

Chapter 9 The Donegal Community Audit – Conclusions

The Donegal Community Audit was funded under Measure 3.3 of the EU Programme for Peace and Reconciliation, which is aimed at locally based re-generation development strategies, 'Building Better Communities'. A prerequisite to building better communities is to increase the level of accessibility. The project has achieved this by examining:

- 1) The physical accessibility of community infrastructure to different concentrations of the population, by Electoral Area, Electoral Division and by Urban and Rural Areas.
- 2) The accessibility of community and voluntary groups to key vulnerable sectors of the population. It looked at how well their needs were being met by the existing provision. It examined the programmes and activities that are conducted by community and voluntary groups to meet the needs of targeted groups
- 3) The needs of the community and voluntary sector (spatially, sectorally and at community level) to ensure they can be dealt with in a systematic and planned fashion, to ensure their long term sustainability and ultimately increased accessibility.
- 4) How accessible community structures are to community and voluntary groups, how aware are the latter of the existence of existing community structures and are they willing to join
- 5) How accessible are community facilities to community and voluntary groups in terms of physical distance and the time allocated to community and voluntary groups in the programming of activities. How accessible are community facilities to People with Disabilities, to low income groups and other key vulnerable sectors.

A number of key recommendations have emerged from the Donegal Community Audit

□ **Addressing the imbalance in the physical accessibility to community and voluntary groups in rural areas and community facilities in small urban areas**

The results from the analysis in number one above, highlights that mixed clusters of community and voluntary groups and facilities are found mainly in the towns of medium and larger populations, while, clusters comprising of mainly community and voluntary groups are located in small urban settlements and rural areas. Despite the lack of facilities in small urban and rural areas, the level of activity is testimony to the nature of those communities to meet in alternative types of facilities, (e.g.) schools, public houses.

Subsequently, the research further examined whether the number of community and voluntary groups are sufficient to meet the needs of the total population? The results indicate that populations in urban areas and in particular small urban towns are better served with community and voluntary groups, with 1 group serving 158 people. Rural populations are the least served with community and voluntary groups (1 community and voluntary groups serves 1425 people).

Therefore, rural areas, which account for 58% of the entire population of the county, are at a particular disadvantage, in terms of accessibility to community infrastructure. Despite the favourable ratios recorded for urban areas, the question remains as to whether this is sufficient.

Enhancing accessibility requires the widespread dissemination of information and to this end, the Community Audit has produced the *'Directory of Community and Voluntary Groups by Geographical Remit'*, which outlines the groups in each area, be it urban or rural and also a

series of spatial maps. This information can be used by members of the general public to identify where the nearest community and voluntary group is located. Furthermore, it is recommended that policy makers and community development workers utilise both sources of information to plan for community infrastructural provision in a more coherent fashion, to ensure these deficits, especially in rural areas, be addressed now and in the future.

In addition the Community Audit has identified community and voluntary groups who are willing to or could be encouraged to share a wide range of resources. These could be used again to address the imbalance of infrastructure in rural areas.

❑ **Planning in a coherent fashion to meet the changing needs of different segments of the population**

The analysis carried out indicated that the sectors with the greatest concentrations of key vulnerable groups, were not always those which were best served by community and voluntary groups with a specific sectoral remit in those sectors (i.e.) the older population and People with Disabilities are the most weakly served. So, it is evident that other factors are determining where this infrastructure is emerging. In particular, the two sectors outlined above, deserve positive discrimination towards their accessibility needs. The Audit has produced a *'Directory of Community and Voluntary Groups by Sectoral Remit'*, which can be used in a similar manner as outlined above.

The results also reveal that the range and diversity of programmes and projects offered by community and voluntary groups appear to be responding to the changing composition of the population (i.e.) ethnic minorities and lone parents. This result is encouraging, however, on-going strategic needs assessment are necessary to ensure policy makers and stakeholders in the Community and Voluntary Sector, are cognisant of changing needs and plan in a coherent manner as to how provision will meet or cater for these in the future.

