB services, particularly people with disabilities and those in precarious work situations.

CIB has in various submissions² over the years regularly highlighted the need for a more integrated approach to local community development and social inclusion. Feedback from CISs and CIPS, based on the experience of dealing with queries from the public, provides an insight into some of the systemic difficulties experienced by people in respect of staying out of poverty, finding meaningful and adequately paid work and avoiding homelessness. In recent months, as might be expected, many of the issues highlighted by CIB services related to Covid-19, in particular, job losses, reduced income, increasing debt problems and mental health difficulties associated with trying to cope with the new 'normal'.

Implications of Programme for Government for DRCD Strategy

The Statement of Strategy 2020-2023 will be required to give effect to not just the Programme for Government commitments but reflect as well the priorities set out in a number of other Strategies, the *Action Plan for Rural Development*, the *Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025*; in *Sustainable, Inclusive and Empowered Communities*, and in *Putting People First - Action Programme for Effective Local Government*.

Priorities in the Programme for Government relevant to the DRCD include:

- Publication and implementation of a new Rural Policy
- A regular series of Rural Ideas Fora to foster ongoing contributions from communities
- A sustainable Rural Mobility Plan including an enhancement of Local Link
- A Rural Development Programme that is led by independent Local Action Groups and supported by Local Community Development Committees
- A new National Digital Strategy (and including the full roll out of Broadband)

The commitment in the Programme to support, through a consultative process, community groups, arts and cultural bodies, sports clubs, voluntary organisations, and charities to recover and enhance their impact in the aftermath of Covid-19 is important and will need to be provided for in the new DRCD Strategy.

The reference in the Programme to encouraging young people to participate in community development initiatives through special awards for youth-led involvement to assist young people in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath will be critically important. The Strategy should include some priority targeting of young people with disabilities and young people experiencing mental health difficulties living in rural communities.

CIB considers that the commitment in the Programme to build on and implement the National Social Enterprise Policy is a centrally important one. It is an area for which provision needs to be made in the DCRD Strategy. A social enterprise approach is important in creating a developmental infrastructure within which volunteers can contribute in innovative ways and provide a new model

² See, for example, Submissions on *Migrant Integration Strategy*; *National Volunteering Strategy*, *Evaluation of Community Banking and Local Provision of Banking and Financial Services*; [Citizens Information Board Website: Submissions and Policy Recommendations](#).

for delivering social support services. Social enterprises may often be best placed to deliver support services to disadvantaged communities, people with disabilities and older persons requiring care and support.³

In addition, social enterprise has the potential to create sustainable, stable and high-quality employment for relatively vulnerable social groups and, in so doing, is likely to generate multiplier effects by collaborating with other local and community development initiatives. Social enterprises can also be an integral part of the local development infrastructure, can act as a strong catalyst for change, enhance service integration at local level and enable individualisation of support and care according to individual needs and preferences. The need to encourage and support local communities to develop integrated bottom-up approaches to Covid-19 will be an important consideration.

The local public banking model as set out in the 2018 Joint Report on Local Public Banking in Ireland⁴ has as one its primary goals to achieve regional and rural development through the support of a banking infrastructure that can support a vibrant indigenous productive sector. Clearly, social enterprises can play a significant role in the latter.

Ensuring that nobody is left behind⁵

A common feature of the lives of citizens who use CIB supported services is their multi-faceted income support needs and frequently a sense of being left behind. These citizens are typically reliant on combinations of income from available work (very often part-time and atypical) and social welfare supports. They need to be able to retain engagement with mainstream employment and social integration structures during and after the pandemic. The new strategy, therefore, needs to make provision for consolidating and enhancing a number of approaches and initiatives that have been to the forefront of policy on local development and debate at local level over a number of years and as set out in various policy statements and previous strategies, in particular:

- Encouraging local communities to develop integrated bottom-up approaches
- Building community capacity and stimulating social innovation) by encouraging the development and discovery of untapped potential within communities

These factors are particularly important in the current context.

The need to actively engage disadvantaged and marginalised communities is clearly a critical consideration in promoting social inclusion. Building on the potential of local communities to address the issue of poverty and social exclusion will be particularly challenging in the Covid-19 climate. There will be a need to achieve an appropriate balance between reliance on local communities and exchequer funding for various initiatives.

³ See CIB Submission on National Social Enterprise Policy, [Consultation on Draft National Social Enterprise Policy for Ireland 2019 - 2022. Citizens Information Board's response to the Dept of Rural & Community Development Consultation.](#)

⁴ [Joint Report on Local Banking in Ireland, Department of Finance, 2018](#)

⁵ See CIB Pre-budget 2021 Submission "[Leaving Nobody Behind](#)". [Protecting Citizens' Rights and Entitlements post Covid 19.](#)

Consultation with local communities

As far back as 2001, the OECD⁶ noted that strengthening relations with citizens is a sound investment in better policy-making and a core element of good governance. It allows government to tap new sources of policy-relevant ideas, information and resources when making decisions. Equally important, it contributes to building public trust in government.

CIB services at local and regional level (CISs, MABS and NAS) can play a vitally important role in the development of local information hubs, the empowering of individuals to self-advocate and in providing feedback to Government on systemic issues affecting local communities. There is potential for more collaboration between CIB delivery services and other agencies at local level to enhance people's (individuals and groups) ability to access and use information to enable a more effective engagement with developmental opportunities and support services.

