



WOMEN'S MANIFESTO PROJECT



**MAKING OUR COUNCILS MORE OPEN, ACCESSIBLE AND
REPRESENTATIVE -
Experiences and observations of attending council meetings**

September 2015

CONTENTS

Executive summary

1. INTRODUCTION	5
2. THE POLICY CONTEXT	7
3. OBSERVING COUNCIL MEETINGS	10
a. The benefits of attending meetings	10
b. Access to council meetings	11
c. Access to information	12
d. General conduct	13
e. Gender balance	14
4. CONCLUSION and RECOMMENDATIONS	17

Appendix I

List of Manifesto Groups	19
---------------------------------------	-----------

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Longford Women's Manifesto Group (LWMG) supports women to engage with local government structures in order to bring women's voices and perspectives to decision-making tables. While women are actively involved in a range of organisations at a community level, for many reasons, few engage at a political level. Women's representation on councils has been consistently low over many decades. The 2014 local elections resulted in a small increase in women's representation at council level, going from 17% (2009) to 20.5%.¹

LWMG engages with Longford County Council in a number of ways. Members are actively involved in policy committees such as SPCs (Strategic Policy Committees), make regular submissions and observe meetings at a county and Municipal District level.

Such activities, concerning active citizenship, reflect /resonate with the proposals outlined in 'Putting People First – the Action Programme for Effective Local Government'. Greater emphasis is placed on strengthening relationships between the community and local authorities. Measures proposed include to promote greater participation by women and to 'increase *understanding on the part of the public generally of local government, how it operates and what it does*'. (p.164)²

LWMG has supported the establishment of other Manifesto groups around the country who have adopted this model of engagement. These include groups from Westmeath, Cavan, Roscommon, Dublin, Donegal and Leitrim and are members of the Women's Manifesto Project

Observations of council meetings

Over a period of time Manifesto groups documented their experiences and observations while attending Council meetings. This report is a compilation of the feedback received.

For many groups, observing councils gave them an insight into how councils worked and helped to demystify local politics. Key difference emerged across councils in terms of access to information and meetings. One council posts almost all their information on line and live streams their meetings while others only make available meeting agendas and minutes. The process of gaining access to meetings varies greatly from no notice required to having to contact an official giving several days notice or having to contact a councillor for a 'pass'.

¹ McGing, Claire (2015) 'Voices & Views from Local Elections 2014. How women fared – reflections and lessons for the general election'. Paper from LWMG/5050 Group seminar, Longford 30.1.2015

² Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government (2012). Putting People First , Action Programme for Effective Local Government. P.164

While Standing Orders of councils outline the 'rules of debate' there were many comments on the repetitive nature of discussions. The conduct of some councillors highlighted the 'male culture' that dominates meetings and is regarded as a key factor inhibiting women's participation in local politics. With the exception of one council, the gender balance among elected representatives and staff at senior management level is very poor, resulting in women's views and perspectives not being included in decision-making processes. Good practice in some councils is highlighted and has informed a number of recommendations.

Recommendations

The key recommendations include the following actions for councils:

- Ensure access of the public to observe council meetings, either by attendance or by providing live streaming.
- Post information relevant to all meetings on the website
- Adhere to the rules outlined in council's Standing Orders and the Code of Conduct.
- Lobby for implementation of gender quota legislation to be extended for the next local elections in 2019

1. INTRODUCTION

Longford Women's Manifesto Group (LWMG) is a flagship project of Longford Women's Link (LWL), a rural-based women's social enterprise in Longford, Ireland³. The LWMG is based on a model of positive engagement between women and local decision-makers. While women are actively involved in a range of organisations at a community level, for many reasons they are not engaged politically at a local level.

The Manifesto model focuses on developing women's political understanding by supporting them to engage with local government processes to bring women's perspectives and voices to the decision-making table.

While council meetings are open to the general public, few members of the public attend or are aware they are free to do so. To learn more about local politics a key activity of the LWMG has been attending meetings of the county council.

LWMG are represented on several Council committees where they engage directly with Councillors to influence policy decisions. Other activities include seminars on local government reform, training for women candidates in local elections, media work and policy submissions.



