



Department of Rural and Community Development

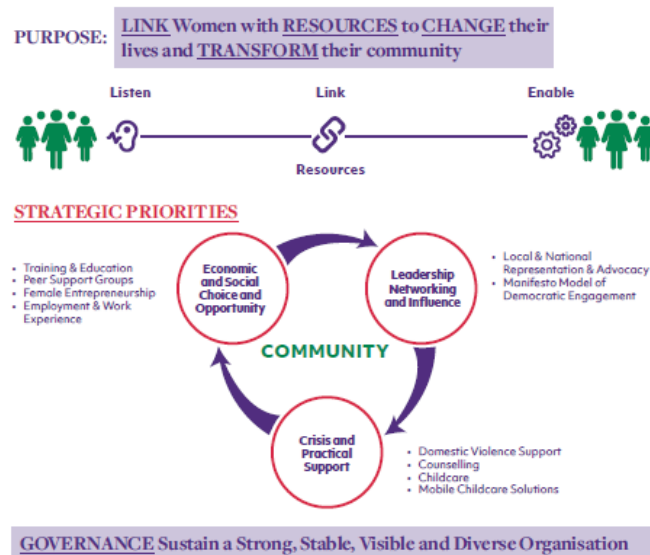
National Social Enterprise Policy for Ireland

Submission by Longford Women's Link

Introduction

Longford Women's Link

Longford Women's Link (LWL), a dynamic social enterprise which celebrates its 24th anniversary in 2019, links women with the resources to make their community safe and equal. LWL identifies and addresses key inequalities that prevent women in Longford achieving their full social/economic potential and our work provides real and tangible opportunities for women and their families. Services provided to approximately 900 women and 170 children in Longford/Midlands (2017) enabled women to access a wide range of programmes and supports yielding real benefits for their families and the wider community. We provide women-centred services (Education, Training, Group Support, Childcare, Domestic Violence, Counselling, Female Entrepreneurship, capacity-building and local/national advocacy). Key to the delivery of our services is our unique model of Integrated Service Delivery (ISD):



LWL and many similar rural-based social enterprises were severely impacted by both government reform processes and the economic recession. In addition, LWL, throughout its 24 years in existence has identified key barriers to women's full participation in society, specifically experienced by women in Longford. These include rural isolation, experience of domestic violence, lack of access to childcare and transport and lack of third level opportunities in Longford.



LWL Submission Outline

LWL welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the *Department of Rural and Community Development National Social Enterprise Policy for Ireland*. We also welcomed the commitment to the creation of the department in the *Programme for Government* and the intention to 'investigate the best ideas to advance economic and social progress in rural Ireland and will work to implement the best proposals in partnership with the rest of Government' (*Programme for Government*, 2016, p.41). Finally, we are pleased to note the studies highlighted in the public consultation document which respond to the needs of social enterprises and reference the potential for growth in Irish society and the benefits that this could bring.

We have structured our submission so that firstly it provides the background to our experience as a women's organisation working in a rural area. We will then address each of the policy priorities, providing a comment as to their relevance to our work as a grassroots women's organisation.

Gender Equality in Rural Ireland

Women in rural Ireland share many commonalities with their urban counterparts, however there are significant differences in terms of access to services, experiences of social exclusion and disadvantage and opportunities for economic independence. The recognition of different needs according to levels of disadvantage and/or geographic location is critical e.g. a rural woman experiencing economic disadvantage and social isolation will have very different needs to those living in urban areas. As outlined in the CEDRA report:

'Rural areas have lower skill levels in the labour market, reflecting the types of employment sectors traditionally found in these areas with this trend even more pronounced in the most peripheral areas' (CEDRA Research Report, 2014, p.148).

Ireland is a city/large urban town focused society, with our Governments own definition of 'rural' equating to anywhere outside the five cities. This 'one size fits all' approach will not serve rural areas in terms of their development and instead, denotes an ever increasing centralised approach to provision of state services and inward investment:

'With 40 per cent of the State's population located in Dublin and its output representing half of gross domestic product, Ireland is unique in the Western world' (Department of Housing and Planning, 2016).

