



# Sharing Power Conference

Conference Report

Cavan

Thursday/Friday 17 and 18 September 2009

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# **Cavan Community Forum Conference Report**

## **Sharing Power Conference**

### **Thursday 17 and Friday 18 September. Cavan**

#### ***Executive Summary***

#### **Speakers and Format of Conference**

Cavan Community Forum hosted a regional conference, Sharing Power, on Thursday 17 and Friday 18 September, in Cavan. The conference examined the role and relationship of the Community Fora in the county structures, in particular with county councillors and council officers across the border region. The project was funded from the '*Power and Responsibility*' programme of the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust.

The conference was a huge success in terms of attendance, engagement and participation. Over 90 people attended the first day and 70 the second. Half the delegates stayed over in the evening. Delegates were made up of county councillors and community representatives from across the six border counties, with some representation from other counties (Wicklow). There were speakers from Northern Ireland, Cavan, Sligo, Dundalk, Leitrim, Louth – from the community sector, the councillor body and county council Directors of Service. There was an evening speaker from the Shoreditch Trust in the UK. Two Government Ministers attended and spoke – one from the Department of the Environment, Heritage, and Local Government and one from the Department of Community Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs.

The first day was chaired by Michael Kenny, NUI Maynooth who ensured full and active participation of all delegates during plenary sessions by actively seeking views and opinions. The first day focused on the issues and concerns raised by community representatives. The second day focused on the views of the Government Ministers and councillors and was chaired by Cavan county manager, Jack Keyes.



Networking at a Break in Sharing Power Conference

## **Key Emerging Issues**

The conference was organised into plenary sessions and workshops. It was chaired so that conference participants could engage and contribute views and ideas in full. There was full and frank discussion around a range of the following topics

- representative and participative democracy,
- the challenges of active participation in Strategic Policy Committees and other county wide bodies,
- the role of councillors,
- the role of the community forum
- the role of county councils,
- how to improve the partnership process.

Issues around training, administration, communication, supports were raised and suggestions and ideas were put forward to improve the challenges posed by participative and representative democracy. At the conclusion of the conference there was an extremely positive atmosphere

amongst all delegates and a sense that tangible recommendations and proposals had emerged which could be followed through and put into practice.

## **Conference Recommendations**

### **Training and Education**

Both councillors and community forum representatives felt that training and education was needed and sought:

- Accessible in-house training for all representatives in the structures, bodies, and operation of the county council, state and community sectors
- Accessible in house training of SPC members in the role of their SPC, the work to date and work planning for the next five years
- Training in effective representation for both councillors and Forum representatives
- Training in work planning for Community Forum members
- Training for council officers on the role and input of the Community Forum

### **Improved Dialogue**

- Establish regular structured meetings between local Community Fora representatives and councillors
- Establish regular contact between Community Forum and all local Directors of Service to share information on work plans

### **Information and Communication**

- All stakeholders to promote and support the Community Forum and the support the work of the Council.
- Council to circulate papers and minutes well in advance of meetings
- Council to seek items for the agenda
- Council to avoid use of jargon where possible
- Community Forum to develop strong information and communication systems

### **Financial/Budgets**

- DoEHLG to make Community Forum budgets available to Community Forum
- Councillors to protect community forum budgets and community grants schemes
- Council to include training budget for community forum and council representatives

## Conclusion

The conference was a huge success. It brought together the relevant participants and enabled a frank and open exchange and resulted in ideas and proposal for action. The objectives of the conference were to:

- Explore the current challenges facing the Community Forum representatives
- Explore the tensions between representative and participative democracy
- Explore how to improve working partnerships
- Reflect on the supports needed by Community Fora to be effective
- Show how the work of a full time worker can actively contribute to community participation.



From L-R, Kate Ennals, CCF co-ordinator, Madeleine Ui Mhealoid, V/C CCF, Jack Keyes, Cavan County Manager, Minister John Curran, Community, Rural and Gaeltacht.

The speakers all provided expert presentations relating to local and national experiences and provided excellent background for full plenary and workshop debates.

Those discussions have enabled the conference organisers to bring forward recommendations which we will circulate widely and seek to get implemented and discussed across the community fora in Ireland.

The conference report will be circulated to conference participants and put up on the Cavan Community Forum website along with presentations<sup>1</sup>. It will be disseminated to the relevant Government ministries and Ministers and the interested representative bodies.

