

# Finding your way around Local Government

Hilary Curley



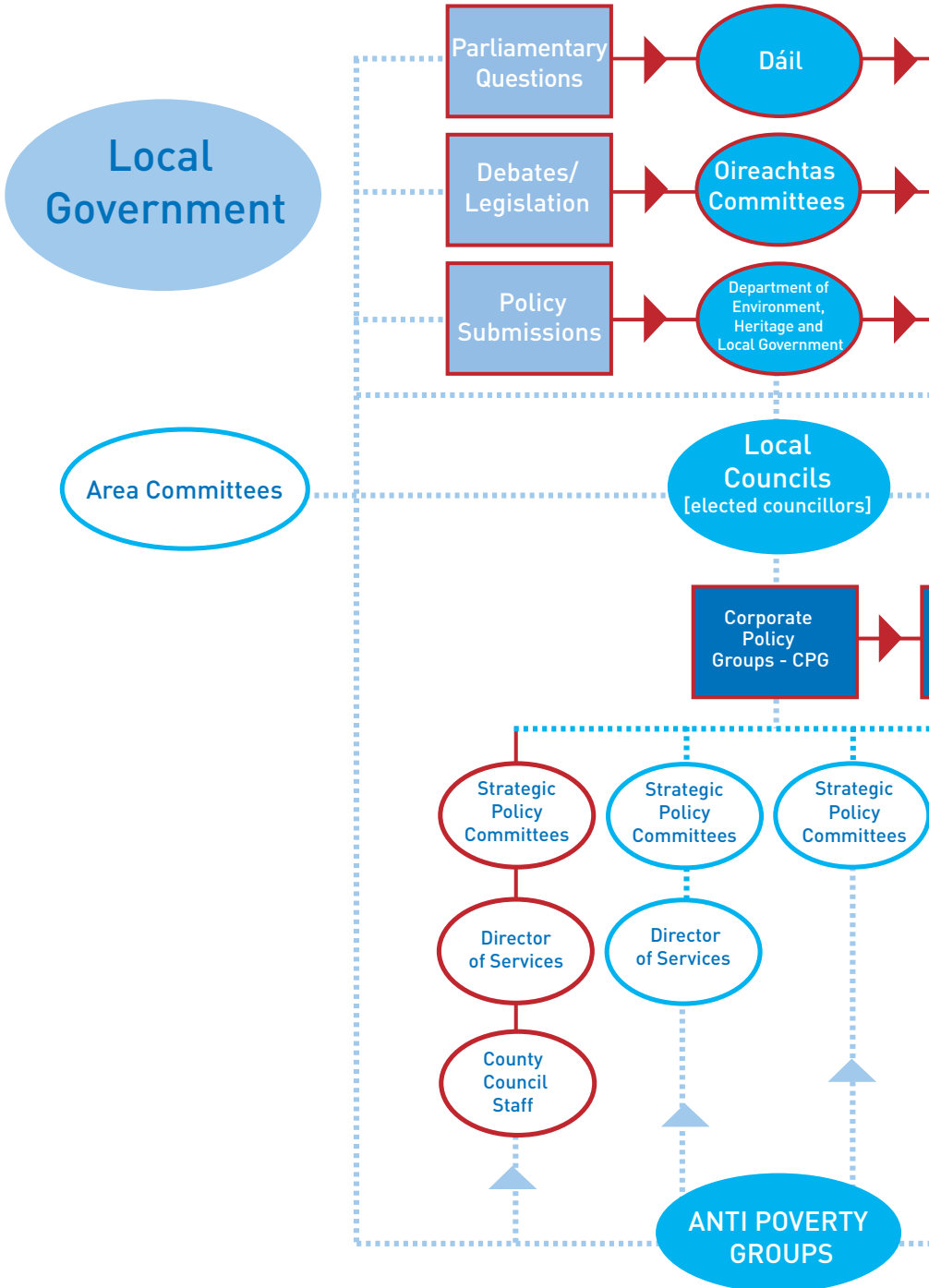
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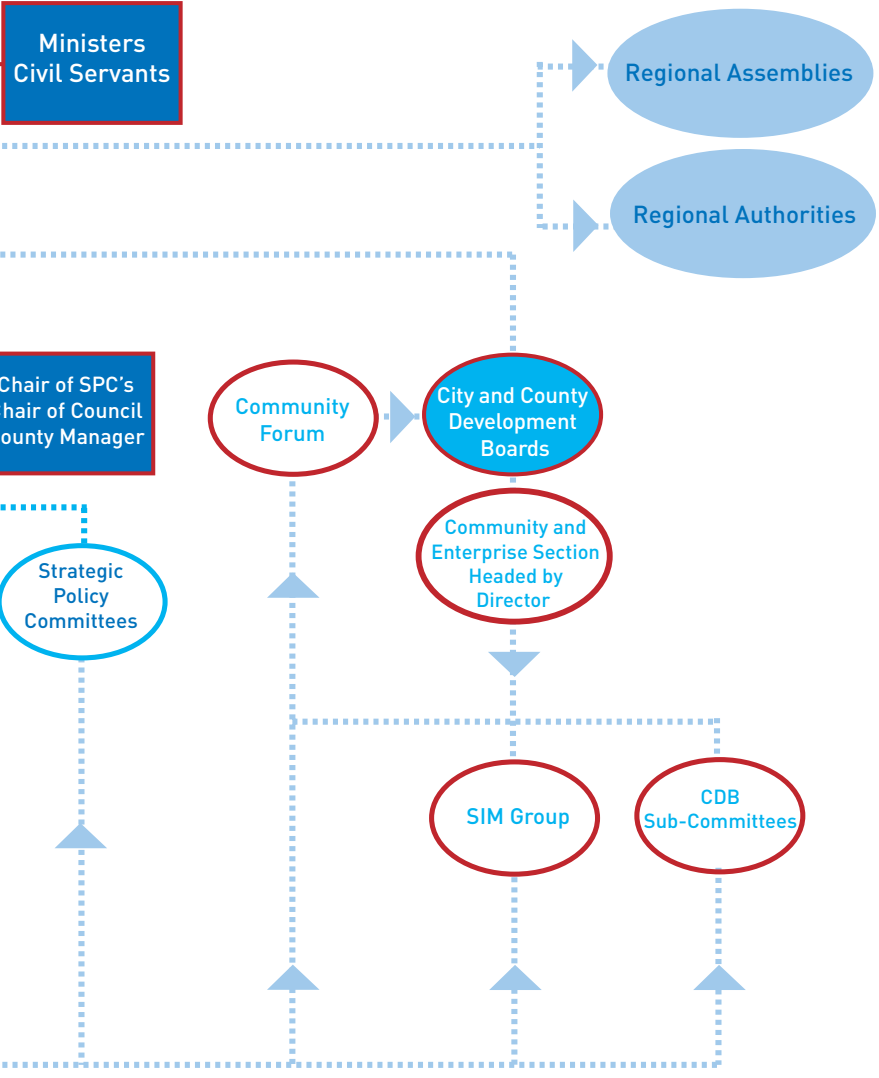
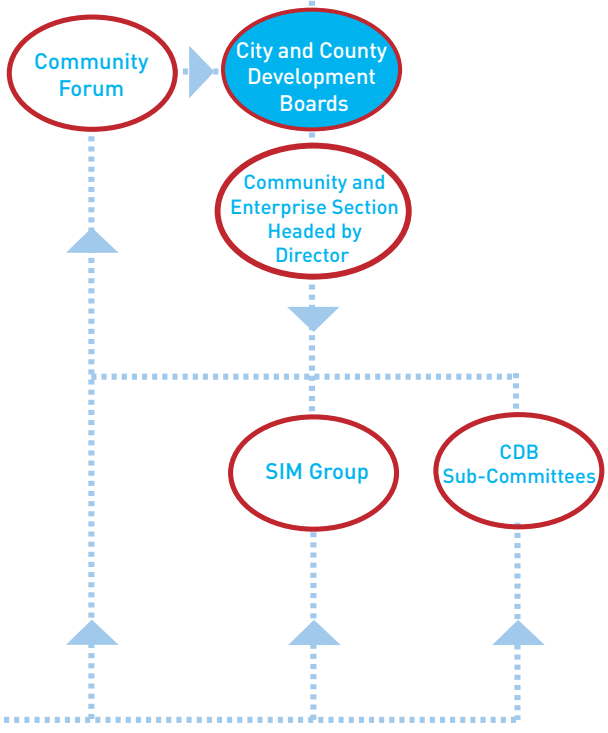
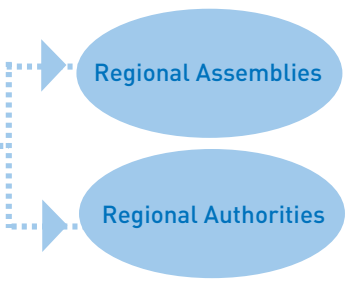
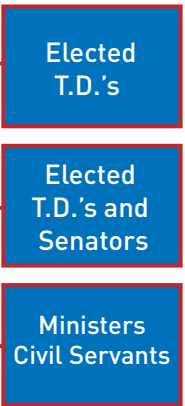


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# Local Government

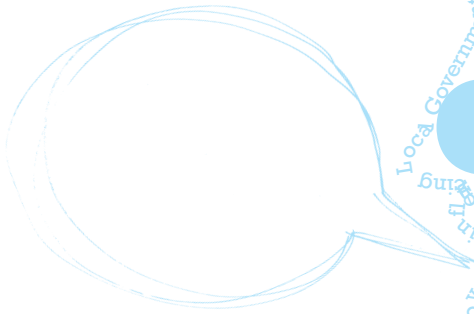
# Finding your way around





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Government influencing Local Government influencing Local Government  
Government  
Strategic Policy Committees  
Social Inclusion Measures Group  
Area Committees  
Regional  
Authorities  
LOCAL  
Councils  
Department of the Environment  
Heritage and Local Government  
City and County  
Development  
Boards  
Traveller Accommodation  
Consultative  
Committee  
Regional  
Authorities

 **Combat Poverty  
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## Foreword

The Combat Poverty Agency Act 1986 specifies Combat Poverty as a state advisory agency whose functions include: policy advice; research; project support, innovation and evaluation and public awareness of poverty. This work is undertaken through the current Strategic Plan 2005-2007, *Working for a Poverty-Free Ireland*.

