



PLANET – The Partnerships Network

Submission to

Dept. Environment, Heritage and Local Government

on Green Paper on Local Government

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PLANET – The Partnerships Network is the representative organisation of the thirty-eight Area-based Partnership companies, who from 2008, under the Department of Community and Rural Affairs Cohesion Process, will have county-wide coverage (after merging with Community Partnerships and LEADER Companies).

The Network comprises eighteen Partnership Companies based in Rural areas, nine based in towns and cities outside of Dublin (urban Partnerships), and eleven within the Dublin area.

These Partnership companies, have over the past number of years, worked closely and collaboratively with both City and County Councils, and City and County Development Boards, and for the past number of years Partnership' plans have been endorsed on an annual basis by their respective Director of Community and Enterprise, and now welcome this opportunity to contribute to the formulation of policy in this area.

Foreword:

Firstly, PLANET welcomes the broad thrust of the tentative recommendations addressed in the Green Paper. The document speaks favourably of the role of local government in supporting all individuals within their counties, however, we are conscious that the Green Paper is 'light' on specific recommendations to deal with social inclusion issues, particularly the experiences and involvement of these most marginalised.

In agreement with the Green Paper, we recognise that the role played by local authorities in supporting the community has expanded in recent years, and that they are now more pro-active in assisting community development and participation, and addressing social inclusion, and we welcome the recognition that “to reach its potential, local government needs to be strengthened to meet the challenges that include:

- Continued population growth and balanced regional development;
- Tackling social exclusion and integrating new communities;
- Ensuring greater connection between local government and local people”.

Also, from the many years of experience of the Partnership Companies, we agree with the belief that “Central government is not best placed to respond to every issue faced by local communities. We therefore need to give local government greater freedom and capacity to tackle local issues locally, working on its own initiative and in partnership with other local and State agencies”.¹

This flexibility and innovation is required to serve the larger, more diverse populations, but also to continue to support the needs of those who remain most excluded from the local authorities, such as those with low levels of literacy or minority groups.

Part 1, Chapter 1: Responding to a New Ireland

Because of the nature of the work of Local Agencies and the Community & Voluntary Sector, we are particularly interested on Government decisions that will impact on responses to a 'New Ireland'.

These challenges highlighted in the Green Paper are those experienced by Partnerships on an ongoing basis. As outlined, these include: ²

- “A growing population expected to exceed 5 million by 2020 with the resulting requirements for housing, public infrastructure, educational facilities etc;
- A more diverse and mobile population;
- An ongoing focus on overcoming social exclusion;
- Achieving greater regional balance in a country which depends on the free market for much of its economic success;
- Managing urban development, and ensuring regional coherence in planning strategies, within an overall national framework;
- Maintaining a vibrant and sustainable rural Ireland...”

PLANET welcomes the recognition of these issues, and area-based Partnership companies will continue to work collaboratively with local authorities to address and provide local solutions to these issues.

However, in this Green Paper, and subsequent White Paper, PLANET would like to see Central Government address the perception, outlined in the *Taskforce on Active Citizenship*, that “the perceived distance between the citizen and local authority was too great – particularly but not exclusively in urban areas.”

PLANET also welcomes the recognition in this Green Paper that 'Uniform solutions will not necessarily fit all circumstances'. ³ It has been our experience over many years that a local, flexible, and innovative response to particular issues in each county is the most responsive, positive way to deal with the relevant issues of all communities.

¹ Page 3, Green Paper on Local Government

² Page 12 / 13, Green Paper on Local Government

³ Page 18, Green Paper on Local Government

Serving the Citizen

Linked to the above point, the Green Paper recognises that “the provision of quality customer service to the public is a key objective of Government right across the public service. Notwithstanding the range of initiatives that have improved service delivery in the last decade, local government must demonstrate flexibility and imagination to continue to deliver essential services in a changing Ireland. There is also potential for greater cooperation and assistance across boundaries and for the delivery of shared services”.⁴

These recommendations are also endorsed in the recent review of County / City Development Boards. Indecon International Economic Consultants recommend to:

- “Introduce arrangements to facilitate reporting of CDB issues within Local Authority.
- Recommend that CDBs undertake an annual audit of the effectiveness of the operations of their boards in line with best practice.
- Undertake a review of the composition and role of SIM to enhance its effectiveness.”