Therefore it is our strong belief that a targeted approach to social enterprise development is required in order to ensure both balanced development as well as the inclusion of rural areas in future policy formulations. LWL has a long history of developing and implementing innovative programmes which support and promote Female Entrepreneurship in our community. Our experience is very varied – from female entrepreneurship mentoring programmes (under the previous EWM Programme 2010-2013) to tailor-made, gender specific courses for female entrepreneurs (our 2014 programme was supported by the Ulster Bank Community Impact Fund in collaboration with the Ulster Bank and Longford Local Enterprise Office and we are currently delivering an 18-month long programme supported by the Ulster Bank Skills



and Opportunities Fund). All our previous evaluations point to the same conclusion – gender inequality in the field of entrepreneurship is a complex issue and cannot be adequately addressed by one intervention.

Rural Isolation and Rural Poverty

People living outside cities or large towns face increased pressures, both financial and social. People in rural areas can experience isolation and poverty at greater levels. For example, the most recent SILC data shows that seventeen per cent of people living in rural areas are at risk of poverty, compared to almost fifteen per cent in urban areas (SILC, 2018). Older people, people engaged in agriculture and people living alone in rural areas suffer higher levels of rural isolation than the general population. This is further exacerbated by the rapid decline in the population in rural areas, especially among young people with many emigrating or in more recent years migrating to larger urban areas of cities to gain employment.

The Irish Rural Link report on Rural Poverty: *Poverty and Social Inclusion - The Case for Rural Ireland* (Irish Rural Link, 2016), lays out starkly the specific issues that exist in rural Ireland. The Midlands region in particular is at a disproportionately high risk of poverty and social exclusion. Therefore LWL is advocating for a specific focus within the DCRD on rural poverty e.g. rural isolation, poor employment opportunities, low income households and poor access to services. **Note: The chapter on equality in rural Ireland in the IRL report was authored by LWL and we are represented on the board of IRL by LWL's Deputy CEO.**

In this changing rural context, it is imperative that social enterprise is recognised for the role it can play in the regeneration of rural Ireland, particularly under Project Ireland 4040.

Policy Objectives

Policy Objective One – Creating Awareness of Social Enterprise

Awareness Strategy

LWL welcomes the proposed Awareness Strategy. As outlined in the consultation paper, the lack of clarity around what social enterprise actually entails is a barrier to ensuring that wider society understands the objectives and benefits of social enterprise.

An annual Social Enterprise Forum is also a welcome proposal, however LWL proposes that this be broadened somewhat to include regional fora which would provide greater opportunities for local and regional networking and also facilitate the exploration of collaborative work, particularly on a thematic basis. We are aware that there already a number of networks operating within the sector but a more cohesive approach is required.

LWL also suggests that greater use is made of technological and social platforms to facilitate the exchange of information and support the dissemination of information, and not just within the social enterprise sector. Finally, a National Social Enterprise Directory is also a recommendation.



Initiating Social Enterprises

LWL is in broad agreement that the education system and programmes such as the Young Social Innovators Programme have key roles to play. However the role that existing social enterprises can play is not insignificant. In theory, local agencies such as the Local Enterprise Offices, LDCs etc. have a supporting role in terms of direct and indirect supports but in the case of a social enterprise providing essential social and community services, there is a specific level of expertise and support required here. Therefore while working with both higher education providers and local agencies is important, LWL suggests a community partnership model which sees higher education institutions working in partnership with established social enterprises already implementing successful models of third level/community sector collaboration on the ground. This combination of both theoretical and practical learning is, in our opinion, an ideal method of creating models of good practice which can be adapted/replicated in the case of new initiatives.

Policy Objective Two – Growing and Strengthening Social Enterprise

Business Supports for Social Enterprise/Access to Finance and Funding

Supports for existing social enterprises are at best inconsistent and at worst, non-existent. This is particularly true for social enterprises in the community and voluntary sector¹ providing supports to those who are most disadvantaged within our communities. While the social enterprise model, by its very nature, is an income generating model (albeit, not-for-profit), LWL believes that there is a need for core funding to be provided to social enterprises who are providing critical services within their communities. LWL acknowledges that there are programme supports available from various government departments but these rarely result in full cost recovery, nor do they contribute to the overall management and leadership of the social enterprise in question. Therefore while a compilation of existing business supports would be welcomed, the process of identifying gaps (point 8 in the consultation paper) must include the issue of core funding. LWL acknowledges point 14 in the consultation paper which refers to the Government '*seeking to improve alignment of funding schemes to support the objectives of social enterprises, whilst avoiding any displacement of existing supports for Community and Voluntary organisations*' however, as outlined above, core funding to social enterprises in the community and voluntary sector would not amount to displacement in those organisations which deliver multiple community services. In terms of social finance, organisations such as LWL, operating in the community and voluntary sector, are trading as a social enterprise to be able to provide essential community supports – therefore social finance is not often a suitable option in this instance.