In November 2005 Combat Poverty launched a three-year programme *Having Your Say* (see [www.combatpoverty.ie/havingyoursay](http://www.combatpoverty.ie/havingyoursay)). The aim of the programme is to strengthen the voices and practices of people and communities living in poverty in the development and implementation of anti-poverty policies and programmes.

Objective 2 of the *Having Your Say* Programme is designed to support the skills and capacity of the community and voluntary sector to understand the policy system.

This Guide: *Finding your Way around Local Government* is one of four companion titles published under this objective. The four guides are designed as practical tools to enable the community and voluntary sector with a focus on poverty to understand, navigate, analyse and influence the policy environment more effectively. These include Local Government, the Budget process in Ireland and Northern Ireland, and social welfare and family policy. Three of the Guides are published in partnership with Comhairle and the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA). A fourth Guide on health is produced in collaboration with the Combat Poverty *Building Healthy Communities* Programme.

Combat Poverty acknowledges Hilary Curley's work in producing three of the Guides. It is hoped that they will make a valuable contribution to a greater understanding of the policy system in Ireland, leading to better outcomes for people experiencing poverty.

October 2006  
Combat Poverty Agency



# Glossary

<b>CDB</b>	City and County Development Board
<b>SIM Groups</b>	Social Inclusion Measures Groups
<b>SPC</b>	Strategic Policy Committee
<b>CPG</b>	Corporate Policy Group
<b>TD</b>	Teachta Dala (elected representative to the Dail)
<b>DOEHLG</b>	the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government
<b>BMW</b>	Border, Midlands and West
<b>S&amp;E</b>	Southern and Eastern
<b>EU</b>	European Union
<b>NDP</b>	National Development Plan
<b>LAPS</b>	Local Anti-Poverty Strategy
<b>NAPS</b>	National Anti-Poverty Strategy



## Overview

The work of local government has always been central to the development of communities through their role in housing, planning, roads, amenities and environmental protection. In the last number of years, their involvement in the work of anti-poverty groups has increased, following the reform of local government in the late 1990s.

A number of local authorities now have social inclusion units; local councillors are represented on local partnership and community group structures; the local authorities support the work of City and County Development Boards, the Social Inclusion Measures Groups and the Community Fora.

While these new structures and new roles present challenges for many anti-poverty groups as they struggle to engage in a more meaningful way with local government, they also present opportunities to influence their other mainstream functions which are central to addressing poverty, e.g. housing, infrastructural development, recreational facilities, etc.

Outside of the role as provider of public services, the local authorities also have an important role in representing the voice of communities at local, regional and national level. This role is afforded to them through elections held every five years where the public gets to choose its own local representatives.

The range of areas where councillors have direct decision-making powers may be limited but their influencing power is significant in the wider policy development process.

The development of policy can be understood as a circular flow process – with the learning and experience gleaned from groups



working on the ground informing the policy-making process at local and national level, which in turn designs programmes and allocates resources that continue to fuel the work of local groups.


This is the theory, and groups do have an influential role to play in the policy process. However, in practice it is not so simple, for many reasons:

- People become so immersed in their own group or area that it is difficult to take the time, look around and see what relevant policy processes are coming down the line.
- The significant volume of information coming at people on a daily basis means that key information gets lost, critical times to influence policy are missed and decisions have been made without the input of people who are most affected by the policy decision in question.
- The range and complexity of the policy world is daunting and groups are unclear about who they should talk to, uncertain about how they can become involved and sceptical as to whether anyone will take what they have to say seriously.

Anti-poverty groups have a heavy workload, usually carried on the back of limited resources and volunteers with already busy lives. Engaging in policy work might seem just another extra duty, requiring too much time and delivering very little.

There are a number of tips a group should take on board that will help conserve energy and resources and make policy efforts more effective:

- Be very clear about what needs to be said: what the problem is, how it is manifesting itself, what could be done to address it. Try to speak in specifics rather than generalities and have real-life



examples or situations to back up your position.

- Document these problems as you go along. This makes it easier to compile an argument when necessary.
- If you are making a policy submission, keep it short and to the point.
- Identify what policy fora or spaces you are going to concentrate your energies on. Trying to engage with every individual, every strategy, every policy will simply dilute your efforts and sap your energy. What do you need to say, where do you need to say it and to whom do you need to say it?
- Identify the key people you need to keep in touch with – people from political parties; civil servants most related to your policy area; journalists who have a particular interest in social policy issues. Put work into building up informal networks and relationships with these people.

For groups working on the ground, with often limited resources and seemingly insurmountable problems, the policy development process may seem far removed from their every-day work. But in reality this is not the case. If the anti-poverty strategies and other anti-poverty related policies are to be focused and targeted on the real needs of people and communities who live in and experience poverty, they need to be informed and influenced by the work of groups around the country. Otherwise the policies that will be developed will be inappropriate, poorly targeted and ultimately ineffective.

# Section 1



## County, City and Town Councils

### What are they?

Local government is the umbrella term for all the County, City, Borough and Town Councils<sup>1</sup> around the country. It has two main functions: (i) the delivery of public services on behalf of the Government in counties and cities and (ii) representing the interests of its communities at all levels of government.

There are 29 County Council areas, and five City Council areas covering Dublin, Cork, Limerick, Galway and Waterford. There are also a number of town councils and borough councils (80 in total) operating within county council areas.

Each council area – county, city and town – has an elected council consisting of representatives (called ‘councillors’) from different political parties or independent candidates. Local elections to select council representatives are held every five years.

Local authority is the word used to describe the elected council members and the staff who work in councils around the country. The councils are the policy-making arm of the local authority. The day-to-day running of the local authority is handled by a County or City Manager.

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<sup>1</sup> Eighty towns in Ireland have town councils (in five of the 80 towns, the title ‘borough council’ is used) and each town or borough council carries out the local authority functions in its area.



## Local Authority Functions

Housing and Building	Provision of social housing, assessment of housing needs, housing strategies, homelessness, housing loans and grants, Traveller accommodation, voluntary housing, private rented sector, housing standards and estate management
Roads and Transportation	Road construction and maintenance, traffic management, public lighting, collection of motor taxes, driver licences, taxi licensing
Water and Sewerage	Water supply, waste water treatment, group water schemes, public conveniences
Planning and Development	Adoption of development plan, decisions on planning applications, urban or village renewal plans and works, heritage protection, industrial and tourism infrastructure and support
Environmental Protection	Waste collection and disposal, waste management planning, litter prevention, the fire service, civil defence, air/water pollution controls, burial grounds, building safety
Recreation and Amenity	Public libraries, parks and open spaces, swimming pools, recreation centres, the arts, culture, museums, galleries and other amenities
Agriculture, Education, Health and Welfare, Miscellaneous Services	Local authority financing; IT; Making nominations to vocational education committees and harbour boards; processing of higher education grants; veterinary services; maintaining the register of electors for elections; rate collection, provision of animal pounds

Extracted from 'Local Government and the Elected Member', DoEHLG, 2004.



The Manager in each City or County is assisted in his or her job by a number of Directors of Services – the equivalent of assistant manager positions. Each local authority is divided into different sections or directorates that correspond to the functions of the local authority.

A Director of Services is responsible for a particular basket of functions within the local authority, e.g. Director of Housing and Planning, Director of Environment and Water, and is supported by a staff complement.

Key members of the Directorate staff include Senior Executive Officers who look after specific areas of work within their section, e.g. Senior Executive Officer of Housing, and they report to the Director of their section who in turn reports to the County Manager.

The workings of the Town Councils are somewhat different, being smaller in nature. They are headed by the Town Manager who is responsible for the strategic development of the town. This role is usually taken on by one of the Directors of Services in the County Council.

The day-to-day running of matters concerning the town is looked after by the Town Clerk. The Town Engineer looks after all the infrastructural needs of the town. The work of the Town Councils is supported by a number of administration staff.

## Why are they important?

For groups involved in anti-poverty work, the local authorities represent government at a local level and deal with many issues directly related to social exclusion, e.g. accommodation, facilities, amenities, land-use, etc. They are vital from a service delivery and





from a policy-making point of view.

The decision-making powers of local councils are quite limited, extending to two main areas:

- the annual budget of the council; and
- the County Development Plan – this is the blueprint for future land-use in the county, prepared every six years.


Local councils have significant influence over the area of roads, housing and planning:

- They agree programmes for non-national roads in their city and county and feed into the national road-planning process.
- They prepare housing strategies and social and affordable action plans determining local authority housing provision over a period of years.
- They decide what infrastructure can be built and where.

Many of the decisions concerning provision of other public services (e.g. health and education) in cities and counties are made by central government and implemented locally by other state agencies. Councillors have seats on the management boards of these state agencies at local level, e.g. the Vocational Educational Committees (VECs).

Local councils are often consulted on the drafting of national public service strategies and programmes. Final decisions may rest at central level but the extent of the influence of local councils should not be underestimated.