Enhancing the role of the Community and Voluntary Sector

Covid-19 has again highlighted the importance of communities and, particularly the role of local community and voluntary organisations. It is abundantly clear that volunteer-led organisations make a significant contribution to the social, cultural, economic and environmental fabric of Ireland. In addition, they have huge experience and expertise in the issues that directly affect people, communities and the environment in their areas of operation. Support for this sector must, therefore, be manifested in investment in programmes that support community engagement and enable communities to move towards sustainability. Support should take into account the fact that increased administrative and regulatory duties imposed upon this sector mean that resources that would otherwise be dedicated to frontline and core services are diverted to administration.

There should also be a return to a situation where the concept of community development in rural areas and areas of high disadvantage is seen as an integral part of developing sustainable communities. The community development approach is based on the principles of collective action, the participation of the most disadvantaged people and communities, addressing root causes of poverty, social exclusion and inequalities in a way that ensures that those affected have a say in how the issues are addressed. Individuals and groups share in identifying their needs and in identifying solutions to those needs. It is also the case that a key feature of the community development approach traditionally (and the related involvement of NGOs at local level) was to pioneer new and innovative responses to local needs.

Capacity-building among voluntary and community organisations to engage in a partnership approach to planning and policy-making should take into account the need to:

- Eliminate local and regional discrepancies in levels and methods of funding
- Eliminate dysfunctional competition
- Maintain a balance between service provision/development activities and fundraising requirements

Role of information in local and community development

It is widely acknowledged that access to information plays a key role in individual and community capacity-building and in enabling people to both access services, benefits and supports to which

⁶ Citizens as Partners. OECD Handbook on Information, Consultation and Public Participation in Policy-Making.

they are entitled and to engage in meaningful dialogue about both individual and community needs and how these needs can be addressed.

CISs/CIPS users regularly report difficulties with accessing information from public bodies at national and local/regional level about services and supports to which they are entitled including, in particular, difficulties with telephone access to public offices. Advocacy is a key element in accessing public services and CIB services play an important role in empowering people to access and use information and to self-advocate. For example, the information may be there but people have to search it out and may need help in this regard. Also, a person may frequently require the co-ordination of several elements to meet a particular service need. How to ensure integration of service delivery remains an ongoing challenge. One of the most urgent tasks is to integrate and co-ordinate e-Government in a manner which facilitates people who regularly need to contact a number of departments/local agencies in order to deal with a single service need, e.g., housing and related supports.

The challenge for local communities and local partnerships is to ensure that all citizens - taxpayers, social welfare recipients, workers, students, people with disabilities, members of the Travelling community and ethnic minorities, migrants, family carers – have a voice and are well informed as to how to make that voice heard. While community and voluntary organisations have a crucial role to play in this regard, their capacity to do so needs to be stimulated and supported by Government on an ongoing basis.

Supporting caring in the home

Many people, particularly women (many of whom are lone parents), take on dual responsibilities - caring within the family for children and for other dependent groups (people with disabilities and vulnerable older persons) -- and contributing to economic growth through participation in the workforce. There are two factors here that need to be taken into account in local and community development. Firstly, care in the home differs from other economic activities in that it involves a form of engagement which limits its potential for productivity increases. As a result, so-called 'non-economic' processes may be invisible and not included in the overall assessment of economic output. Secondly, the non-availability of affordable child-care in many areas presents a significant barrier to parents (particularly lone parents) in taking up work or activation programmes or engaging in voluntary activity. This issue is regularly referenced in feedback from CISs and CIPS and needs a stronger focus in promoting the social inclusion agenda.

Points for consideration in formulating the Strategy

- Maximising the potential of Public Participation Networks to enable local communities to fully participate in the development of innovative and creative responses to the challenges of Covid-19 will be particularly important.
- It is important that the Strategy is fully integrated with other government strategies and programmes, including, in particular, the National Volunteering Strategy and the Migration Integration Strategy.
- There is a need to create a climate where people are both encouraged and feel the need to become involved in the community across a wide spectrum of activities, social cultural,

sport, service provision and community development.

- Building on the concept of inter-generational solidarity, the potential of older people working as mentors to younger, less experienced people is one that could potentially should be applied much more widely than is currently the case – in local social enterprise settings, training and mentoring and in local community development initiatives.
- Resources available to local communities from different government programmes should be pooled and integrated at local community level in order to enhance collaboration, minimise competition and optimise value for money and outcomes for citizens.
- The potential of social enterprise at local level to create viable and sustainable jobs should be further explored with a view to facilitating the entry/re-entry to employment of specific social groups (people with low qualifications, young people who have never been employed, migrants and older workers who have been made redundant and women who have been out of the work force because of child-rearing responsibilities).

Overview

Networks such as CISs and MABS are in a key position to identify the concerns of individual citizens and accordingly to provide feedback to policy-makers about how policies and practices are impacting on people's lives - anomalies, inadequate service provision, emerging trends in particular areas and discrepancies between Government stated policy and citizen reality. The challenge is to develop a wide range of protocols and practices to engage people in a meaningful and active way in shaping services according to their needs and expectations.

Covid-19 has brought to the fore the vital role that the State and local government plays in providing basic services and supports for its citizens. It also and, perhaps, in a more fundamental way, brought into sharp focus the importance of local communities. As a society, we now need to make sure that the correct mechanisms are put in place to enable local communities to mitigate adverse economic shocks. This will require a strong strategic focus on building sustainable communities and ensuring that nobody gets left behind. As it becomes clear that the economy is not going to return immediately to where it was, we need to make sure that marginalised groups are protected from further social exclusion and disengagement and related feelings of not belonging and possible mental health difficulties. These considerations should be at the core of the Department of Rural and Community Development Statement of Strategy 2021-2023.