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<sup>1</sup> Please see [www.cavancommunity.ie](http://www.cavancommunity.ie) See Sharing Power Conference Link.

## **Background to the Conference**

### **The legislation**

In under the *Better Local Government* Legislation, each ROI County Council established a new directorate, Community and Enterprise which established the County Development Board and set up County Community Fora. There were also Strategic Policy Committees established.

The Community Fora were intended to bring a broader voice and community interests into the orbit and policy making structures of the County Council. As a result, each County Council has a Community Forum though these are constituted in many different ways. Some Fora are based on a geographic profile, some represent communities of interests. Some Community Fora employ workers, others rely on council staff. Some Community Fora are led by the county council, others have a stronger volunteer base who have taken ownership. There are different arrangements in different areas.

### **What is Cavan Community Forum?**

Cavan Community Forum is a network of approximately 400 community organisations in county Cavan. It is now a limited company with some support from Cavan County Council. It has a budget of €29,600 from the DOELGH which in 2009 will mainly pay the salary of a full time employee. It seeks funding for programme costs. It was established in 2002 as a constituted body but was set up as a limited company in 2008 by current Forum members. The countywide steering group is made up of 30 people elected from area forums. These people represent the Community Forum on a range of county wide bodies and agencies (County Development Board, Regional Drugs Task Force, Peace Partnership, Breffini Integrated Limited, Social Inclusion Working Group, ICBAN, Heritage Forum, Strategic Policy Committees, Community Transport Schemes, etc). The key objectives of the Cavan Community Forum are to

- represent the voice of the community organisations in Cavan
- make representations on issues that affect communities in Cavan.
- involve people in the social, cultural and economic activities in the county.
- share information, experience and tackle common problems
- provide information and communication supports.
- be a vehicle for local consultation.



Cavan Community Forum Members, Cavan Cathaoirleach, the County Manager with Minister Michael Finneran, Department of Environment, Local Government and Heritage

### **Why a Conference on Sharing Power**

When Community Fora were established, the intention behind the legislation was to help communities have a voice in the county and increase active participation by the community in local government. However, there appeared to be little strategic consideration given to the relationship between a growing community voice and the voice of the councillors. There was also little consideration given to the relationship of the fora to the county councils.

As Cavan Community Forum developed during the last 3 years, it took more ownership and become more active. As a result, concern was increasingly expressed by councillors and council officers as to the role of the Forum. Increasingly, there was tension between the Council and the Forum as to the extent of its remit or independence. Discussions with colleagues in the border region reflected shared experiences in relation to this tension.

So it was becoming evident that as Community Fora evolved, so did a tension between the role of the Community Forum in relation to the Council and councillors (participative v democratic accountability). Tensions are not necessarily unhealthy, but Cavan Community Forum was interested to explore these tensions in an open and transparent basis amongst a range of stakeholders to discuss how they surface, how they challenge the work, and also examine what joint partnerships or work could be established.

We were also keen to address how Forum members and councillors could benefit from the support of the other.

Also, with a full time worker supporting the steering committee of the Cavan Community Forum, the CCF has been actively engaged in a range of activities and initiatives. We wanted to use the opportunity of the Conference to showcase the potential of a community forum working successfully given the supports within the county structures.

Therefore the objectives of the conference were to:

- Explore the current challenges facing the Community Forum representatives
- Explore the tensions between representative and participative democracy
- Explore how to improve working partnerships
- Reflect on the supports needed by Community Fora to be effective
- Show how the work of a full time worker can actively contribute to community participation.

Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust was interested in the conference proposal and agreed to the application for funding. Working with the JRCT has been a very positive experience. There was very little bureaucracy and the staff were very helpful. Cavan Community Forum was able to focus on the organisation of the conference as funding was provided in advance of the conference.

The conference was organised by the Cavan Community Forum<sup>2</sup>. A Conference Sub Group<sup>3</sup> was formed comprising seven Forum members. This met six times in the six months prior to the conference and with the support of the worker organised the administration, speakers invitations

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<sup>2</sup> See [www.cavancommunity.ie](http://www.cavancommunity.ie) for list of Cavan Community Forum members

<sup>3</sup> Jackie McKenna, Bob Gilbert, Jerry Fitzpatrick, Olive Hannigan, Martin Donohoe, Fintan McCabe, Kate Ennals

and briefs, conference exhibitions and the venue. While these six people led the work, all Forum members were assigned different responsibilities during the conference and all the members actively took part, taking time off work to attend the conference.

