Western Development Commission (WDC) Response to Consultation to Support the Community and Voluntary Sector 2026-2030

August, 2025.

The consultation response was submitted using the online consultation portal. This is a record of the responses submitted.

B. Mission - what the strategy aims to achieve

The previous strategy identified six high level ambitions to be attained:

- *A thriving community and voluntary sector*
- *A strengthened partnership between Government and the community and voluntary sector*
- *Community supports underpinned by societal value and community need*
- *Resilient communities empowered to meet emerging challenges*
- *Empowered communities informing and shaping responses to their needs*
- *A thriving volunteering culture*

Taking account of the current environment, challenges and priorities for the C&V sector, do these six high level ambitions still reflect the priority for the sector, do you propose any amendments or additional ambitions be included in the new strategy?

These ambitions still seem a fair reflection of the priorities for the sector.

We would also suggest a further ambition for the sector which arises from the challenge of in some cases, having an **over-proliferation of groups operating in overlapping spaces**. The impacts of this that we see in WDC include: duplication and associated inefficiencies and waste; fragmentation of advocacy when it is spread across multiple actors; the dilution of impact due to the dispersal of funding amongst multiple competing groups; governance strain where skilled leaders and volunteers are spread too thin; and risks to the overall credibility of the sector and public support for it. There are political and other complexities involved in addressing this challenge, not least the deep-rooted sense of community identity and loyalty naturally associated with individual organisations, but it is also true that greater encouragement of mergers, partnerships, and shared services (for example) could reduce duplication, strengthen governance, and improve sector performance and resilience overall. We would therefore advocate for a additional ambition - or Strategic Objective - to be for **a more coordinated and consolidated** sector overall. Some of the specifics of how that might be achieved are highlighted in Section D below.

C. Strategic Objectives

The strategic objectives which define the scope of the previous strategy were:

- *Strengthen and develop participative approaches to the development of public policy and programming underpinned by an autonomous community and voluntary infrastructure*
- *Support and facilitate communities to participate in community development and local development*
- *Develop and strengthen processes and mechanisms to secure meaningful consultation, inclusion and participation in local, regional and national decision-making structures, particularly by non-engaging and marginalised communities and their representative organisations*
- *Develop capacity of organisations supporting communities to participate in community development and local development, with a specific focus on marginalised communities*
- *Supporting commitments in Our Public Service 2020, develop the strategic and operational capacity of Local Community Development Committees (LCDCs), including in coordinating, monitoring and supporting community development and local development*
- *Strengthen and build understanding and capacity to meet Public Sector Duty obligations in local government and community and voluntary organisations*
- *Supporting commitments in Our Public Service 2020, continue to develop and strengthen Public Participation Networks as the primary mechanism for communities to engage with local government decision-making*
- *Strengthen and build understanding and capacity to support the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) National Implementation Plan*
- *Strengthen the Local Economic and Community Plan process, enhancing community participation in the development and implementation of plans and securing more effective collaboration and partnership working nationally, regionally and locally.*
- *Support, develop and enhance capacity in the local government sector in community development and local development*
- *Support community development and local development to engage with Climate Change adaptation and mitigation strategies.*

Which of these strategic objectives do you consider to be most relevant and are there further objectives that should be considered?

These all remain relevant objectives. The most relevant to our work in WDC are: 'Support and facilitate communities to participate in community development and local development'; 'Support community development and local development to engage with Climate Change adaptation and mitigation strategies'.

WDC has a remit to develop and support the **social enterprise sector** in the Western Region (please see Pillars 3 & 4 of our 5 Year Strategic Plan Unlocking Potential, Driving Change https://westerndevelopment.ie/about/our-strategy/ for more). We see enormous further potential in the social enterprise model in strengthening the sector overall: it offers possibilities of greater financial sustainability, independence and resilience via revenue generation; it encourages innovation and an entrepreneurial approach to meeting societal needs; it carries with it potential for scalable impact and for replication; it can help address volunteer burnout and/or difficulties with recruiting volunteers; and it can help support employment. especially for groups who may have difficulties in accessing the mainstream labour market. Accordingly, we would welcome a stronger focus on the development of the social enterprise sector within the next Community and Voluntary

sector strategy and suggest that this be translated into an additional Strategic Objective, with strong links to the mission and objectives of Trading for Impact, the current National Social Enterprise Strategy.

