

REVIEW OF COMMUNITY AND LOCAL DEVELOPMENT STRUCTURES

Discussion document

Background

1. When announcing the establishment of the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs in June 2002, the Taoiseach stressed the need for Government to address issues of regional and social balance in a more effective way as well as securing economic development. He explained that the Department was being set up to produce a more co-ordinated engagement by the state with communities around the country as they pursue their own development.

2. In pursuit of this objective, the Ministers for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, Environment, Heritage and Local Government and Justice, Equality and Law Reform, advised the Government in February 2003 that they were initiating a review process to secure the most positive impacts for communities from expenditure through programmes in this area. The guiding principles/terms of reference for the approach are:

- Improving on the ground services, supports and impacts on local communities, from within existing levels of resources;
- Streamlining and rationalising structures so as to avoid overlaps, duplication and undue administrative overheads;
- Bringing transparency, co-ordination and improved control to the funding and operation of local/community development measures;
- Strengthening the democratic accountability of agencies and service providers in this area.

3. The review process has three main elements, which are:

- a comprehensive consultative process with the various agencies and bodies, which began in February and was advanced at a national seminar in June attended by almost 300 participants,
- a review of existing arrangements between Area Development Management Limited, Government Departments and other stakeholders,

·a requirement that various local agencies and boards submit their annual work plans to city or county development boards for endorsement, in order to support greater coherence at local level.

The main objective of the consultation phase has been to attract an input from as wide as possible a range of bodies and agencies engaged in the delivery of services at a local and community level so as to inform the review process going forward.

4.The objective of this paper is to provide some flavour as to the Department's thinking at this stage regarding the issues that need to be addressed in the short term.

Main Issues.

5.It is clear that the provision of local and community services and support is a complex and multi-layered area. The complexity and number of structures and programmes are in themselves a cause for concern in that it is difficult at first glance to see the justification for this level of complexity. There is a counter argument made in a number of the submissions received in the Department that the number and complexity of programmes and structures is justified by the number and complexity of ways in which disadvantage can adversely affect communities.

6.It is hard to justify that even a wide range of specific problems requires a multiplicity of structures. A multiplicity of structures inevitably causes confusion to the very communities these structures are designed to serve. It also can cause duplication of facilities, overlapping of programmes, and difficulty with objective measurement of the impact of programmes and schemes. Also, an objective, comprehensible measurement of the effectiveness of expenditure across different Government departments in any one geographical area is difficult to make.

7.At this stage of the review it seems clear that the multiplicity and complexity of structures is to a great extent the result of the approach of central Government departments over the years. Across the range of departments dealing with disadvantage and social inclusion, it is difficult to see a consistent coherent approach to tackling particular issues. Even now, after the establishment of the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, new structures and schemes could be formulated within Government departments and agencies to tackle specific issues that might be better left to existing local agencies and bodies. Accordingly this leads us to the first two main issues thrown up by the review process at this stage:

Issue 1: What arrangements/rules should now apply to Government departments to avoid duplication?

Issue 2: What can Government departments do to improve existing arrangements?

Issue 3: What changes would be advisable to reduce, where appropriate the number of bodies operating in areas to ensure a sensible geographic basis to the areas of operation of each body.

8. While many of the contributions received from the agencies and bodies involved in the delivery of services claim a high level of co-ordination at local level, the feeling persists that there is considerable room for improvement. Of themselves, the structures that are in existence do not seem to provide a basis for formal coherent linkages or a common consistent approach across the range of problems that might beset any one particular community. This is not to say that individual programmes are not working or delivering good results, however is the impact of the total expenditure as effective as it could be?

9. Even within programmes in the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, inherited from different Government departments, there are inconsistencies in their management. In addition, it appears that some agencies are engaged in the funding or the provision of certain services without clear indication that such activities are factored into the thinking or operation of other local and community agencies pursuing similar goals or state agencies charged with the responsibility for the provision of such services at a national level.

10. A further important concern with current structures is to ensure that governance arrangements are consistent with the levels of disbursements involved. Some agencies dispense very large amounts of money and it is difficult to be certain the structures within such agencies support the proper detachment, equity and openness in arriving at funding decisions that the spending of public money demands. A large number of bodies depend on multiple funding from various sources to do their work. In a large number of cases the ultimate source of a large proportion of the funding is now the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs. This leads us to the next number of issues that may need to be directly addressed:

Issue 4: How do we improve linkages across the various local and community bodies?

Issue 5: Do we need to simplify funding streams?

Issue 6: How do we satisfy ourselves that proper arrangements for access to funding mechanisms are in place?

Issue 7: How do we secure better independent local evaluation of proposals for expenditure and annual plans as well as improved review of outputs?

Issue 8: Do we need to strengthen governance on local and community development bodies so as to enhance decision-making as well as consistency, equity and impact of spend?

11. It is evident from the contributions from local and community agencies that there is a level of concern, even resentment, at the involvement, as part of the tri-ministerial initiative, of the County and City Development Boards in the endorsing of agencies annual plans.

12. While not wishing to pre-empt the outcome of the review process, the Minister is on record as saying that a county based approach provides a manageable and comprehensible locus for measuring the expenditure and impact of programmes and schemes for communities. Guidelines are being prepared by the three departments concerned for the endorsement process by CDBs, which will bring greater clarity to this element of the initiative.

13. Some contributors refer to the "autonomy" of the local or community agency being diminished because the CDBs are closely linked to the local authority structure; others doubt that the CDBs are adequately resourced to carry out a significant monitoring role.

14. Other contributors are concerned that a move towards the involvement of the CDBs would undermine the integrity of the bottom-up approach to addressing problems within communities. Still others question the validity of taking a county-based approach at all. Further issues that present themselves include:

·Issue 9: What is the appropriate balance between bottom-up decision-making and central policy making and accountability?

·Issue 10: How do we ensure that CDBs are properly positioned to carry out a wider role?

·Issue 11: How do we ensure that local input and expertise is respected and affirmed?

·Issue 12: How can we be sure that the balance of representation on local agencies and bodies is equitable and appropriate?

15. As mentioned earlier the purpose of this paper is to stimulate discussion on some of the issues that we believe have been thrown up by the consultation process. The other elements of the Ministers' initiative are progressing - the review of ADM Ltd. is proceeding and guidelines for the endorsement process by CDBs are being developed. It may be that the review of ADM will raise further significant short-term issues that will need to be addressed when the Ministers return to Government with proposals later in the year.