## ***The Conference Report***

The Conference opened with words of welcome from the Cavan Cathaoirleach, Winston Bennett, and Cavan Community Forum Chair, Jackie McKenna. Both referred to the importance of 'participative' and 'representative' democracy and wished the delegates well.

## ***Better Local Government?***

Joe McLoughlin, Director of Service, Community and Enterprise<sup>4</sup> and Bob Gilbert, Cavan Community Forum both gave an introduction as to the origins of Community Fora. They referred to Meitheal, Muintir na Tíre, set up in 1931 and the Community Councils that had emerged by the late 1950s. They discussed how the 'community' voice had evolved and the grant aid that was provided to the community sector to provide supports and services to local people. Joe highlighted the white papers, taskforces and legislation that emerged during the last 30 years of the last century which resulted in 'Better Local Government' in 1997. This introduced new forms of participation by local communities and the Strategic Policy Committees. He pointed to the Directors of Community and Enterprise posts that were advertised as 5 year contracts and their responsibility to establish the Community and Voluntary Forum. He referred to the Community and voluntary Grant Scheme set up by CCC, the Community Development Capital Fund, and work carried out by the Forum with the support of the County Council in its early days.

## ***Community Involvement Is An Old Philosophy***

Bob Gilbert discussed the importance and value of community participation and the challenges he had encountered in Fingal on SPCs and working with planners on County Development Plans. He referred to the moral obligation to get involved quoting from Francis Bacon, *In the theatre of man's life it is reserved only for God and angels to be lookers on*". In relation to the role of the community representatives in Strategic Policy Committees, Bob felt it had worked quite well in Fingal, but the circulation of agendas and minutes meant it was hard for Forum members to feedback to the Forum. Bob warned the conference of the challenges of change, quoting John Stuart Mill. *"When society requires to be rebuilt there is no use attempting to rebuild it on the old plan"*. He wished the conference well...saying he was looking forward to the frank discussion and debate that was needed, finally quoting James Dewar. *"Minds are like parachutes - they only function when they are open"*.

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<sup>4</sup> See [www.cavancommunity.ie](http://www.cavancommunity.ie) Sharing Power Conference link for presentation

Michael Hughes from Rural Community Network (RCN), Northern Ireland, gave an excellent presentation<sup>5</sup> in relation to the community sector working with the politicians in the North which set the scene for the conference debate on how to or how not to actively share power!

### **Fractured Voice or Sore Throat?**

He provided the back ground to RCN (set up in 1991 by rural community groups to articulate their voice on issues relating to poverty, disadvantage, inequality and discrimination.) He discussed the 'contested space' and 'power imbalance' between the civil servants, the politicians and the community organisations. He also highlighted the challenges for the community sector – the possible 'fractured' community voice and the issue of 'legitimacy' for community organisations. He pointed to the different journeys of participative democracy and representative democracy and underlined that we all share responsibility. He referred to the 'chaos' of contested space or shared process and emphasised the importance of involving the 'experts'. He discussed a positive experience of micro planning which involved local people, civil servants and RCN in an environmental consultation process which bridged the top down with the bottom up.

### **From Challenges to Opportunities**

Michael Hughes highlighted three key challenges

1. To change the established way of doing business
2. To highlight tensions that exist in collaboration
3. To acknowledge the constraints in consensus building.

He suggested we turn challenges into opportunities by placing value on dialogue, share our knowledge for mutual learning, make sure flexibility is afforded to local concerns, mediate contested relationships, appreciate the value of both agreement and disagreement. He underlined the importance of community development values and demonstrated how adopting community development principles can support and improve governance.

### **A Working Forum**

Cavan Community Forum (CCF) then presented their work and experience of Community Forum members over the past three years since having a full time member of staff. The coordinator, Kate Ennals, focused on the work of the Forum and the Chairperson, Jackie McKenna focused on the experience of Forum Members.

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<sup>5</sup> See [www.cavancommunity.ie](http://www.cavancommunity.ie) Sharing Power Link for Michael Hughes presentation

## **Mix and Match the Work to Bring People with YOU**

Kate Ennals referred to the importance of having a mixed work programme that comprised representative work, policy development and project management work.<sup>6</sup> She discussed the importance of training, team work and building capacity of people...and enabling them to respond to the issues they see on the ground and engage in activities that resonate in their communities.