County, City and Town Councils, as the local democratic arm of government, also have a role in representing the interests of their



communities at local, regional and national levels of government. Councillors are elected to speak on their community's behalf and make decisions on their community's behalf, and are one of the main channels through which political party headquarters keep informed about local issues, needs and concerns.


## How do they operate?

Local councils meet on average once a month, attended by elected councillors. Public notice of these meetings is given in the offices of the local council as well as other local information outlets. The agenda of the council meetings are generally available a week in advance from the corporate affairs section of the local authority which services the council meetings.

The policy direction of the council is driven through a Committee structure called Strategic Policy Committees (SPCs), set up to improve policy formulation and development within local councils (see Section 4).

The councils also operate another committee system called Area Committees. These work in particular geographic areas around the county or city which generally correspond to electoral areas (see Section 5).

The main working document of each local authority is the Corporate Plan. Essentially this is the business plan for the authority, setting out what it is going to do for the next five years, complete with objectives and actions. The five-year plan provides the framework for all the work undertaken by the council and for other strategies or plans that are written in that period.



Each section or directorate within the local authority develops its own work programme, flowing from the Corporate Plan, while also taking account of policy directives from the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government. The work programme gives more specific details on what the section (e.g. housing) will achieve, complete with actions, targets and timescales.

In the last number of years, Social Inclusion Units have been set up in a number of local authorities. These units have the task of bringing an anti-poverty focus to the work of the local authorities and incorporating this focus into the planning and delivery process. More recently, they have been given the additional focus of improving customer services within the local authorities to disadvantaged groups and people with disabilities.

The work of the units is carried out through information, research and support. They are staffed by a social inclusion officer and a researcher and are usually under the responsibility of the Council's Community and Enterprise section.



## Points of influence

Being informed is the key to influencing the work of the council – knowing what plans and strategies are coming up for development and linking in with the councillors to ensure your view is heard.

There are two particular policy spaces under the direct control of councillors that groups have an opportunity to influence: the Council Budget and the City/County Development Plan.

The first of these, the council budget, is produced in draft form towards the end of each year, usually around November. It is sent out



for consultation to all elected members and is also made available to the public at local authority offices or may be supplied to any member of the public on request. If a group has any concerns or suggestions about the budget, these should be communicated to the elected representatives before the budget meeting of the council.


Preparation of the budget usually begins in September, so lobbying for inclusion of actions and funding lines should take place between May and October. Groups should have their proposals drawn up, costed if possible, and also have indicated how their proposal links in with objectives for the county expressed in countywide plans or strategies.

The second key policy space, the City/County Development Plan, is again under the direct control of councillors. It is drawn up every six years and essentially sets out the blueprint for physical development in the city or county. The council sets out in the plan what land will be zoned for residential, amenity or business purposes, the kinds of developments proposed and the infrastructure necessary to support this development.

For groups that are involved in anti-poverty work linked with accommodation (e.g. Traveller accommodation, local authority housing), enterprise development, youth activities and amenities, input into the City/County Development Plan is essential. The plan is normally reviewed every two years, and after four years the preparation of another begins. Widespread consultation and publication of plans is central to the Development Plan process.

Finally, as mentioned above, councillors do not have final decision-making powers in many of the central government programmes delivered locally. However, they do have significant influencing power, and groups should not be hesitant to approach them. Because it





is impossible for any group to keep informed of every programme or policy being developed at national level, it is recommended that members of the group familiarise themselves with the strategy and policy documents most relevant to their work (see text box). This involves knowledge of when preparation of the document starts, who is preparing it, details of the process and who makes the decisions.

The group should then refine its message or proposal and ensure that all councillors are familiar with it so that when the Strategy or plan in question comes up for discussion at SPC or Council meetings there is a better chance that the group's views are represented.

The main point to note here is that groups have the opportunity to influence the planning and implementation of these work plans and strategies through the public consultation process, through the SPC process and through the ongoing review process.

Groups would need to be very clear about which part of the local authority's work plans most concern them and target their message and their energies accordingly.



**County Development Plan:** a blueprint for future land-use in the area. It is prepared every six years by the Planning section in the local authority and reviewed every two years. An extensive consultation process is involved in the preparation of the Development Plan and in the review process.

**Social and Affordable Housing Action Plan:** sets out what is proposed for housing in the area. It is prepared every five years by the Housing section in the local authority and goes to the Housing SPC for discussion. The first of these began in 2004 and they are subject to review in 2006.


**Traveller Accommodation Plan:** prepared by the Housing section in the local authority (see Section 6 for further details).

**Arts Strategy:** prepared by the Culture and Arts section (usually under the control of the Arts Officer) in the local authority. It progresses through the SPC with responsibility for Arts and Culture. Public consultation is sought as part of the strategy development.

## Who to target

The importance of getting to know your local councillors and maintaining a regular information flow cannot be over-emphasised. The councillors are the people elected to represent and make decisions on behalf of local people in their city and county. They can do this more effectively if they are informed about the poverty and social inclusion issues existing in counties and cities. Do not underestimate their influence directly at local, regional and national level.





Groups should get to know the staff in the local authority, particularly the Directors of Services and the Senior Executive Officers, because while it is the councillors who make the final decisions, the staff are the people who develop and shape the policy, plan or process.

## Key Targets

- Your local councillors
- Staff in the directorate or unit dealing with your area of activity

### Helpful hints

You may discover that some local councillors have a greater interest in anti-poverty work than others. Find out who they are, meet with them individually and agree a regular information flow between them and the group.

### Further information

Each local authority has a website that contains details on the work of the council, its responsibilities and contact information. The website address is available by contacting your local authority. Or you can log on to [www.environ.ie](http://www.environ.ie) and click on the local government tag in the left-hand side of the screen. Other more general information is available from the information site [www.oasis.gov.ie](http://www.oasis.gov.ie).



## Section 2



# City and County Development Boards

## What are they?

City and County Development Boards (CDBs) were set up in the year 2000 to promote co-operation and co-ordinate local services between state agencies, local development bodies, the community and voluntary sector, and local government. They are independent structures located in every city and county but operate under the umbrella of the local authority. As such, therefore, CDBs are serviced by staff in the Community and Enterprise section of the local authority, headed by a Director of Community and Enterprise.

The City and County Development Board is a partnership structure with representatives from the local authority,<sup>2</sup> state agencies, local development bodies, social partners and the community and voluntary sector.


## Why are they important?

The main task of the Development Boards is to produce a ten-year social, economic and cultural strategy for each city and county.<sup>3</sup> This Strategy pulls together the concerns and ambitions of the different member organisations and produces a vision or a plan for the city or county, complete with objectives and actions setting out how this vision will be achieved.

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2 Local authority representatives are comprised of the City or County Manager and the Chairpersons of the Council Strategic Policy Committees (see Section 4).

3 The ten-year Social, Economic and Cultural Strategy sits alongside the local authority's County or City Development Plan which details the physical development to take place over a number of years.



The Strategy is an important document. It acts as the framework within which social, economic and cultural development takes place in the county or city over the ten-year period. Social inclusion and anti-poverty work are central to the strategies that have been developed to date.

Every organisation (state, local government, local development, community group) is supposed to take account of this framework when preparing its own work plan. This is to help avoid overlap between organisations, ensure that duplication is minimised and also ensure that everyone is working together towards the same goal.

The Strategies were reviewed in 2005. Following the review, the CDBs were asked by the DoEHLG to translate them into more manageable implementation plans, setting out priorities for the next three-year period (up to 2008).

It is important for groups that their work and priorities are reflected in the strategy and the implementation plans:

- It ensures that their issues are on the county or city wide agenda for the short to medium term.
- It ensures that these issues are kept on the radar through the implementation and strategy review phases.
- It facilitates opportunities for other organisations and agencies to come together around these issues to try and tackle the problem.

## How do they operate?

City and County Development Boards meet on average four to five times a year to assess progress on the Strategy. They generally have a number of sub-committees and working groups responsible for



overseeing the implementation of the Strategy, e.g. enterprise sub-group; arts and culture sub-group. Each sub-group or committee includes a number of CDB board members so that there is information flow between the committees and the board.

From an anti-poverty perspective, the main sub-committee or group is the Social Inclusion Measures (SIM) Group (see Section 3).

Another key structure linked to the CDB is the Community Forum. This is a space organised by Development Boards to bring community and voluntary groups together within counties and cities (see Section 7). It is from this platform that community and voluntary representatives are elected onto the CDB and other local government structures.

The day-to-day running of the CDB is carried out by the Community and Enterprise section in the local authority, headed by a Director of Community and Enterprise and a dedicated staffing unit.

Alongside the key task of developing and implementing the ten-year strategy, the CDBs are often given specific tasks by central Government to carry out (see text box).



## The 'Cohesion Process'

The CDBs have been given responsibility for implementing the 'cohesion process'. This is being driven by the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs in an effort to bring about clearer boundaries between local anti-poverty and local development organisations in terms of geographical areas of operation and activity.

The long-term aim is to have one lead organisation in a city or county that will have responsibility for delivering the range of community programmes currently under the remit of the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs. Funding has been allocated to the CDBs to make this process happen and they have to sign-off on any proposals made before they are forwarded to the Department for agreement.



## Points of influence

There are a number of policy spaces or opportunities to influence the work and direction of the City and County Development Boards.

Firstly, the sub-committees of the CDBs provide an opportunity for detailed discussion to take place. Groups can raise issues relevant to their group or to the wider community and voluntary sector in the area, either directly or through their representatives on these committees. The outcome of these discussions or any proposals arising are normally relayed to the meetings of the CDB through the board representative sitting on the committee.

