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## Clare PPN submission in respect of Public Consultation on the Future of Local Government

September 29<sup>th</sup> 2023

Clare Public Participation Network welcomes this opportunity to make this brief submission in relation to the above consultation.

Clare PPN considers that an urgent reprioritising and rebalancing of the decision making functions of local government is necessary in Ireland.

In work carried out previously by Clare PPN we established that there is an inequality in the realisation of the socio economic rights of people resident in Ireland with their geographic location determining their access to certain basic necessities. The current system of Government, National, Local and EU does not in itself provide a solution to this. It will require specific commitments, policy changes and investment to ensure that irrespective of geographic location that residents of Ireland have their basic socio economic rights guaranteed. It is impossible however to think of how effective solutions to local inequalities could be guaranteed without both resources and decision making power being re-localised. What we are seeing under the current programme for government and NPF and NDP instead is the regionalisation of local decision making and on the ground in our communities the effects of this are being felt. We have a reduction in local services in many areas alongside a growing population.

As it stands we consider local government to be underfunded, lacking autonomy and having a poor balance of decision making between elected representatives and the local authority executive. The current situation has corroded and weakened the democratic basis of local government and removed decision making processes from ordinary residents in each county. In particular the centralised and then regionalised focus of national government has meant very poor levels of subsidiarity with decisions hap-

pening largely beyond the reach of residents in each county. In particular the Regional Assemblies, and Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies lack a democratic lever for county level influence. Although county level Councillors sit on the assemblies, there is no method for residents of each region to have their democratic wishes for the region represented on the assemblies and no method for the balancing of county and regional interests.

Clare PPN also considers that the direct underfunding of local government can lead to poor decision making with a prioritising of rate-generating economic development rather than a prioritising of social wellbeing and sustainable development within the county.

Clare PPN wishes to see investment in the enhancement of local government and in the democratic process itself and calls for a commitment to be made that at least 25% of exchequer funding (up from 8%) will be redistributed through local government channels and that a road map for this to happen is developed in consultation with the diverse communities in each LA area.

As part of this process Clare PPN would like to see a mandatory training programme on democratic systems, deliberative democracy, participation, co-decision making, dissent, human rights, equality, climate action and the value of critical analysis being developed for staff of local authorities and for those contesting elections.

Clare PPN as part of local democratic processes would like to see a significant re-investment in independent community development projects in each LA area. These must be independent in their decision making from the Local Authorities. The community development approach underpins democratic participation, empowerment, self advocacy and the development of leadership from within communities who experience marginalisation or exclusion including migrant and ethnic minority groups. Without this it is likely that such communities will remain unrepresented in Local Government structures. This approach will also bring the lived experience of particular groups to bear on policy making leading to better and more informed decisions.

Clare PPN calls for **all** the business of local authorities to be done in public – including in particular that of the Corporate Policy Groups in each LA. This is in line with the Open Government Action Plan.

Clare PPN would like to see a thorough cost benefit analysis of the widespread and expensive use of consultancy firms in policy making and consultation. Clare PPN considers this practice to be a contributory factor in the de-localisation of decision making and a symptom of the underfunding of local government. Clare PPN considers that the role of Local Authorities in providing sustainable employment and acting as an anchor institution for community wealth building is undermined by the practice of extensive contracting out of decision making through such agencies and consultancy firms. Far better to build and retain local expertise.

In the light of the threats presented to communities by Climate Change and extreme weather events Clare PPN would like to see local government emergency services significantly enhanced, with directly employed staff trained to sufficient levels to respond to flooding, storms, displacement, fires etc.

Clare PPN would like to see democratically reconstituted LAs re-establish themselves as the direct builders, suppliers and maintainers and retrofitters of public housing in their localities. Clare PPN also notes the difficulty in rural areas of securing employers to host apprenticeships and notes that the LAs have the opportunity to provide this function.

Clare PPN would like to see an independent research and statistics section with directly employed qualified staff established in each local authority area in order to ensure that policy making is based on accurate readily available data. This service should be available to Councillors to help them cost and evaluate proposals for their areas. This service should be free from policy and political constraints and able to present data which supports, contradicts or challenges the local authority executive policies or plans where necessary.

Clare PPN calls for the proper remuneration of Councillors- with a salary of at least the average industrial wage and the introduction of maternity leave and childcare provisions and the possibility of nominated ‘seconds’ to stand in for absences to help make it possible for those from a variety of walks of life to seek election.

Clare PPN calls for Councillors to be bound by a human rights charter and for a method of democratic deposing of /or recalling any councillor who acts in contravention of this charter to be introduced.

Clare PPN considers that there is a need to either re-establish town and community councils or invest significantly in the Municipal District structure – enabling decision making at that level and encouraging and resourcing participation from communities at that level of local government.

Clare PPN, echoing the call from Traveller organisations around the country, calls for the removal of the function of provision of Traveller housing and accommodation from Local Authorities who have over decades failed to realise the socio economic rights to housing and accommodation for this community. We call for this function to be provided for by an independent new agency which incorporates Traveller leadership and has a remit to deliver high quality sustainable and culturally appropriate homes in consultation with the diverse Traveller community in Ireland..

In regard to the internal staffing and core skills of Local Authorities Clare PPN considers that the practice of employing generalists rather than specialists may need re-evaluation in light of the challenges relating to climate action. We note the recent recruitment processes for Climate Action Staff in Local Authorities were no particular

specialisation, education or expertise in regard to climate change, climate science, environment, energy or just transition were required and consider this to be a lost opportunity.

Clare PPN has welcomed innovations in democratic processes such as the Citizen's Assemblies and the PPNs themselves. CPPN considers that an extension of town hall and Citizen's Assembly style consultations and policy formation would be valuable at local levels with a key feature being the random selection of participants and the presentation of input from a range of experts and people with lived experience of the issues at hand.

Clare PPN considers the PPN structure as a valuable step in engagement in local processes which is hampered itself by the lack of decision making power at local government level- many of the issues our members raise are rejected as being part of national policy not issues under the remit of local government and yet there is no similar structured process for community groups to input at national level.

The independence of the PPNs themselves and the proper resourcing of them with both staffing and programme funding are crucial if the structure is to form part of rehabilitating and reinvigorating local democracy. It would be valuable to consider the PPN's role and funding in this respect, and also to evaluate the fact that the PPN representative roles nationally have gender parity – we have as many women as men in our representative structures.

One issue for concern within the PPN structure is the fact that the PPN's are the responsibility of the Department of Rural and Community Development and not the Department of Housing and Local Government, an anomaly which appears to devalue the role of the PPNs within LAs.

Clare PPN looks forward to continuing to engage in this process and welcomes any communications or queries in respect of this submission.

Yours Sincerely,

Sarah Clancy

Clare PPN Coordinator

Any queries in relation to this submission can be directed to Sarah Clancy, Clare PPN Coordinator, for the attention of the Secretariat of Clare PPN:

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