Kate referred to the five key issues that emerged at the initial consultation process

- Information and communication systems
- Planning consultation
- Health and social care
- Participating and volunteering supports
- Supporting local business through tourism and heritage.

She then took the conference through the responses that the CCF had made. These involved setting up a monthly email bulletin and bi-monthly newsletter alongside regular 'column' in the local paper. The Forum has also published various brochures, briefs and community tips.

The CCF facilitated consultation sessions around the County Development Plan but felt that further attempts to maintain the consultation process had not been valued.

The CCF set up and co-ordinated the Health and Social Care Forum and co-ordinated the production of a 16 page supplement highlighting community activity in County Cavan and co-ordinated ten days of positive mental health which involved over 30 activities taking place in the community.

To respond to the needs of participation and volunteering, the CCF hosts an annual Make A Show of Yourself which brings together groups from throughout the county to celebrate and show off their activities. The CCF also run a variety of training sessions on effective representation and leadership training and policy development.

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<sup>6</sup> See [www.cavancommunity.ie](http://www.cavancommunity.ie) Sharing Power Link for presentation

Project work has included: election nights, area meetings, story telling sessions, production of CD of stories, research on disadvantage in Cavan, walking groups, a book of local walks, cross border training, Forum Theatre project, website development, Website awards, Community cook book, energy workshops, county wide produce show, community radio.

### **A Rollercoaster of Experiences**

Jackie McKenna discussed how being a volunteer on CCF had been “*exciting, scary, inspiring and sometimes intimidating...a rollercoaster of experiences*”. She talked about how much she had learned, the good friends she had made and the success and achievements she was proud of. Jackie also mentioned the ‘*blocking mechanisms*’ the CCF felt they had encountered from the bureaucracy, and the sometimes ‘strained’ meetings that had been held. She discussed the difficulty for volunteers who had little experience of negotiation dealing with Directors of Services that were well versed and very experienced and who also held the purse strings. She talked of the compromises made and the importance of being able to speak out and argue strongly on our own behalf and the issues that need to be addressed to ensure effective participation – such when meetings are held, the circulation of papers, the minutes, the jargon etc.

### **Public Institutions...Predicated on Control?**

Jackie quoted from an article by Patricia Downey of Downey, Youell Associates published in 2005.

*“Our organisations and institutions are complex living systems but, because of the dominant mechanical mindset, organisations life in both the public and private sectors is predicated on the belief that is possible to design, control and predict outcomes. Even the language is classic Newtonian: re-engineering, downsizing, relocating, embedding, input, outputs bench marking.”<sup>7</sup>*

She went on to say that we need to adopt a whole systems view which focuses on the importance of relationships.

### **Conference Feedback – Does Money Talk?**

Michael Kenny then took feedback from the Conference participants which was wide ranging. One member agreed that it was difficult to be an expert with a professional at the table and also it was challenging to represent such a wide electoral area. She felt that it was the budgets that made decisions. Another participant referred to the hidden agenda and Michael Hughes’

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<sup>7</sup> See [www.cavancommunity.ie](http://www.cavancommunity.ie) for Patricia Downey article

discussion of things not always being what they seem. Another raised the planning consultation sessions and how they had been good but in fact many decisions seem already made. Another person raised the importance of 'relationship' and trust being the key.

One of the councillors present indicated that she felt she was not wanted at Community Forum events. Another felt that they already worked well with community but community groups not keen for councillors to be at events as it was often felt that they took over. Another indicated how much of his energy came out of the community work and looked to create close co-operation between councillors and the Forum. One community representative said he felt that councillors put party politics first.

### **Accountability?**

The Director of Service indicated that the representative expectations are too high for the community and voluntary forum...that many people sit on county wide bodies with no answerability at local level and that those who are most active will become councillors. The Director felt that was more tension between state agencies and community forum. He agreed that honesty was necessary and a sense of perspective.

Four workshops were then held. All the workshops were facilitated by the community development officers working in different projects in the County. They were asked to bring back three key points.



## **Workshop Feedback**

### **What are the Obstacles Facing Community Fora? Facilitator: Hayley Fox Roberts.**

To develop an effective strategy to feed upwards and downwards to improve accountability and engagement.

Formal recognition of the Forum structure empowers within the hierarchical structure.

Forum volunteers not having access / time for training.