Secondly, the Community Forum provides an opportunity for groups to come together and share concerns, ideas and information. This



is particularly important if a group wants to seek wider support on a particular issue. The task of the Community Forum representative elected on to the CDB is to relay the issues and concerns of the forum to CDB meetings. The capacity of the representative to do this job effectively is crucial.

Thirdly, the preparation of the Strategies (every ten years) and implementation plans (every three years) presents an opportunity to influence the process. Widespread consultation is an integral part of the Strategy preparation. It is an opportunity for groups to comment on the positives and negatives of the plan, how it is affecting anti-poverty work and what needs to be changed in order for it to be more effective and targeted.


Groups can become involved in the consultation sessions as well as feeding into the process through the community or local development representative on the CDB.

Groups should be involved at all stages of the development of the strategy or implementation plan, but they need to be clear about what exactly they wish to be included in the plan and why.

## Who to target

Anti-poverty organisations often concentrate only on networking between themselves and within their own circle. Efforts should be made to form allies and networks within and between other partnership sectors such as state agency representatives, local development representatives or local elected representatives.

Make sure your views are heard and understood by all members of the CDB. Groups are often surprised at how many people from



other sectors hold similar views to them. The more people aligning behind an issue or cause, the more weight it will carry. So, while it is important to be linked into your sectoral representative on the board, it is equally important that alliances are developed with other CDB members on either the board or the committees.

Making and keeping regular contact with the staff of the City and County Development Boards is also beneficial. These are the people who not only are involved with delivering the strategy on a day-to-day basis and putting together agendas for committee and board meetings, but are also a key source of information and support.

## Main targets

- Community and voluntary representatives on the CDB
- Local Development representatives on the CDB
- Director of Community and Enterprise
- Staff in the Community and Enterprise section
- Chair of the CDB





### Helpful hints

- Do not rely on forming alliances only within your own sector. Make sure your views are known by all sectors involved with the CDB ... you'd be surprised where your allies are!
- In an effort to conserve energy and ensure focus, groups are advised to be well informed on what is coming up for discussion at committee and board level, decide whether they want to have an input or not, and decide what to say and how to say it with a clear objective in mind concerning the outcome they require.

### Further information

Further details are available from [www.cdb.ie](http://www.cdb.ie). This will also link you to the websites of individual City and County Development Boards.

### Keep Notes:



# Section 3

## Social Inclusion Measures Groups

### What are they?

Social Inclusion Measures Groups (SIM Groups) are a sub-committee of City and County Development Boards and were set up to co-ordinate social inclusion activity in the city and county.

Membership of the Social Inclusion Measures Group is drawn from community and voluntary groups, county and city childcare committees,<sup>4</sup> RAPID Area Implementation Teams,<sup>5</sup> local development bodies and local state agencies who are involved in anti-poverty work either through direct service delivery, capacity building or community development work.


### Why are they important?

The SIM Group's main role is that of overseeing and co-ordinating social inclusion activity among all organisations in its city or county. It also monitors the progress of the social inclusion objectives and actions contained in the CDB Strategy and implementation plan.

Alongside these ongoing functions, the SIM Groups have been allocated a number of specific tasks by central Government which

<sup>4</sup> County and City Childcare Committees: 33 City and County Childcare Committees are set up around the country to support the local development of childcare in each county and city through information, support and co-ordination of services.

<sup>5</sup> RAPID Area Implementation Teams: The RAPID Programme is about targeting particular geographic areas of disadvantage for funding and investment based on local action plans. In each of the RAPID areas identified, an Area Implementation Team has been put together made up of local representatives and service providers in the area. The role of the Team is to draw up a plan for the area and monitor its implementation.



have a significant bearing on the work of community/voluntary and local development organisations:

- The SIM Group has to ‘endorse’ the plans of local development organisations. What this essentially means is that local development action plans are brought to the SIM Group for discussion to make sure the planned activities are co-ordinated as effectively as possible with all other social inclusion activity in the city or county. The plans are then signed-off or endorsed by the SIM Group.
- The development of local ‘Integrated and Targeted’ plans for particularly marginalised groups is being promoted at national level through the DoEHLG. The role of the SIM Group is to prioritise a number of target groups in its city or county and develop an integrated plan aimed at addressing the particular difficulties this group may be experiencing, be it in housing, the labour market, health or education. This plan should involve all relevant organisations working together with the client group at the heart of the process.
- The development of Integrated Traveller Plans is being promoted by the Taoiseach and driven through SIM Groups. These plans require all agencies to look at the local issues faced by Travellers, the services provided (including accommodation) and how their needs can be more effectively addressed.
- A number of SIM Groups have been involved with developing Local Anti-Poverty Strategies (LAPS) with the support of Combat Poverty (see Appendix: Case Studies). The LAPS aim to influence the planning within the local authority and the delivery of local services.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Combat Poverty has developed a programme of work aimed at supporting local authorities to develop local anti-poverty strategies which in turn support and strengthen national anti-poverty actions. *Developing a Local Anti-Poverty Strategy: A Guide*. First Published 2005.



## How do they operate?

The SIM Groups meet regularly (usually once a month) with members drawn from the different sectors. The composition of SIM Groups varies from place to place. Many of them include members from all groups in the area involved in social inclusion work, so groups are afforded direct representation on the Group. Other areas attempt to make numbers more manageable by having representatives from different sectors or groups on the SIM structure. Some groups are not involved in the SIM process at all.

For the most part, SIM Groups have a working group system where smaller task-specific groups are set up to address a particular issue or concern. These working groups can include members of the SIM Groups but also members from outside of the Group who have an expertise on the issue in question. They feed back to the SIM Group which, in turn, reports to the City and County Development Board.

The SIM Groups are supported by Community and Enterprise staff (usually a nominated staff member) in the local authority who provide the day-to-day administration and secretariat function.



## Points of influence

As members of SIM Groups, local development and community organisations are in prime position to exert significant influence over its work and in turn the work of the Development Board and its member organisations. This can be done directly through the Group or through the smaller task-specific working groups established. The role of the SIM Group in monitoring the progress of the social inclusion actions in the CDB Strategy provides an important



opportunity to influence its development and the various reviews that are undertaken.

Outside of these particular time-specific policy spaces relating to the plan, groups can work on an ongoing basis through the regular meetings to ensure that the work of the CDB and the member organisations is promoting and fulfilling its obligations in relation to social inclusion.

## Who to target


A group can be a member of the SIM Group, can be represented on the SIM Group by another organisation, or may not be involved with a SIM Group at all. It varies from county to county, but whatever way the SIM Group is organised in your local county or city, keeping informed is absolutely crucial.

If a Group has a seat on the SIM Group, it should establish a communication channel linked to all its own members, keeping them informed about key developments at SIM meetings.

If you are represented on the SIM Group by another organisation, it is imperative that formal information links are established so that you receive timely and informative feedback.

If you are not a member of SIM, you can keep informed through linking with the staff member in the Community and Enterprise section (or the Social Inclusion Unit) who supports the SIM process.

The Chairperson of the SIM Group usually has a seat on the City or County Development Board and acts as the main feedback channel between the SIM Group and the Board. Building a relationship with



the Chairperson on an informal basis will help in flagging up meeting agenda items and also in keeping the group informed of developments at CDB level.

Informal networking between members of the SIM Group is essential not only for building relationships but also for developing allies around particular areas of concern a group may have. This networking should take place within the community and voluntary sector and also between the sector and state agencies.

Administrative support for the SIM Group is provided by the Community and Enterprise section of the local authority (or in some cases, the Social Inclusion Units). Regular contact with staff in this section is recommended.

## Main targets

- Chairperson of the SIM Group
- Other possible allies on the SIM Group
- Staff looking after the SIM Group in the local authorities



### Helpful hints

Even though it provides an important policy space, do not hesitate to take your issues of concern beyond the SIM Group. Poverty by its very nature is cross-cutting and you must guard against seeing the SIM Group as the only policy space in which social inclusion issues can be raised. Remember the Strategic Policy Committees (see Section 4) and the local councillors (see Section 1) – these groups should also be targeted with your message.

### Further information

Further information is available from your local authority, through the Community and Enterprise section or the Social Inclusion Unit (if there is one in your area).

### Keep Notes:



# Section 4

## Strategic Policy Committees

### What are they?

Strategic Policy Committees (SPCs) were set up to improve the development of policy within city and county councils. The number and type of committees differ around the country, depending on the size of the county or city, but they generally correspond to the different functions of the local authority (see text box).

Elected councillors make-up two thirds of SPC membership and the remaining one third is filled from other interested local organisations.

#### **Dublin City Council – Strategic Policy Committees**

- Arts, Culture, Leisure and Youth Affairs
- Economic Development, Planning and European Affairs
- Environment and Engineering
- Financial Development and General
- Housing, Social and Community Affairs
- Transportation and Traffic

#### **Cavan County Council – Strategic Policy Committees**

- Community, Social and Cultural
- Housing Development
- Environment and Water Services
- Roads and Infrastructure
- Economic/Rural Development and Planning
- End of box



## Why are they important?

Strategic Policy Committees are among the main vehicles through which groups can influence the mainstream work and activity of the council since this is where policy is meant to be developed.

They also act as the vehicles through which the various plans of the council are developed, e.g. the Housing SPC is involved in drawing up the council's Social and Affordable Housing Action Plans; the Culture SPC is involved in drawing up the Arts Strategy; the Planning SPC is involved in drawing up the County Development Plan, etc.


## How do they operate?

Strategic Policy Committees meet on average four times a year. The meetings are chaired by a councillor and supported by the relevant section in the local authority. For example, Housing SPC is serviced by the Director of Housing and his/her unit; Environment SPC is serviced by the Director of Environment and his/her unit.