³ LWL is a dynamic social enterprise linking women with the resources to make their community safe and equal. LWL identifies and addresses key inequalities that prevent women in Longford achieving full social/economic potential. We provide women-centred services (Childcare, DV, Counselling, Training, Female Entrepreneurship), capacity-building and local/national advocacy.

Manifesto model

A role of the LWMG has been to support women's organisations around the country to adopt the Manifesto model. The Women's Manifesto project was established with funding from the Joseph Rountree Charitable Trust and has been working with six women's networks, encouraging them to engage with local decision-making structures, in particular their county council. These groups are based in Westmeath, Cavan, Roscommon, Dublin, Donegal and Leitrim.

Like the LWMG, representatives of these groups also started to attend meetings of their county councils. After some time observing meetings and sharing experiences between groups at networking sessions, it was apparent that there were many commonalities and some differences in how councils operated. It was decided it would be worthwhile to document these experiences and observations.

This report is a snapshot of groups' observations from their attendance at council meetings, highlighting a range of issues and making recommendations.

The policy context is first explored as substantial changes have taken place within local government that impact on the relationship between communities and councils. It is evident that many aspects of the reforms in local government resonate with the work of the LWMG.



Representatives of Manifesto groups from Longford, Cavan, Donegal, Westmeath, Roscommon and Dublin at a Networking session held in LWL

September 2014

2. THE POLICY CONTEXT

'At the centre of democracy is the participation of citizens in public life and their right to influence the decisions that affect their lives and communities. Open and inclusive policy-making increases public participation, enhances transparency and accountability, and builds civic capacity'⁴

In 2012 the Government published 'Putting People First – the Action Programme for Effective Local Government'. The Programme sets out a vision stating that local government will be the main vehicle of governance and public service at local level – leading economic, social and community development, delivering efficient and good value services, and representing citizens and local communities effectively and accountably.

In January 2014 the Local Government Reform Act was passed which made provisions for the implementation of the proposals in the policy document, 'Putting People First'.



New structures have been established as part of the reforms. LCDCs (Local Community Development Committees) have been set up. Six year plans are being developed to manage community development programmes. PPNs (Public Participation Networks) are replacing community and voluntary forums that are the main vehicle through which Councils will connect with the community, voluntary and environmental sectors,

Much emphasis is placed on better citizenship engagement, strengthening relationships between the community and local authorities and 'improving the proximity of citizens to local government and their ability to engage with it'. It is also about this engagement in a way that 'that would both provide a resource to councillors in carrying out their work and contribute to meeting community need'.⁵

⁴ Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government (2012). Putting People First , Action Programme for Effective Local Government.

⁵ Ibid, p.158

The 'Putting People First' report presents examples of how local authorities can interact with communities:

- attendance by the public and the media at local authority meetings, and the availability of minutes of those meetings;
- provision of information on local authority activities, budgets, etc;
- public consultation on a range of specific matters such as proposed by-laws; proposed development plans and various projects;
- powers under the Local Government Act 2001 to enhance local authority engagement with the local community, including by –
 - consulting with local sectoral, community or other groups, or associations,
 - holding information meetings and disseminating information to the public,
 - ascertaining the views of the local community on matters that affect them,
 - organising the carrying-out of research, surveys or studies in the community. ⁶

Municipal Districts meetings have replaced the electoral area meetings and are highlighted as playing a key role in connecting councillors to local communities.

*'Local authority responsibility for managing interaction between councillors and communities in relation to participative measures might be best placed at the level of the relevant municipal district council'*⁷

The challenges for local authorities in undertaking the new role of citizenship engagement is outlined – such as requiring the appropriate skills, having a supportive political and administrative culture; and the additional resources to undertake participative methods, feedback mechanisms.

Additionally, there is acknowledgement of the supports required by the community to engage in participative democratic measures. The report highlights the importance of measures to encourage participation of specific groups such as women and youth:

'Consideration will also be given to possible measures or initiatives to promote greater participation in local government by particular groups such as young people and women; to promote higher voter turnout at elections; and to increase understanding on the part of the public generally of local government, how it operates and what it does.' ⁸

⁶ Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government (2012). Putting People First , Action Programme for Effective Local Government. P.157

⁷ Ibid, p.162

⁸ Ibid, p.164

The Manifesto model is an example of how grassroots women's groups have been promoting greater participation in local government. A very practical element of the model has been groups attending council meetings where they have gained considerable learning with regard to how local government works. Their observations, outlined below, also highlight where there is great scope to build on this engagement.