PLANET also notes that under this section (Serving the Citizen) that 'one of the themes that came up was the disconnect between local authorities (as the lead local institution) and local development agencies. Local authorities, from both the public representative and official side, consider that in many cases, local and State agencies do not work sufficiently closely with local authorities. On the other hand, local authorities have been criticised by the local development sector for not being engaged or pro-active enough in relation to areas of activity promoted by those organisations'.

This issue is again addressed in Chapter 2.

Part 1, Chapter 2: Irish Local Government in Context

The Green Paper, in a very loose manner, raises the issue of linkages between local authorities and local development agencies. References include:

“County and City Development Boards were established to bring together, under the local government umbrella, the wide range of State agencies operating locally, with the social partners and local development bodies. CDBs provide an opportunity to maximise the combined impact of State agencies at local level. They were designed to concentrate the collective energies of all local partners on devising strategies for economic, social and cultural development tailored to the needs of the county or city concerned. The aim was to integrate public services in the interests of the common good and, crucially, under the democratic leadership of local government.”⁵

It claims that 'local development agencies – Area Partnerships, Leader, County/City Enterprise Boards etc – have grown alongside local authorities. Part of the rationale for the County/City Development Boards is to more closely align these local development bodies with local government.

⁴ Page 23, Green Paper on Local Government

⁵ Page 30, Green Paper on Local Government

The recent initiative to bring Area Partnerships and Leader Groups together has seen some rationalisation within a unified county based structure. The interaction and synergy between local government and these agencies continues to generate debate'.⁶

“This view from the centre has also affected belief in the ability of local authorities to deliver new services. It has encouraged Government to by-pass local authorities in favour of separate local development bodies and it does not encourage decentralisation of power. This approach has arguably served to keep the local government sector much weaker than it should be”.⁷

The Indecon review of CDB's also addresses this issue:

“A wide range of other issues were raised during the consultation process and these included the following:

- Concerns about relationship between CDBs and new unified local development agency structures;
- Effectiveness of members of CDBs;
- Role of Community and Voluntary Fora;
- Access to county/city data and availability of information.”⁸

The report recommends that CDB's should 'ensure appropriate integration mechanism with new unified local development agencies.'⁹

while also highlighting some of the perceived benefits of CDB's in that they “have a significant role in Social Inclusion areas where they have success in getting agencies to work together and share resources. The culture of agencies in the Social Inclusion areas is towards co-operation. While economic development agencies tend to adopt a more individual approach. “

- “SIM Groups have provided vital focal points for Social Inclusion stakeholders”
- “Good at exchange information. Agencies with social inclusion briefs see value in inter agency work. Agencies with County Officers have a commitment to the County and are supportive”
- “Effective in Social Inclusion, due to commitment of locally based agencies, and clear and concise action plans and also understood by most of the players that they each have something to contribute
- Willingness at local level to address issues.””¹⁰

One of the recommendations of the Indecon report is to:

“Introduce arrangements to facilitate reporting of CDB issues within Local Authorities¹¹, and PLANET would also welcome this recommendation as a method of informing the wider local authority within a county / city and also their networks of the innovative, responsive, and positive work being undertaken in their areas.

⁶ Page 28, Green Paper on Local Government

⁷ Page 32, Green Paper on Local Government

⁸ Page vii, Indecon Review of County / City Development Board Strategic Reviews

⁹ Page viii, Indecon Review of County / City Development Board Strategic Reviews

¹⁰ Page 46, Indecon Review of County / City Development Board Strategic Reviews

¹¹ Page xii, Indecon Review of County / City Development Board Strategic Reviews

In relation to the SIM Groups

“While evidence of good work among SIM groups has emerged during this study, it is also clear that these groups would benefit from a renewal of their mandate. In addition some of the recommendations in this report concerning the CDBs would also apply to the SIM groups.”¹²

On the whole, PLANET is emphatic that competitive attitudes should not prevail between local authorities and the wide variety of local development agencies that currently exist. All organisations only exist to serve the communities they have been established to support, and in the interest of supporting all members of society, a collaborative approach, both to sharing expertise, staff, funding, etc. is ultimately the most successful.

It should also be recognised and noted that all area-based Partnership companies are required to have their Programmes of Activity endorsed by their respective Local Authority on an annual basis (through the CDB SIM group), and are signatories to the Development Board's Strategic Plans. The above point about central government by-passing local authorities in favour of separate local development bodies is exactly that – a decision of central government, and not a decision on the part of the local development bodies themselves.