The majority of seats on the SPCs are held by councillors. The other members are elected through the various agreed nominating organisations in the city or county. The position of Chairperson on each of the SPCs is occupied by a councillor.

- The Community Forum elects the community and voluntary representatives (see Section 7)
- Employer bodies such as IBEC nominates employers.
- ICTU nominates union members.
- Farming organisations elect farming members.





The SPCs usually operate from an annual work plan which flows directly from the local authority's Corporate Plan (see Section 1). They generally report to the Council through the Corporate Policy Group (CPG) which is made up of the Chairperson of each SPC, the Chairperson of the Council and the County or City Manager. In some areas and depending on the issue being discussed, the SPC reports directly to the Council through its Chairperson.

Corporate Policy Groups were set up to co-ordinate the work of the different SPCs, to hear feedback from the various committees and to agree on what policy positions need to go forward to the council meeting for discussion.




## Points of influence

SPCs have a critical policy role in the council and there are a number of spaces where groups can influence their work. The main opportunity lies in the strategies or plans that are being developed or being reviewed in your city or county:

- County Development Plan: progressed through the Planning SPC
- Social and Affordable Housing Action Plan: progressed through the Housing SPC
- Traveller Accommodation Plan: progress through the Housing SPC
- Arts Plan: progress through the Arts SPC
- Roads Programme: progressed through the Roads SPC

These are just some of the more relevant plans and strategies that are developed by local councils. The SPC structures are a central link in their development. They therefore provide an ideal opportunity to influence the mainstream activities of your local council.



Outside of these particular policy spaces, groups can influence SPCs on an ongoing basis through their regular meetings, if there is a particular issue or concern arising relating to the work of the SPC.

## Who to target

First and foremost, you need to familiarise yourself with what SPCs are established in your own council area, who is on them, how relevant they are to the work of the group, who they are serviced by in the local authority, and what is in their annual work plan.

Once this is established, there are a number of people to focus your energies on, the key person being the Chair of the SPC. This person has an important role not only in facilitating the meetings but also in feeding back to the Corporate Policy Group and the Council.

The other main link into the SPC is through the Community Forum representative. The Forum generally has a seat on every SPC but this varies from county to county.

### Main targets

- Chair of the SPC
- Community/Voluntary representative from the Community Forum on the SPC
- Other sectoral representatives on the SPC
- Staff of the unit related to the SPC in question, particularly staff at Senior Executive Officer level.



## Helpful hints

It is difficult for groups to be involved in everything that goes on in the Council and the SPCs. Therefore, in order to conserve energy and maximise your input, get a copy of the Council's Corporate Strategy and the linked SPCs' work plans to find out what objectives were set for individual SPCs and how they relate to the work of your group. This should help determine where you focus your attention.

## Further information

Each local authority website has a link to information on their Strategic Policy Committees. Other more general information can be sourced at [www.environ.ie](http://www.environ.ie); click on local government at the left-hand side of the screen.

# Section 5

## Area Committees

### What are they?

Area committees are established around geographic areas of counties or cities, usually corresponding to local electoral areas.<sup>7</sup> Membership of the committees is comprised of local councillors elected from these areas. The committees offer councillors the opportunity to come together around issues that are particular to their own constituencies.<sup>8</sup>

### Why are they important?

Area Committees do not have any decision-making powers but they can exert significant influence over county and city council decisions relevant to their area, e.g. on housing issues or Traveller accommodation.

If councillors from an Area Committee join together to oppose or propose a particular issue, this has serious implications for the work of the council and efforts are usually made to resolve any issues they may have.

<sup>7</sup> Area Committees are relatively informal structures and as such do not operate in all parts of Ireland – some councils use them effectively, others do not use them at all.

<sup>8</sup> A small number of local authorities have devolved functional responsibility to area committees so that they are involved in delivering public services in these geographic areas. The local authorities in question are usually based in the larger county areas, e.g. Donegal, Meath, Kerry and Cork.



## How do they operate?

Area Committees operate differently from county to county – in some places they are not active at all. Generally, they meet four times a year and are supported by a secretariat in the local authority.

The location of this secretariat varies from place to place. Groups should contact their own local authority to get information about the committees and the personnel assigned to support them. The Area Committees do not report in any formal way into the council meetings.



## Points of influence

Area Committees do not work from any specific strategic work plans. They are essentially information-sharing fora for councillors on local issues and, as noted above, their strength lies in their influencing power over local issues of concern.

Their membership is restricted to councillors only. However, there are opportunities to attend these meetings at the invitation of the councillors, if there is a particular issue or concern that has been brought to their attention.

## Who to influence

The obvious target in this council structure is the local councillors themselves who sit on the Area Committees. Informal networking channels should be opened and contact maintained on a regular basis, particularly around the time plans that are being developed in



the local authority, e.g. social and affordable housing plans and county development plans.

This is the time to ensure that your councillors are informed about proposals, concerns, and suggestions your group has for the community and that they use their influencing strength to press for change.

## Main targets

- Councillors on your local area committee

### Helpful hints

Don't wait to go to your councillor until a problem or an issue in your local area has reached crisis point. Make sure contact is maintained with him or her on a regular basis so that a relationship is built up over time.

### Further information

Details of what Area Committees are in place, and their membership, are available from your local authority.



## Section 6

# Traveller Accommodation Consultative Committees

## What are they?

Traveller Accommodation Consultative Committees are established in every city and county with members from the Traveller Community, representatives of Traveller organisations and local elected councillors.

Each local authority is required to prepare and adopt a five-year Traveller Accommodation Programme which is developed through a local Consultative Committee. The local Consultative Committees link in with the National Traveller Accommodation Consultative Committee responsible for overseeing the progress of local plans at national level.

## Why are they important?

The local committees are responsible for drawing up the five-year Traveller Accommodation Programme. For anti-poverty groups working to improve the life conditions of Travellers, housing and accommodation is one of the key priorities.

The Accommodation Programme is not only important as a stand-alone document, it also informs the Traveller accommodation and land-use elements in the local authority's Social and Affordable Housing Action Plan and the County Development Plan.





## How do they operate?

Traveller Accommodation Consultative Committees meet on average four times a year and secretarial support is provided by the Housing section in the local authority. Their work essentially involves drawing up the local Traveller Accommodation Plan and then monitoring its progress over the five-year period.

The local groups are linked to the National Traveller Accommodation Consultative Committee set up to oversee the progress of local plans around the country. Membership at national level comprises representatives from Traveller organisations, government departments, the General Council of County Councils and the county and city managers association.


Many of the local Traveller groups and individuals sitting on the local committees are members of the national Traveller organisations such as the Irish Traveller Movement or Pavee Point. These linkages help ensure information flows from the local to the national level and back again.

While the national committee reviews progress around the country, it also takes a number of site visits throughout the year to different parts of the country.



## Points of influence

The Traveller Accommodation Programme is drawn up through a consultation process giving groups an opportunity to influence the development of the plan.



The importance of being involved in the development of this programme cannot be over-emphasised as it should inform two other key documents produced by the local authority:

- the Social and Affordable Housing Action Plan which sets out accommodation requirement targets for cities and counties, including targets for Travellers; and
- the County Development Plan which is a blueprint for future land-use and physical developments in each city and county. It is required to specify where in the county or city Traveller accommodation (halting sites, group housing) will be located and this draws heavily from the Traveller Accommodation Programme.

If there are ongoing issues arising relating to Traveller accommodation, groups can link in with the meetings held by the Consultative Committees at local level. If these issues are not resolved to everyone's satisfaction, they can be referred to the National Committee. This is supposed to meet four times a year but meetings can be erratic.

## Who to influence

Anti-poverty groups should familiarise themselves with the members of their local Traveller Accommodation Consultative Committee and set up an informal information channel with them. This enables the groups to keep an eye on the progress of the Traveller Accommodation Programme. It also enables them to feed in any issues they may have in relation to Traveller accommodation in their area.

Details on the Traveller Accommodation Committee in your area should be available from the Housing section in your local authority.



Groups should also find out the membership of the National Traveller Accommodation Consultative Committee. Details are available from the Housing section of the DoEHLG or from Traveller organisations such as the Irish Traveller Movement.

If issues are not resolved or addressed to your satisfaction at local level, groups can contact members on the national committee to have the issue raised.

## Main targets

- Members of the local Traveller Accommodation Consultative Committee
- Staff in the Housing section of the local authority
- Representatives on the National Traveller Accommodation Consultative Committee.

### Helpful hints

Make sure that commitments made under the local Traveller Accommodation Programme have been included in the local authority's County Development Plan and Social and Affordable Housing Action Plan.

### Further information

Further information is available from your local authority. Other sources include the Irish Traveller Movement [www.itmtrav.com](http://www.itmtrav.com) or Pavee Point at [www.paveepoint.ie](http://www.paveepoint.ie)



# Section 7

## Community Fora

### What are they?


Community fora were set up as a space where all community and voluntary groups in a city or county could come together. They were established around the same time as the City and County Development Boards (CDBs – see Section 2) with the primary objective of facilitating the involvement of the community and voluntary sector in CDBs and Strategic Policy Committees (see Section 4).

The fora provide a platform to elect representatives from the sector on to the CDBs and local authority committees. While ensuring links between the CDBs, the local authority and the community and voluntary sector, they also have an information-sharing and networking function.

### Why are they important?

Community fora are the main platform from which community and voluntary representatives are elected to the City and County Development Boards and to the Strategic Policy Committees of the local council. They also act as a consultative platform for local strategies that are being developed either by the council or by other organisations.