3. OBSERVING COUNCIL MEETINGS

This section outlines Manifesto groups' observations from their attendance at council meetings. These come under the following headings:

- a) The benefits of attending meetings
- b) Access to meetings
- c) Access to information
- d) General conduct
- e) Gender balance

3 (a) The benefits of attending meetings

The benefits of attending council meetings were highlighted by many Manifesto groups. It gave them an opportunity to engage directly with councillors, either before or after meetings. It helped to raise the groups' profiles among councillors and the executive. Members became more informed about procedures and policies of the council, how the council works, process of meetings etc. It was also a useful way to become more informed about local issues and the council's role in addressing them. Some comments from groups follow:

'We now have a better understanding of the process and would feel less intimidated attending meetings'

'I would definitely be more informed and would like to see the agenda in advance'

'I have found out more about the councillors, have already connected with some on LinkedIn, this is very useful as we are building up a rapport'

Attending meetings also confirmed for some Manifesto groups what they already knew about local issues.

'Far from being lacking in knowledge for taking part in something like this, I actually know lots by comparison ...'

With a growing interest in local politics, Manifesto groups began to read more about politics in the local papers and several members attended the 2014 local election counts for the first time.

3 (b) Access to council meetings

Regulations for public access to observe council meetings are outlined in a council's Standing Orders which set out the rules determining how meetings of the council are conducted. They include the attendance of the public and the media, compliance with general rules and conduct and grounds for when the public can be excluded from meetings. Access of the public is dependent on seating capacity in the public gallery. No details are outlined as to how the public can gain access to meetings.⁹

Manifesto Groups found that the process of accessing council meetings varies from council to council. Of the seven Manifesto groups who attended meetings they had to undertake one of the following:

- Contact a councillor for a 'pass'
- Contact the meetings administrator a minimum of four days prior to the day of the meeting and submit their contact details.
- Ring the council to inform them that they wished to attend.
- Attend without any prior notice.

Councils requiring prior notice stated this was necessary due to the limited space in the public gallery. Public space has been further limited in some councils due to the increased numbers of councillors elected in the 2014 local elections. For example, in one council an additional nine new councillors were elected. This resulted in a reduction of public spaces from twelve to three.

Protocols for public attendance also varies across councils. Manifesto group members, on arrival at one council, were asked to sign an undertaking to observe the Standing Orders and Protocols of the Council.

Manifesto members attending meetings noted it was rare to see any other members of the public present. It would appear that the public is largely unaware that they can attend council meetings. Even if they were aware no information is available on how to access meetings. In some councils the process is cumbersome, as some Manifesto members commented:

I needed an invite and had some problems with reception not having been given the proper advisement form. However, the councillor herself sorted it out.

⁹ Sligo County Council (2014) Standing Orders
<http://www.sligococo.ie/YourCouncil/StandingOrders/StandingOrders-SligoCountyCouncil/>

It is really wrong that in such a large county, there is only room for a maximum of ten members of the public to attend/observe the meetings. Furthermore, these places are allocated on a first come first serve basis, even with invitations. This means having to go along really early to secure a place, and it would not be fair for our group to hog them all.

Even with limited space Manifesto groups commented that they were given a good reception from councillors and the executive. In many cases, they were formally welcomed by the Cathaoirleach or their presence was acknowledged

Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council organises live streaming of meetings. They are filmed for live or subsequent broadcast via the Council's website and archived meetings can also be viewed. Webcasts of surveys or polls carried out can be accessed as can any documents or presentations associated to the webcasts.

3 (c) Access to information

Manifesto groups found that the availability of information varied from council to council. Some posted agendas on their website four to five days in advance of meetings while others made it available on arrival at the meeting or not at all. In most cases, once adopted, minutes were posted on websites.