Part 2, Chapter 5: Division of Responsibility

Options for Change

Continued Training

“Councillors do have significant powers of direction and policy making. To ensure that councillors are fully aware of their functions and powers, regular courses are organised to assist them. These types of courses should be maintained, particularly as new councillors come into the system after local elections.”¹³

PLANET would like to see Councillors, and other relevant local authority staff being provided with ongoing training to maintain their understanding of social inclusion issues, and creating an awareness of the diverse range of local development organisations that currently exist within the landscape.

Part 3, Chapter 7: Participative Democracy and Local Government

“There is significant potential for stronger community influence and input into the decision-making processes of local government. New avenues of participation and communication between local authorities and the communities they represent could allow citizens to exercise a greater degree of control over local services and facilities, could help mobilise public engagement and civic spirit, and could increase the transparency of local authority business.

¹² Page xii, Indecon Review of County / City Development Board Strategic Reviews

¹³ Page 61, Green Paper on Local Government

These new forms of participation may be particularly useful in areas of social exclusion. Measures such as participatory budgeting, petition-related rights, binding plebiscites, regular town/area meetings etc could be used to empower communities by fostering direct, meaningful contact between councils and the communities they represent. Such measures would also be in keeping with the guiding principles of this Paper, particularly those of local democracy and subsidiarity.”¹⁴

PLANET welcomes the need for participative democracy, however, recognition needs to be given to the fact that those groups and individuals supported by the Partnership Companies (and other local development agencies) are a further step removed from the participatory process. These communities are only making tentative steps towards working collectively to improve their communities. The individuals that Partnerships support are in a similar situation – they are frequently ethnic minority groups, who may not be entitled to vote, or may not have been encouraged to vote up-until-now, they may have low educational attainment, and are therefore, further marginalised from participating.

We welcome the recognition of the need to engage more positively with communities, however, would welcome further discussion as to how best to engage with these groups mentioned above.

Part 3, Chapter 8: Serving the Citizen

In relation to staff recruitment, we feel it is vital within the Social Inclusion Units of Local Authorities, that the positions are filled by people with experience, qualifications, and background in this area. An understanding, empathy, and awareness of the complex issues that impact of peoples' and communities' capacity to become active citizens in their communities is essential if local authorities are to become more approachable by those they are charged with serving and supporting.

The Indecon report also recommends “the retention of exceptional personnel as Directors of Service for community and enterprise, and to implement secondments between CDB Community and Enterprise Directorates and central Government departments, statutory agencies and private, community and voluntary sectors”.¹⁵

This issue is recognised in the Green Paper when it claims that “it is essential that the sector should be in a position to attract and retain high calibre candidates with a range of experience and skill sets.

This means putting in place more flexible recruitment policies to meet organisational needs.”¹⁶

¹⁴ Page 80, Green Paper on Local Government

¹⁵ Page viii, Indecon Review of County / City Development Board Strategic Reviews

¹⁶ Page 23, Green Paper on Local Government

Part 4, Chapter 9: Regional Governance

“Regional development also requires support for economic growth in rural areas, in addition to the Gateways and Hub towns, in accordance with the White Paper on Rural Development and the National Development Plan.”¹⁷

This recommendation would be strongly endorsed by Rural Partnerships, who are all too aware of the impact of significant population decrease in remote rural areas, and population explosion in and around large local towns, each bringing their own range of issues.

Overall

Overall, PLANET welcomes this Green Paper on Local Governance, however, we find that the Paper has little concrete recommendations in regard to how local authorities will specifically deal with / expand their role in the area of social inclusion.

- This Green paper is couched in a recognition of the limitations on a certain section of society to be able to participate in volunteering. “While community remains strong in Ireland, some ties have loosened. Long commutes and near full employment impact on volunteerism.” Again, we point to the 'target group' of the Partnership Companies, are not those constrained by long-commutes, but by low-paid employment, no employment, or no permission to work.
- PLANET would welcome a discussion on how to ensure that those who can vote do so. Several issues impact on peoples' perception of the value of their vote, and an ongoing educational programme in this area, along with other strategies to encourage voting would prove beneficial.
- The suggestions on participative democracy are also removed from the groups / individuals mostly supported by Partnership Companies.
- This Green Paper recommends communication / availability of forms through the Internet. This is a method of communication not often available to those most often supported by the Partnership Companies, while it is also often the case that those who may have access to it, are not aware how to use it – particularly the elderly.

¹⁷ Page 97, Green Paper on Local Government