The fora have an important networking and information function – a space where groups can come together to raise and discuss either items of information or issues of concern. They have the potential to strengthen the capacity of the community and voluntary sector



through bringing people together and uniting them around common issues of concern.

## How do they operate?

The structure and operation of community fora differ from county to county but all are supported by the Community and Enterprise section of the local authority. Some are well established at this point and have an office and support worker in place.


Each community forum operates off a work plan or strategy. Core funding for the implementation of this work plan is provided by the local council. This funding comes via the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government and is allocated on a per capita basis.

The community fora include all types of community and voluntary groups. For groups focusing on anti-poverty work, it can be difficult to push a social inclusion agenda through such a broadly based network. In some areas, anti-poverty groups have come together and secured supports to help each other promote a social inclusion focus in the community forum. A network of Community Fora has been established at national level. Two representatives from each City and County Forum are nominated to the national network and it aims to provide guidance, direction and support to fora around the country.



## Points of influence

The Community Fora have become important consultation spaces not only for local authority strategies and plans and for CDB activity but also for other publicly funded organisations.



The best advice is that groups should keep informed about what is coming up for discussion at the fora and ensure that they are involved in the items that most concern them. At least, in this way, groups can choose when to channel their energies into topics that are related directly to them, their work and their target group.

## Who to target

The community fora are open to the involvement of any group in each local authority area. Groups can represent themselves directly at meetings, or work through a representative if that is more resource-efficient for them. The key people to link in with are the Community Forum representatives on the CDB and Strategic Policy Committees.

Be aware of the two people who represent your forum at the National Forum. If there are issues arising for any group, these representatives can bring them forward for discussion and, hopefully, resolution.

The other key people to keep in touch with are the staff members in the Community and Enterprise section responsible for supporting the forum.



## Main targets

- Community Forum representative on the CDB and SPC
- Community Forum representatives on the Irish National Community and Voluntary Forum
- Staff supporting the Community Forum in the Community and Enterprise section of the local authority.

### Helpful hints

Because of the number of different committees and groups at local level, it can be difficult to find the time to fit in all the work. Rather than running from meeting to meeting, it is recommended that you keep informed through informal contacts, newsletters, websites, so that you know when discussions concerning your work are taking place and you can prioritise those meetings and organise your time better.

### Further information

Further information on your local Community Forum is available from the Community and Enterprise section of the local authority. Information on the Irish National Community and Voluntary Forum can be found at [www.incvf.com](http://www.incvf.com)





## Supporting Community Representation

Community Fora around the country are broad based fora involving all different types of community and voluntary groups. It can be difficult for anti-poverty groups to make sure that the needs of the most disadvantaged in the community are heard and attended to at meetings.

One way of addressing this difficulty, is for anti-poverty groups to band together and support each other in taking their message to the community forum and other places.

This happened in Wicklow where there are two community fora linked to the County Development Board (CDB). One of the fora, Wicklow Community Platform, has members from 30 community and local development organisations actively involved in promoting social inclusion in County Wicklow.

It provides a voice for disadvantaged communities in decision making at local level and ensures representation on emerging new structures throughout Wicklow but particularly on Wicklow County Council.

It has representation on the following:

- Wicklow County Development Board
- Wicklow County Childcare Committee
- Wicklow County Council's Housing and Corporate Estate Strategic Policy Committee
- East Coast Area Health Board Local Child Protection Board
- Wicklow County Council's Community, Cultural and Social SPC

Active support of their representatives on these county policy structures is crucial and the Platform helps them through a number of different ways as illustrated through the story of Jim O'Brien, Manager of the Bray Travellers Community Development Project.



Jim sits on the Housing and Corporate Estate SPC representing Wicklow Community Platform. The other seats are held by local Councillors, county council staff and one other person from outside the Council, from Wicklow Community Network.

*“It has been a bit of a learning exercise for me”, he says. “I am only now finding my feet after two years on the committee and even though I still feel intimidated from time to time, I feel it is really important for the most marginalised communities to have a voice at this level”.*

The meetings take up a lot of Jim’s time. He first has to prepare for the meeting by going through all the agenda and papers. If there are items on the agenda that concern other member groups in the Platform, he contacts them to hear what they have to say.

Before every SPC meeting, he gets together with the Community Platform worker and the Platform representative on the County Development Board to go through the agenda. He does this to make sure he is fully informed about the matters being discussed and what issues need to be raised.

Following the meeting, it is time to report back to Wicklow Community Platform about the meeting and its outcomes. WCP have designed a reporting template for representatives on different committees to fill out so that it minimises the work they have to do.

*“I don’t know if I would have stayed on the Committee if I hadn’t the support of the Platform”, Jim says. “The amount of paper, the language used – this was all new to me. I mean, I haven’t gone to college or anything so it took a while to get used to it all. But now I think I am really able to make a contribution”.*



# Section 8

## Regional Authorities

### What are they?

There are eight Regional Authorities in Ireland, set up over a decade ago to promote the co-ordination of public services across regions.

They have specific responsibility for:

- reviewing the County Development Plans of local authorities in their region
- preparing Regional Planning Guidelines
- preparing regional economic and social strategies
- promoting co-operation and joint actions among local authorities and other public bodies.


All members of the Regional Authorities are local councillors, nominated from the local authorities in the region.

### Why are they important?

While having no direct decision-making powers, the eight Regional Authorities have influence over decisions taken by government at both local and national level. Their profile has been enhanced somewhat with the launch of the National Spatial Strategy where the Government set out a framework for achieving more balanced regional development.

Spatial planning deals primarily with physical infrastructure and land-use, and while these may appear far removed from anti-poverty work, they are in fact closely related. Access to public services, opportunities in education and employment, and quality





accommodation are all determined through spatial plans that set out what areas of cities/counties/regions are to be developed, when they are to be developed, how they are to be developed and what will be developed in the area.

One of the recommendations from the Spatial Strategy was that planning should be concentrated at regional level rather than at the more micro, local level. As a result, Regional Authorities were asked to draw up Regional Planning Guidelines.

These Guidelines now act as a regional framework for the Development Plans (see Section 2) at city and county level, as well as other plans that are to be produced in the region.

## How do they operate?

The Regional Authorities have their own administrative support structure with a fully staffed office.

They are also represented at European level through the Committee of the Regions. This Committee represents local and regional government in the EU policy formation and decision-making processes. It ensures that local and regional government bodies are consulted on EU policies of direct interest to them. Nine regional authority members are nominated by the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government to sit on this committee.



## Points of influence

The preparation of the Regional Planning Guidelines is the main item to keep on your policy radar. Regional Authorities are required to go through a public consultation process with drafts of the Guidelines, so contact your local regional office (see below) to see when they are coming up for preparation or review.

## Who to influence

Members of the Regional Authorities are drawn from local councils, so groups need to find out who from their local authority is represented at regional level. If a group has already built up a relationship with these local councillors, a lot of the ground work will already have been laid. The Regional Authority is not one of the most important structures to keep tabs on, but maintaining ongoing informal contact with the councillors in question is recommended.

### Main targets

- Your local councillors represented on the Regional Authority
- The staff in the Regional Authority office



## Helpful hints

Pick up a copy of the Regional Planning Guidelines prepared by your local Regional Authority. It will give you a more informed idea about what is supposed to happen with regard to the County Development Plan and the National Spatial Strategy in your area.

## Further information

General information on regional authorities is available from the Irish Regions Office based in Brussels at their website [www.iro.ie](http://www.iro.ie).

South West Regional Authority: 021-4876877 or [www.swra.ie](http://www.swra.ie)

South East Regional Authority: 052-26200 or  
[www.sera.ie/seedshome.htm](http://www.sera.ie/seedshome.htm)

Mid East Regional Authority: 0404-66058 or [www.mera.ie](http://www.mera.ie)

Dublin Regional Authority: 01-8745018 or [www.dra.ie](http://www.dra.ie)

Border Regional Authority: 049-4362600 or [www.border.ie](http://www.border.ie)

West Regional Authority: 091-563842

Mid West Regional Authority: 067-33197 or [www.mwra.ie](http://www.mwra.ie)

Midlands Regional Authority: 0506-52996 or [www.midland.ie](http://www.midland.ie)



# Regional Assemblies

## What are they?


The Regional Assemblies are two bodies of regional government that between them cover the entire republic of Ireland: the Border, Midlands and West Region (BMW Region) and the South and East Region (SE Region). They were set up as part of the negotiation process for EU funds for the 2000–2006 period when the country was split into two regions to maximise EU funding support.

The main role of the Regional Assemblies is to manage the Regional Operational Programmes in the National Development Plan (NDP) and to monitor the impact of all EU Programmes in the region.

## Why are they important?

The role of the Regional Assemblies in the National Development Plan makes them relevant to the work of anti-poverty groups. The NDP is a multi-annual plan setting out investment priorities over a number of years. In the NDP 2000–2006, social inclusion was identified as one of its four key priorities. Numerous social inclusion programmes and actions were included for funding in the plan, including the Local Development Social Inclusion Programme, the Family Resource Centres and the Community Development Programme.

A key role of the Regional Assemblies, through their Monitoring Committees, is to monitor the progress, spend and impact of programmes in the regions and identify any obstacles or blockages that may be affecting implementation.



Through this monitoring role, they gather a lot of information that is important to future planning and investment in poorer areas of the region:

- what parts of the region are receiving limited investment
- what parts of the region are suffering from lack of employment
- what parts of the region are experiencing stress on facilities, etc.

It is this information sourcing, disseminating and influencing role that increases their importance to anti-poverty groups.