Much of the deliberation at council meetings refer to reports previously circulated to councillors. These documents are not usually available to the public or on line since, in some cases, they have to be first adopted at the Council meetings. Some councils then post them on their website, but not all. Again, this reflects the inconsistencies between councils. In not having access to such reports Manifesto groups attending meetings commented that it was difficult to follow discussions and agenda items in a meaningful way.

In some councils documentation relating to council meetings was available on their websites. This included correspondence, CEO reports, minutes of SPCs, income/expenditure by service division and roll call votes on motions.

Manifesto group found the schematic diagram on their website greatly helped with identifying the Councillors and Executive.

The availability of Standing Orders on council websites also varied, the majority not having them accessible and up to date, following the 2014 local elections.

3 (d) General conduct

Standing orders of councils outline the 'rules of debate' and conduct at meetings. They include the length and number of times councillors can speak. The norm is that members speak once on an item for no more than five minutes. The time allowed for presenting motions is six minutes and further contributions three minutes. The Cathaoirleach plays a key role in maintaining order and ensuring meetings are carried out in a dignified manner and in an atmosphere of respect for all concerned.¹⁰

In some councils Manifesto members found meetings were conducted in an orderly fashion. They also noted that since meetings are taking place at Municipal District level, the monthly county council meetings are taking less time and are more efficient.

There was a general air of cooperation and the meeting flowed very well. '

Others Manifesto members found the repetition of comments by councillors at meetings frustrating and time wasting. This appeared more evident when the media was present.

'I suspect that much of endless repetition has to do with protecting votes and with an eye to the media rather than to dealing with the serious issues of the day'.

'I found it largely tedious ... far too much time wasted on voting and recording. too much emphasis on party politics, little sense of the real world we live in actually impacting on the sense of priorities'

It is interesting to find out how structures and procedures work but once I know them I fear I would die of tedium at how the meetings progress. I'd have to learn to knit!

In some councils speaking time can be shaped by party whips which can restrict the speaking times and consequently lead to shorter meetings.

With regard to the conduct of some councillors during meetings Manifesto members were critical in their observations.

Even though I had heard about the 'behaviour' it was unbelievable to be a witness to this and to see how little work got done as a result. hidden agendas are at play, party politics, and highlighting issues knowing the media would report on their responses

¹⁰ Sligo County Council (2014) ... Standing Orders, para 39

'These meetings should be held standing up. Hardly any decisions were made. information can be given in reports circulated in advance, and if they had to stand they might get to the point quicker

'One councillor played games on his laptop throughout the entire meeting'

'One male Councillor in particular heckles, interrupts, walks around a lot and makes jokes'

' One councillor was very bullish, standing up to speak , he was both aggressive and threatening in his manner, spoke in a raised tone of voice, many of the Councillors were obviously frustrated and annoyed by his behaviour and time on the floor.

Manifesto members, however, did appreciate the democratic nature of councils and the challenges of being a councillor.

'In spite of all the above, I still retain a reverence for democracy - however painful is in reality! But it could be way better ... I still have admiration for people who put themselves up for this and I did enjoy some of the banter.

Not surprisingly, party politics play a role in debates and tensions often run high, particularly coming up to an election.

Some Manifesto groups thought their presence was useful in that councillors, knowing they were being observed, were 'better behaved' as a result.

3 (e) Gender balance

A striking feature of most councils is their male dominated nature. The majority of elected representatives and executive is composed of men. It is a stark reminder of the persistent under-representation of women in leadership positions. Women account for half of the Irish population, yet their representation in national and local politics has been consistently low over many decades. The 2014 local elections resulted in a small increase in women's representation at council level, going from 17 per cent (2009) to 20.5 per cent.¹¹

The behaviour described above highlights the male culture that dominates council meetings. It is an adversarial system that has been created for men by men and not attractive to women. Furthermore, for some women, they don't see themselves in such an environment.

¹¹ McGing, Claire (2015) 'Voices & Views from Local Elections 2014. How women fared – reflections and lessons for the general election'. Paper from LWMG/5050 Group seminar, Longford 30.1.2015

I feel I don't belong here, this is not my style. This would do my head in. I understand the need for formality, but something more creative and efficient please.

