

Environmental Protection Agency  
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**RE: *Our Communities: A Framework Policy for Local and Community Development in Ireland***

Overall, the framework is very worthwhile and wide-ranging. However, it could usefully increase reference to a number of points around sustainability which would help in delivering successful and resilient local communities.

EPA has been working in this area for several years and supports a broad range of activities of direct relevance to this framework. Examples of these include:

- *Local Authority Prevention Network*: a cooperative programme between the EPA and Ireland's local authorities to build capacity for promoting waste prevention at a local and grassroots level.
- *Community Re-Use Network*: the all-Island representative body for community based re-use, recycling and waste prevention organisations. Its objectives are to jointly promote re-use and social inclusion at national and local level.
- *Stop Food Waste*: a programme working with householders, communities, schools, local authorities, tidy towns groups and businesses providing comprehensive information about food waste. Recognising that there will always be some food waste (and other 'green' wastes) the programme has also established a network of community-based Master Composters to train individuals and groups in this technique.
- *Green Enterprise*: a funding scheme to provide financial support to encourage Irish companies and organisations to implement cleaner, greener work practices. In recent years, several community-based groups have engaged with Green Enterprise – including Midlands Simon Community; the Bia Food Initiative; and the Rediscovery Centre, Ballymun.

In terms of specific observations and recommendations; EPA makes the following comments:

- It is fundamental that Ireland's communities are provided with a **high quality environment** in which to live. At a basic level, citizens should have access to safe drinking water and clean air – this requires investment & regulation from government; and responsible behaviours from businesses & citizens.

EPA has developed a number of resources to assist citizens & communities in engaging with their local environment. These would include

- *My Local Environment*: on-line access to information about the environment close to where people live or work, including local air & water quality and details of nearby EPA-regulated activities.
  - *SPLASH*: an on-line map-based website which provides the public with bathing water quality information for all of the identified bathing waters – including notifications via Twitter.
  - *See it? Say it!*: a Smartphone App to help people to report environmental pollution in their towns and villages – allowing the public to photograph a pollution incident, input GPS location coordinates, which are sent to the relevant local authority for follow up.
- Communities should also be provided with the infrastructure necessary for making correct choices with regard to **waste management** (including provision of waste collection services and recycling facilities), as well as water and energy use. This also extends to providing appropriate routes for disposal of problematic wastes including bulky items and hazardous materials from households, farms etc.
  - Human health benefits of contact with nature and green spaces are well proven and are key to encouraging the active lifestyles needed to prevent issues such as obesity, cardiovascular disease and type-2 diabetes that are affecting much of our population. For this reason, sustainable communities will require recreational spaces and also areas of wildness. This '**green infrastructure**' would be provided via informed planning at LA level, and then actively maintained by local groups & public bodies. Schemes such as LEADER could be used to support this by developing projects to deliver, for example: *Infrastructure that enables physical activity; Mapping our natural heritage; Safe walking in rural roads.*
  - The concept of the **Circular Economy** has come to prominence recently and is seen as an economic model that puts emphasis on preserving products, components and materials in use for as long as possible. However in a fuller sense, the Circular Economy also addresses and supports concepts such as:
    - Equity of access to resources
    - Valuing ecosystem services
    - Wellbeing of human health & the environment
    - Fair social & employment structures

From a community perspective, the framework of the circular economy is well aligned with local and community development (L&CD) by emphasising local enterprises that repair and maintain products in place of purchasing new (imported) items. This is entirely aligned with the Action Plan for Jobs ambition "*to stimulate the domestic economy and generate employment in locally traded sector*".

- In particular, the circular economy also embraces concepts such as a **local food production** which has a strong role to play in L&CD both in terms of economic effect and a

sense of ownership/participation to the area. These activities could take the form of direct selling via farmers markets; promoting local produce in local supermarkets; and/or small-scale food production businesses.

- The Department of Agriculture's **GLAS agri-environment scheme** is part of Ireland's Rural Development Programme (2014-2020) and should be considered within the framework – particularly in the context of rural communities which have strongly experienced the negative impact of the economic crisis.
- In a similar vein, **local-level tourism** initiatives generate employment and wealth in communities – often in areas where other economic activity is subdued. This is again fully in-line with the strong focus within the Action Plan for Jobs on tourism as an engine to stimulate the domestic economy. Specific actions from the action plan that have L&CD relevance include self-guiding tours/trails based cultural & artistic collections; heritage tourism initiatives; a national park trails network; arts venues, festivals, and touring initiatives.
- SMEs play a critical role in local economies, particularly in rural areas. Supports must be put in place to help these businesses to thrive (such as via EPA's Green Business programme); and also to foster new businesses – with the support of the **Local Enterprise Office** central to this.
- **Public procurement** processes direct extraordinary levels of spending and careful use of this instrument at regional levels (through approaches such as Green Public Procurement) would deliver local employment opportunities.
- Selecting some headline indicators that could be used to track progress and to could assist comparisons with similar ambitions in other European countries. The recently released **Sustainable Development Indicators** from the CSO provide a set of metrics to measure progress on sustainability in Ireland should be examined in this context.
- Finally, EPA notes the listing of the National **Corporate Social Responsibility** Plan in the policy context but suggests further development of this aspect. In particular, the following section from the plan is directly relevant: *"A key priority for a socially responsible business is to develop and maintain strong and mutually beneficial relationships with its community. It is at the local and community level that the impact of increased CSR activity will be felt in social, economic or environmental terms."*

Sponsorship of the Chambers Ireland National CSR Awards by DECLG offers strong opportunities for further promotion of these ambitions especially through the 'Excellence in Community' award category.

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