## How do they operate?

The Regional Assemblies meet once every quarter and membership is drawn from local councils in the region.

Each of the Regional Assemblies has a Monitoring Committee looking after the implementation of Regional Programmes. Specifically, the Committee is involved in:

- monitoring the spend of public money in the region
- assessing the impact that investment is making in the region
- making recommendations to key decision makers in government about regional development.

The Monitoring Committee meets four times a year and is a partnership-type structure with representatives from all the social partners, including representatives from the Community and Voluntary Pillar, and local councils.



## Points of influence

The Regional Assemblies are just one arm of the National Development Plan apparatus but during preparation times (every six years), or review times (every three years), all the arms are mobilised to either review progress of the NDP or begin preparing for the next multi-annual planning period.

It is at these times that anti-poverty groups should be engaged in the process, giving feedback to the community and voluntary representatives on the Monitoring Committee about how social inclusion programmes are impacting on the ground, what issues are arising and what should be changed or included in the forthcoming planning period.

Groups should not only rely on representatives from the community and voluntary sector but also be using their links with other Monitoring Committee members such as local councillors, a number of whom may have been drawn from their own local authority.

If there is a particular issue about any of the social inclusion related programmes in the NDP that are presenting themselves on an ongoing basis, there is an opportunity for them to be aired and discussed at the quarterly meetings of the Monitoring Committee, through either the community and voluntary representatives or another body.



## Who to influence

The Regional Assembly is made up of elected local councillors, so finding out who from your area is sitting on the Regional Assembly and making and maintaining regular contact is important.

It is recommended, however, that groups concentrate on the Monitoring Committee, given the importance of the National Development Plan to their work. The key people to link in with here are the representatives from the Community and Voluntary Pillar.

It is also recommended that groups make contact with the Regional Assembly staff in the region and maintain this contact on a regular basis.

### Key targets

- Community and voluntary representatives on the Monitoring Committee (membership available from websites and directly from Regional Assembly offices)
- Elected representatives sitting on the Monitoring Committee
- The Chair of the Monitoring Committee
- Local councillors holding seats on the Regional Assembly



## Helpful hints

Do not concentrate too much of your energies on the Regional Assemblies. Just make sure that you are kept informed of developments. This can be done by contacting the Assembly offices and ensuring that you are on their mailing list for any newsletters, e-newsletters or other information-sourcing documents.

## Further information

Further information on the regional assemblies is available from their websites: Border, West and Midland Regional Assembly  
– [www.bmwassembly.ie](http://www.bmwassembly.ie); Southern and Eastern Assembly  
– [www.seregassembly.ie](http://www.seregassembly.ie)

**Keep Notes:**



# Section 10



## Government Committees on Environment, Heritage and Local Government

### What is it?

The Government operates a committee system that assists it in carrying out its legislative and policy-making functions. The most important ones from the community and voluntary sector viewpoint are the Select Committee and the Joint Committee.


- Select Committee: involves members of the Dáil only and has a key role in debating draft legislation and considering departmental budget estimates
- Joint Committee: involves all the members from the Select Committee and other members from the Seanad. Has a somewhat wider function than that of the Select Committee and its meetings are open to the public and the media.

The committees are set up in line with the departmental divisions in government. Therefore, the remit of the Joint Committee on Environment and Local Government corresponds with the functions of the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government.

### Why is it important?

The Joint Committee has an important policy function, both in scrutinising the work of the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government and in hearing inputs on draft legislation from members of the public.





Draft legislation or 'Bills' go through a series of stages for discussion or comment, including what is called 'committee stages' when a Bill is brought to the Select Committee for consideration.

The Joint Committee can also play a role in these debates by inviting interested outside parties, such as community and voluntary groups, to make presentations to the Committee about their views on the legislation and their proposed changes.

The other key role of the Joint Committee is to scrutinise the work of government departments, particularly where problems have been brought to their attention either by constituents, organisations or the media.

The discussions that take place in the committee ensures that TDs and senators are more informed about the issues in question which in turn informs debates in the Dáil.

## How does it operate?

The Joint Committee on Environment and Local Government meets at least once a month. Its agendas are available to the public a week in advance, on the Oireachtas website (see below), and proceedings from the meetings are also posted on the website approximately 1–2 weeks after committee session.

Each committee has a clerk who provides secretarial and administrative support and a chairperson elected by the committee.



Joint Committee meetings are open to the public. If you are interested in attending to observe any of the debates, you are advised to contact your local TD or a member of the Committee in order to receive an official invitation. Such formality is required for security purposes.


The Joint Committee on Environment and Local Government frequently invites outside groups or organisations to attend their meetings when:

- draft legislation is being discussed and interested organisations have requested an opportunity to air their views
- the committee has decided to investigate progress on a particular issue of concern in the Department, e.g. housing, and wishes to hear the views of organisations dealing with accommodation issues on a daily basis
- a member of the committee proposes that part of a meeting is devoted to a problem or issue that has come to his/her attention (usually brought to the TD's attention by local groups or the media). Groups may be invited to present their ideas and debate the topic.

## Points of influence

The best chance of influencing Government Committees is for a group to keep informed and keep regular contact with its members. The Committees do have a work programme, set out in their annual reports. This work programme is not set in stone and the Committee can respond to issues as they arise during the year.

There are specific times when opportunities to influence present themselves:

- 
- Firstly, when draft legislation is being introduced. If forthcoming legislation concerns a group and its anti-poverty work, it is crucial that the group sets in place a lobbying campaign that targets members of the Select and Joint Committees and seeks to have input to the Joint Committee during the discussion phase. A list of proposed Bills at the beginning of each Dáil session is available from the Chief Whip's Office at the Department of An Taoiseach.
  - Secondly, when the budget estimates for different Departments are discussed at Select Committee meetings. This generally occurs during the month of June and sometimes July. The discussion takes the form of a question-and-answer session with the Minister of the Department. If a group wishes to have any issues raised, targeting committee members before this date is vital.
  - Finally, regular contact with TDs and Senators on the committees. This type of contact is essential if a group needs to bring issues of concern beyond the local to the national level.

## Who to target

Find out who holds a seat on the Select and Joint Committees on Environment and Local Government. This information is available through the website (details below) or through contacting the clerk of the committees.

Make contact with the Chairperson of the Joint Committee to let him/her know about the work of your group and how it links in with their work. This contact is extremely important if you seeking an invitation to address the committee in the future. Groups will find, over time,



that there are particular committee members who have an interest in their work and a relationship will be established which is mutually beneficial.

## Main targets

- Chairperson of the Joint Committee
- Members of the Joint and Select Committees
- Clerk of the Joint Committee

## Helpful hints

The following list includes the names of Committees that are most relevant to the work of anti-poverty groups:

- Committee on Social and Family Affairs
- Committee on Environment and Local Government
- Committee on Justice, Equality and Law Reform
- Committee on Arts, Sports, Tourism, Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs
- Committee on Health and Children
- Committee on Education and Science

## Further information

The Oireachtas Website is a good source of information on the Government Committees. Go to [www.oireachtas.ie](http://www.oireachtas.ie) and then select 'committees' on the left-hand side of the screen.



# Section 11

## Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government

### What is it?


The Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (DoEHLG) oversees all activities related to local government (see Section 1) and also has responsibility for:

- environment (including waste and nuclear safety)
- water
- heritage (including national parks, building standards)
- planning
- housing.

The Department is headed by the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, supported by two Junior Ministers. One Junior Minister has special responsibility for environmental protection. The other is a joint ministry with the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht affairs with responsibility for housing, urban renewal, the drugs strategy and community affairs.

### Why is it important?

The Department sets all policy concerning local authorities and their activities. Bear in mind that local councils have decision-making powers in two areas only – their local budget and the County Development Plan (see Section 1). Decisions in relation to all other



areas of responsibility rests with the DoEHLG, even though many of these decisions would generally be arrived at through consultation with local authorities.

## How does it operate?

The internal structure of the Department is organised into sections corresponding to its functions, e.g. environment section, local government section, heritage section.

The Department is required to produce a strategy statement every two years, setting out a work plan, and produces a yearly annual report.

Given its overall responsibility for the City and County Development Boards, the Department has significant influence over many of the policy decisions taken with regards to community and voluntary activity. It sits on a number of inter-departmental national committees dealing with issues such as poverty that cut across departments. One of the most significant of these is the 'Joint Ministerial Initiative' (see text box).



## Joint Ministerial Initiative

The Joint Ministerial Initiative involves the Ministers from the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government and the Department of Education and Science, among others.

These Departments are all involved with funding and supporting various types of local initiatives. For example, Justice, Equality and Law Reform has responsibility for local county and city childcare committees; Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs funds the local area partnerships and the Community Development Projects among others; Environment, Heritage and Local Government has responsibility for the City and County Development Boards.

The Ministers work closely together as part of this Initiative to ensure that the policy decisions they make at national level supports co-ordination at local level between all the different projects and groups. The Initiative, for example, gave rise to the cohesion process (see Section 2).

The DoEHLG is represented on other national committees including the National Consultative Committee on Traveller Accommodation; the Cross-Departmental Team on Homelessness; the National Drugs Strategy Team and the National Assessment Committee of the Young People Services and Facilities Fund.



## Points of influence

Policy making takes place on an ongoing basis which makes it difficult to identify ideal times to influence the process. Sometimes the Department undertakes a consultation process if it is devising a policy on the CDBs, for example, or on housing, but this is not necessarily set in stone.

The best thing for groups to do is keep informed. There are a number of national community and voluntary support groups who provide this kind of information on a regular, systematic basis (see Section 12).