In one council chamber, upon arrival to observe the council meeting, the following remark was directed at Manifesto group members:

'Would you not be better off going to a VEC meeting'

This comment reflects the conservative attitudes towards women, clearly highlighting that some male councillors do not see the Council Chamber as a place for women. It also highlights traditional narrow traditional stereotypical views regarding the subject areas women are expected to be interested in.

Much has been documented on the male culture of politics.

*"As parties are mainly led and run by men, the culture of behaviour and the informally accepted norms of language, views and expressions can mean that parties are uncomfortable places for women to be."*¹²

The absence of women within council structures – among councillors, the executive and on key policy committees, means women's views, perspectives and experiences are not taken into account in the decision and policy making processes.

Many groups stated that more women's voices in the council chamber would make a difference and influence the agenda, debates and the general conduct at meetings -

Yes, looking at the emergency motions on the Agenda, those put forward by women tend to deal more with social and environmental issues, poverty, etc.

Gender balance would lead to more effective meetings and less posturing ... it would also influence topics and female perspectives.

Research has highlighted the need to address the gender balance in politics and the difference it would make, as highlighted in the Department of Justice report

*Whether it concerns a public meeting, a Government meeting, a party political meeting or a conference, the participation of women brings real balance, which leads to better debate and conclusions. It also leads to better behaviour from everyone's perspective, but especially the male perspective.*¹³

¹² Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform (2009) Women's Participation in Politics

¹³ Ibid

One council is an exception when it comes to gender balance at both council and executive level. Dun Laoire Rathdown council's senior management team has four women represented out of nine, including the CEO. The Cathaoirleach is a woman and 17 of the 40 elected representatives are women, the highest number of female councillors in the country.

A seminar organised by Longford Women's Manifesto Group and the 5050 Group highlighted the need for gender quotas at local level for the next local elections.¹⁴

Fianna Fáil's Markievicz Commission Report recommended that the party should table a Bill calling for the extension of the party quota legislation to local elections.¹⁵

¹⁴ Claire McGing paper on the seminarcopy ref.

¹⁵ Fianna Fáil (2014) Markeivcz Commission Report, Gender Equality Document.

4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Manifesto model outlined in this report is an example of how grassroots women's groups have been promoting greater participation in local government. This model fits within the context of the Government policy outlined in PPF which emphasises the need for greater engagement between citizens and local authorities.

It is clear from this report that there are considerable benefits to attending and observing council meetings. Women became more informed about how local government works, connected with their councillors and became increasingly interested in politics.

However, much needs to be done in order for this to work in practice, as is evident in the experience of Manifesto members.

Key inconsistencies emerged regarding access by the public to meetings and information which does not facilitate active and meaningful participation. The conduct at council meetings and of some councillors highlights the persistent male culture that continues to dominate politics. It is clear that unless there is a greater gender balance this will not change and women's voices and perspectives will continue to be excluded from decision-making tables. Since councils are a 'pipeline' to the Dáil, it is imperative that measures are taken at this level to increase women's participation in politics.

Recommendations:

Access to meetings

The public have a right to observe council meetings

- Ensure access of the public to attend council meetings and make the public aware of the process of how they can obtain admission.
- Organise live streaming of council meeting, making the recordings available on council websites.
- Post a 'calendar of meetings' on the website to keep the public informed of all the meetings that are scheduled.

Access to information

The public have a right to access information

- Post agendas for all meetings (plenaries and committees) online several days prior to meetings.
- Post minutes of all meetings along with all other information relevant to the meeting.

General conduct

- Adhere to the rules outlined in council's Standing Orders and the Code of Conduct.
- Use the party whips to limit comments from each party
- Provide training and ongoing support for the role of Cathaoirleach

Gender

- Lobby for implementation of gender quota legislation be extended for the next local elections in 2019. (organise debate on issue - presentation on rationale for local elections quotas – NGO/academic)



APPENDIX 1

LIST OF MANIFESTO GROUPS

Cavan Women's Network

Donegal Women's Network

Longford Women's Manifesto Group

North Leitrim Women's Centre

Roscommon Women's Network

Women4Women, Dublin

Women's Community Projects, Mullingar