❑ **Responding to the identified training and education, strategic development and funding needs, in an integrated and coherent way, that will ensure for the long-term sustainability and ultimately increased accessibility to the community and voluntary sector**

Prior to the establishment of the Donegal Community Audit, there was a degree of uncertainty as to what constitutes a legitimate community and voluntary group¹. It is encouraging to note that the majority of groups captured through the Community Audit would in fact qualify as legitimate community and voluntary groups, in that, they have a constitution, aim and objectives and memorandum and articles of association. This is useful in that other agencies can now use this database to ensure that funds are being allocated to bone fide community and voluntary groups and this would ensure optimal fund allocation. Where the gap existed was in the translation of these founding aims and objectives into strategic development plans. There is a clear interventional role here, with 62% of groups who did not have a strategic development plan, requiring assistance.

It cannot be overstated enough how important funding is to the long-term sustainability of the community and voluntary sector. The success of a groups' project is in part dependent of the development of a clear project plan outlining key deliverables, project milestones, capital and resource allocations and time scales. Although 66% of groups had made plans as to how they would meet their future funding needs, it is evident from above, that the majority of these may not even be linked into a long-term strategic development plan. There is a clear need for funding bodies to take account of a strategic plan as one of the criterion for the allocation of funds.

¹ (i.e.) Does the groups have aims and objectives, articles of association etc

Agencies now have access to a range of practical solutions put forward by the communities themselves as to how volunteerism can be improved. These very valid ways of promoting volunteerism have been grouped according to the following headings: training and support, offering funding payments and incentives, awareness and promotion, through community development and offering better facilities.

The Audit identified the range of training and educational courses taken across all of the sectors and the main benefits and capacity building that accrued from undertaking these courses. Additionally, the Audit identified that 51% of all respondents had short term training needs, 32% had medium term training needs and 17% had long-term training needs. Now education and training providers have clear direction of the type of course to offer each sector to best meet their needs now and in the future.

□ **Targeting community and voluntary groups in a more co-ordinated manner through the creation of networks**

The vision of the Donegal County Community Forum is to 'support and develop a vibrant community and voluntary sector through the Area Fora, actively promoting social inclusion and to represent the sector in decision-making structures in the County.' A necessary pre-requisite to achieving such representation, is that community and voluntary groups are aware of the existence and are willing to join their closest area fora.

The results from the audit, suggests that there is a lack of awareness of the existence of these structures in the County, with approximately 27% of groups being unaware of their existence. Furthermore, 24% of all groups indicated that they would not like to join their nearest forum, which may be due to the low levels of awareness of these structures. The results would indicate that there is a need to promote the role, function and benefits of being a member of these structures on a countywide basis, to ultimately ensure these structures are as representative of and accessible to all community and voluntary groups on the ground.

This task will be greatly assisted with the development of a network of 458 groups registered with the Donegal Community Audit. Now the opportunity exists for the County Community Forum, Donegal County Council and other community stakeholders, to circulate beneficial information² to all community and voluntary groups captured, for instance the benefits of being a member of the County Community Forum, different grants offered to various community sectors by Donegal County Council and other stakeholders.

□ **Improving the usage of facilities, especially among target groups**

Recall the Audit also examined the accessibility to and within community facilities or places where community and voluntary groups hold their meetings. The audit revealed that facilities are under utilised in both the 'peak' and 'off peak' seasons, which could be due to accessibility problems in terms of location and transport, opening hours, insurance or that the facility is being used by majority type sports. Therefore, there is a need to address the programming of facilities to improve usage, especially among the targeted groups.

The evidence suggests that more could be done from a social inclusion perspective to make the facilities audited more accessible to all sectors including 1/ the display of an equal usage policy; 2/ monitoring the diversity of clients using the facility; 3/ measures that will assist people with sensory and intellectual disabilities utilising the centre, 4/ operating a dual pricing system for low income groups, 5/ supporting community and voluntary groups in the formulation of facility sub committees and by 6/ allocating adequate programme times for community and voluntary groups.

² The network was circulated with information on low cost group insurance scheme in Summer 2006

Further threats to the long-term accessibility of community facilities would be the rising cost of insurance and the refusal of some insurance underwriters to provide cover, which could reduce the number of community facilities available in the future. Insurance group schemes and models of good practice need to be explored. Again the future development or expansion of most facilities would fall under the remit of a 'facilities sub committee' and it is quite alarming to note that the vast majority of facilities audited did not have one. Finally, the results of the Audit indicated that community and voluntary groups are more likely to occur in small urban settlements and evidence would tend to suggest that this is not the case with community facilities.

The future challenge is for policy makers and community development workers to now take the findings and the recommendations of the Donegal Community Audit and plan in more coherent manner, for the future of this sector, in County Donegal.