Levels of **volunteerism** are typically high in Ireland - but this is something which can not be taken for granted. A range of challenges exist to the sustainability of volunteerism at current levels or in how people volunteer: demographic changes, most obviously with an ageing volunteer population;high levels of mobility and migration mitigating against the creation of deeper voluntary involvement; work and commuting demands and the increased prevalance of dual-income households; changing volunteer expectations and orientation (e.g. a preference amongst some younger people for shorter 'bursts' vs weekly or ongoing commitments); and increased governance and compliance responsibilities which can discourage volunteerism. Accordingly, we would welcome a Strategic Objective which would anticipate and meet the need for volunteerism to be continually built and renewed and for a level of 'future proofing' in response to these and other trends.

.D. Strategic Actions

The previous strategy included 43 strategic actions/commitments, summarised here:
- *Develop processes for meaningful consultation, inclusion and participation of all communities in decisions that affect them*
- *Develop capacity in community and voluntary organisations to support communities*
- *Support education and training opportunities for community workers, volunteers in community organisations and voluntary board members*
- *Ensure local decision-making and participatory structures are fit for purpose (e.g. PPNs, LCDCs)*
- *Introduce a sustainable funding model for the community and voluntary sector*
- *Develop capacity at all levels to deliver key policy initiatives including UN SDGs, Climate Action and Public Sector Duty*

Considering the current context, challenges and opportunities, what specific strategic actions/commitments do you consider could be included in the new strategy?

The **Strategic Actions** we propose relate to the commentary above:

With regard to the challenge of the over-proliferation of groups in overlapping spaces, we would like to see specific actions explored and/or delivered such as: funding for shared back-office supports (HR, finance, IT) to reduce overhead while preserving local delivery; offering of financial incentives (e.g., merger transition grants, legal cost coverage) for organisations that join forces or share services; prioritisation of multi-year funding for proven collaborations rather than short-term project grants to individual groups; requirements for joint applications for certain grants where there's overlap in aims or geography; prioritisation of funding for strategic alliances that show reduced duplication; encouragement of regional coordinating bodies to map services, identify overlaps, and facilitate cooperation; improved policy alignment across linked policies (e.g. Trading for Impact plus this proposed Strategy) and alignment of departmental funding streams to avoid multiple agencies or funding bodies funding similar services separately.

While many of the broader societal trends impacting on volunteerism are outside the remit of this new Strategy, there are some actions which could be taken by all of the actors in this space which could help to continually renew and refresh volunteer activity. These include: responding to trends for more flexible volunteering (e.g one-off, project or seasonally based); strengthening of volunteer recruitment with targeted outreach, peer recruitment, employment supported volunteering etc.; improved 'conditions' for and recognition of volunteers; reducing barriers to volunteerism, especially amongst groups who may face economic, social or other barriers; and finally, increased funding for broad-based community development workers in local development companies and other similar bodies who could play a role in animating, developing and supporting new and existing community groups outside the confines of current funding programmes such as SICAP, LEADER, etc.

With regard to the social enterprise sector, we would advocate for the full implementation of Trading for Impact but also that the new Community and Voluntary Strategy could also contain actions which support its growth and development. These might include, for example: development of support programmes which would provide information, supports, mentoring, training, capacity building etc. for community groups, organisations which would benefit from more explicitly operating as a social enterprise; encouragement of the social enterprise model from an earlier stage for those tackling unmet societal needs/challenges and where there are particular opportunities for traded income, employment and growth; and more generally, greater promotion of the value and distinctiveness of the social enterprise model amongst the wider public, businesses, the public sector, etc.

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