By keeping informed, a group can be aware of the policy that is being developed, discover who in the Department is developing it, and work out a plan to influence the policy – be that through meeting with the public servant involved, meeting with local councillors or bringing it up for discussion at an SPC or SIM Group meeting. The influencing strategy will depend on the policy in question and its preparation process.

The timing of one key decision that can be relied upon year on year is the budget process. Ensuring there is a budget line and an adequate budget line for the work of anti-poverty groups is crucial, e.g. ensuring that there is enough money in place for social and affordable housing, for Traveller Accommodation, etc. To become involved in the budget process, a group should have a submission drawn up during the summer and have it submitted by September at the latest.



## Who to influence

Make contact with Department staff in the unit responsible for the issue that concerns your group, e.g. local government or housing. This can be found through the Department's website or through a call to the section in question, e.g. Local Government section or Housing section. From a policy-making perspective, it is important to find out who is dealing with the drawing up of the policy in question, check out what the consultation process involves (if any) and make plans to meet with this person.

Outside of the direct approach to staff, the social partnership structure is another key space where many policy issues relating to the Department are discussed. Social partners (including the Community and Voluntary Pillar), who have signed up to the ten-year social partnership agreement, meet quarterly to discuss the progress of the agreement and any issues arising. Many of the commitments in the Social Partnership agreement, e.g. housing, fall under the responsibility of the Department.

Don't forget about your own local councillors and local authority staff. As mentioned above, the Department consults directly with the local authority on a regular basis, so keeping them informed means that you are indirectly influencing the process at national level.



## Main targets

- Civil servants in the relevant unit
- Community and Voluntary Pillar representatives involved in social partnership
- Local councillors and local authority staff

### Helpful hints

It is difficult to keep up-to-date with all the various developments at national level, so it is a good idea to strike up a relationship with your local TD or with opposition spokespersons. Once they know your area of interest, they will be able to keep you informed about relevant developments.

### Further information

Further information is available from the Department website [www.environ.ie](http://www.environ.ie)

## Section 12

# Community and Voluntary Pillar

The Community and Voluntary Pillar is a network of groups brought together by the Government to facilitate the participation of the community and voluntary sector in social partnership. Further information on which organisations are involved in the Pillar, how it is organised and its activities is available from [www.thewheel.ie](http://www.thewheel.ie) or tel. 01-4548727.

## The Community Platform

The Community Platform consists of national networks and organisations within the community and voluntary sector working to combat poverty and social exclusion and promoting equality and justice. Further information is available from the Secretariat of the Community Platform [sean@cwv.ie](mailto:sean@cwv.ie) or tel. 091-779030.

## Irish National Community and Voluntary Forum

The Irish National Community and Voluntary Forum is the representative body of the County and City Community Fora nationwide. It offers opportunities for fora to come together and share information, help resolve local issues and support them in the policy process. Further information is available at [www.incvf.com](http://www.incvf.com).



## Community Workers Co-operative

The Community Workers Co-operative is a network of individuals and organisations involved in community work and working for social change in Ireland. It keeps abreast of policy changes at national level and teases out the implications for community and voluntary groups with a view to influencing the process. Further information is available at [info@cwcc.ie](mailto:info@cwcc.ie) or tel. 091-779033.

## Combat Poverty Agency

Combat Poverty advises the government on poverty issues through policy advice, project support, research and public education. It also is a resource for anti-poverty groups looking to engage with local government in a more meaningful way. Further details on its local government programme are available at [www.combatpoverty.ie](http://www.combatpoverty.ie) or tel. 01-6706746.

## The Wheel

The Wheel is a support and representative body connecting community and voluntary organisations across Ireland. It focuses on support and advocacy for the community and voluntary sector and offers support programmes, training, seminars, conferences and information. Further information is available at [www.wheel.ie](http://www.wheel.ie) or tel. 01-4548727.



## Community Exchange

Community Exchange is a weekly e-newsletter for the community and voluntary sector that contains information on various events, seminars to be held around the country, campaigning news, training courses, workshops and funding opportunities. Further information is available at [www.activelink.ie](http://www.activelink.ie)

## PLANET

PLANET, the Partnerships Network, is the representative voice of the 38 area-based Partnerships in Ireland. PLANET facilitates partnerships to come together, lobby, exchange information and learn from each other around all policy areas including local government. Further information is available at [www.planet.ie](http://www.planet.ie) or tel. 053-9422788.





## Appendix: Case Studies

### Laois Local Anti-Poverty Strategy

The main challenge presented by the national anti-poverty strategy is how to make it relevant at the local level.

The solution for the Social Inclusion Measures Group in County Laois was to develop its own local anti-poverty strategy. This would mirror the national process by trying to influence the policy and planning processes of the local council and state agencies.

A poverty profile of county Laois was carried out which identified (a) the break down by area of the numbers of certain groups in the county who were living in poverty or at risk or living in poverty and (b) certain geographic areas in the county that were particularly disadvantaged.

A poverty profile brings together all the relevant data at a local level such as the number of people who left education early, the number of older people living alone, the number of lone parents in the county etc., the different services in place and the needs of these particular groups.

At the same time as the poverty profile was being finalised, the Combat Poverty Agency announced funding available to local authorities who were interested in developing a local anti-poverty strategy. Laois and Wicklow received funding to develop and implement a LAPS. It is hoped that at the end of the project that there will be a working model of a LAPS which can provide learning to other local authorities.



As part of the process of applying for this funding, the SIM Group was required to put together a local steering committee. This is chaired by the County Manager and the other members include councillors, the Chairperson of the Council, two directors of services, local state agencies, local development agencies and community and voluntary representatives reflecting the make-up of the county/city development boards.

Once funding was received, the Steering Committee began a widespread research and consultation process.

It produced a series of newsletters to inform people about the local anti-poverty strategy process. A consultant was employed to conduct a number of meetings with the key target groups and in areas that were identified in the poverty profile. A seminar was held with state agencies informing them about the LAPS process and getting ideas from them about what could be done.

Research was also commissioned into a study of one of the disadvantaged areas in the county to try and identify the local factors that were contributing to poverty in that and similar communities.

The feedback and results from this research and consultation process formed the basis of the Laois Local-Anti Poverty Strategy.

It sets out actions to be undertaken in the county, which agency or agencies is going to do them and what the expected outcomes are. Here is an example of the People in Disabilities Section:

**Rationale:** Probably one-person-in-ten in Laois (almost 6,000 people) has a disability that affects their daily living. Possibly related to this are the 2,260 people who provide unpaid care to others in Laois: nearly a third of these – ie 680/700 people – provide that care for

at least 43 hours a week. The LAPS consultation showed that the big issue for people with disabilities remains the basic, everyday problems they experience in accessing buildings; services; and facilities.


What to be done	Led By	Involving	Timing	Measure of success
All public agencies to apply National Disability Authority's "Building for Everyone" guidelines/norms	County Development Board	All	Ongoing	All new/ refurbished facilities/ developments meeting "Building for Everyone" standards

Consultation is now being held on the draft strategy with the community and voluntary sector and other key stakeholders and once it is finalised, it will be brought to the Council for approval.

## Wicklow Local Anti-Poverty Strategy

The Local Anti-Poverty Strategy in Wicklow sought to bring marginalised groups and statutory sector agencies together in a more meaningful way. It is being driven by the Social Inclusion Measures Committee and the local development sector and is co-ordinated by the Community & Enterprise Section, Wicklow County Council.

It began with consultation with marginalised groups and individuals in the county carried out by the four main local development sector companies in the county, as well as the Traveller support groups, the County Childcare Committee and the ISPCC,



The consultation sessions involved lone parents, people with disabilities, Travellers, older people, the homeless community, young people and children. They focused on the state services with which these groups come into contact on a regular basis and the views of the participants.

Following these consultation sessions, each of the marginalised groups submitted their issues to the Community and Enterprise section in Wicklow County Council in relation to the services of the health services, the VEC/Dept. of Education and Science the Library Service, the Housing Authority, the Department of Social and Family Affairs, and the Gardai.

These key issues were then passed onto the relevant statutory agencies for their feedback and response. This process is currently ongoing. To date it has resulted in representatives from the statutory agencies coming together with representatives of the community groups and discussing with them the issues that can and can't be resolved.

Some very positive projects have emerged in relation to health, education and the library service, with housing, social welfare and policing to follow suit.

County Wicklow Vocational Education Committee has committed to implementing a structured programme of diversity and equality training that will address the needs in this area. This is to address the fact that bullying and lack of understanding by teachers was cited by many groups as a very debilitating issue in their experience of education.

Formal links are to be set up between the Library Service and local development agencies in the county taking account of the needs of



vulnerable families and children. In particular its clubs and activities for children will be promoted.

The HSE-East Coast Area will increase its number of multi-disciplinary Primary Health Care Teams throughout the county. These Teams will cover the key community health areas of medical (GPs), nursing, therapeutic services, mental health services and other ancillary health services.

The next phase of the project will be drafting, publishing and launching of the Local Anti-Poverty Strategy Document (LAPs) document. This is planned for the end of the year.



**Keep Notes:**

Large dashed blue rectangular area for taking notes.



*Finding Your Way* is a series of four guides which are being published as part of the *Having your Say* Programme.

A central tenet of the Programme is the view that policies intended to tackle poverty are more likely to be successful if the people and communities they are designed for are involved in their planning and implementation.

The guides are designed as practical tools to support the community and voluntary sector to understand, analyse and influence the policy environment in a number of key areas.

These include: Local Government, the Budget process in Ireland and Northern Ireland, Social Welfare and Family Policy and Health.

These guides are being published in partnership with Comhairle, the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA) and the Building Healthy Communities Programme in Combat Poverty.

€10



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