¹ **Note** – LWL does not consider social enterprise as a subset of the community & voluntary sector and agrees with the differentiation presented on page 9 of the consultation paper.



Policy Objective Three – Achieving Better Policy Alignment

Interaction with National and International Policies

LWL, like many of our social enterprise counterparts, engage with a range of government departments and funding sources in the provision of our services. It is absolutely critical that policy object one and two feed into this final objective to ensure that there is a greater understanding of how social enterprises interact with relevant policy areas. To this end, LWL recommends that the Implementation Group outlined in the consultation paper must include sectoral representatives and must have very clear objectives in order to ensure that at all stages of this national policy implementation, government departments are clear as to the objectives and outputs of social enterprises. In terms of influencing international policy, LWL believes that Ireland certainly has the potential to be in a position of influence in the very near future but believes that there are a number of steps to be completed (as outlined earlier) prior to this being a reality.

Data and Impact

Data collection is critical in order to present the impact of social enterprises. It is essential that this data looks at both quantitative and qualitative research methods in order to fully capture evidence of both the impact and potential impact of social enterprises. Critical to this is capturing evidence of the scale of impact of social enterprises with particular reference to services provided by organisations such as LWL on behalf of LWL.

LWL also recommends that any research on the impact of social enterprises conduct a mapping exercise on the various funding models adopted across the country and the lack of uniformity in terms of financial supports of social enterprises.

Sectoral comments

As outlined above, cuts to the budgets of women's social enterprises have had a lasting impact on the ability to provide much-needed services in neglected and disadvantaged areas as well as the ability to maximise the capacity of women and advocate for equality. It is our experience that many women, especially in rural Ireland are reliant on the services provided by social enterprises such as LWL in the Community and Voluntary Sector. There is no 'one-size-fits-all' approach to social enterprise policy and the Government must recognise the different needs and levels of disadvantage in urban and rural areas, including rural towns. Therefore we welcome the forthcoming National Social Enterprise Policy for Ireland and anticipate that it will implement meaningful policies and initiatives to bring about change for social enterprises in rural Ireland.

It is critical that this National Social Enterprise Policy provides an opportunity to acknowledge the value of the roles that social enterprises play in rural life and also, the value and benefit of ensuring equality in society. Commitment to engagement and collaboration requires resources, as does delivery of the work itself. The work of the social enterprise sector in rural Ireland needs to be acknowledged and the significant voluntary contribution made by many of its rural citizens recognised. The sector also needs acknowledgement for the role it plays in addressing social exclusion and inequality.



Social Enterprises operating in the community and voluntary sector offer a significant range of opportunities for communities including education and training options, childcare and entrepreneurship supports. Education and training opportunities are particular noteworthy for our marginalised communities, many of whom have never had access to quality education and training provision. Furthermore, participation in activities of this nature can only lead to a more engaged and empowered society which will foster a sense of social innovation, creativity and collaboration in order to improve conditions right across the country. Therefore, as outlined earlier, LWL believes that social enterprises have a critical role to play in terms of the implementation of Project Ireland 2040 and the rebalancing of the Irish economy.

Conclusion

LWL welcomes the opportunity to make this submission. We believe that a strong National Social Enterprise Policy for Ireland underpinned by meaningful investment is critical in addressing the various imbalances and inequalities as outlined in our own submission. We urge the Department to incorporate the views of organisations like LWL who have taken the time to make detailed submissions. As an organisation with almost 25 years' experience in the sector, including weathering the recession and adopting a business model which has resulted in the growth of the organisation, and gaining representation on various national boards such as Irish Rural Link, AONTAS and the NWCI, we feel we are ideally placed to be a member of the Implementation Group and would be keen to participate on this structure. We look forward to seeing the final policy in place.

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