### **How Do We Develop and Solidify Relationships between Councillors and Community Reps? Facilitator: Hazel Leahy**

Training and education of councillors and community reps together (on Strategic Policy Committees)

Information sharing between both

Promotion of the Community Forum and work of the Councillors.

### **How can Community Forum be more proactive in decision making and policy making processes? Facilitator: Una Traynor**

Ensure existing structures are being implemented properly (Strategic Policy Committees)  
Keeping Forum members informed and not having too high expectations of Forum reps  
Create engagement between councillors and Forum at area level and understand difference between engagement and consultation

### **What are the personal relationships of Forum members? Facilitator: Philomena Finnegan**

Not easy for Forum members to meet all expectations when on county wide bodies  
Feel invisible in certain settings. Unsure of role.  
Community, council and councillors are different camps

### **Border County Forum Experiences**

Each of the six border counties had been asked to contribute their own experiences to the Conference. Cavan is part of a border regional forum and over the years had shared many anecdotal discussions with their colleagues.

#### **Leitrim. David Spence**

Leitrim Forum is made up of a mix of electoral area reps and networks. This structure was part of a compromise with county council who wanted geographical base only. Leitrim experienced difficulty with SPC representation and found it hard to get recognition that the Forum was a voice for the community. Council try to allocate SPC and other body seats to community groups.

#### **Louth. Jim Cousins**

Very diverse opinions between N. Louth, Mid Louth and Drogheda. In relation to SPCs, it's challenging to get community sector listened to and councillors are challenged by community representatives. They are fearful their seats will be taken. Role of the Forum reps is challenging. Reps are often different people depending on the meeting they are at. Training is needed in relation to representation. Feedback is hardly every provided. It is important to rotate Community Forum Chair.

#### **Monaghan. Ursula McKenna**

Monaghan Forum is made up of different network representatives. Monaghan Forum is well represented on SPCs. Benefits is the information that comes through the Forum and the capacity building of people. However, power needs to be shared and community reps need

support – particularly from the worker. There has been huge learning about representation – who you represent? How you represent? What is the mandate. These need to be very clear.

### **Sligo. Tom McGettrick**

Sligo has supportive county manager although change in Directors can be frustrating. Forum members always in a rush. There is always pressure. Take who is available. Difficult to get members to do training. People often represent their own area/interest. Forum members should be representing county. Council officials should be trained alongside community forum reps. Forums are very different in each county. We need guidelines that work for all counties. We need complaints/mediation procedure. There is ignorance often about their finances or what monies that have. Money should be given to Community Forum. Irish National Community and Voluntary Forum has published 'The Way Forward'. If we work together our future could be very good.

### **It comes down to Participation, voices, shared power, money...and a rush!**

As Chair, Michael Kenny identified the issues emerging as participation, training, lack of continuity, countywide voice, sharing of power, professional development work, the rush, orientation of council staff, tracking money. He then sought comments from the floor.

### **Comments from the floor**

“Community forum should work more closely with county wide bodies such as MACRA, GAA.”

“What can SPCs do in an era with no money” (a good deal was the answer)

“Network representation is needed on Community Fora”

“Surprised that some Community Forum do not have financial grasp”

“The conference needs to be followed up with a report and recommendations”

“Forums should be separate to county councillors”

“Forum representatives need to provide feedback at local level”

“ Very surprised that different structures exist for community forum”

“Training and education is needed”

“Councillors should meet community representatives on regular basis”

“Expectations need to be managed.”

“Clarity is needed re role of community forum”

Also people questioned the influence of community forum reps on SPCs and the policy setting role of SPCs as budgets set by Executive. Delegates felt it was important to look at the different ways of working in community forum and noted the disparity of representation on SPCs.

Questions were asked about councillors sitting on community forum and comments were made about there being more politics in community than in the council chamber. People commented that

- Effective feedback is key
- Funding for Forum is essential
- Trust between partners is necessary
- Good governance helps good planning and management
- Work planning, mission statements are important.

## **Who Has Power?**

Rita McNulty, Director of Services, Sligo County Council, asked what power was and commented that every one thinks it belongs to someone else. Rita pointed out that we all have bits of power, we all have common interests and the battle is to respect, share and work together to ensure that there is a working structure that makes use of everyone's power.

Rita's presentation<sup>8</sup> went on to look at the wider community and voluntary, non-profit sector that exists outside of the role of the community fora and discussed the balance and mix of the wider community and how it is perceived by the state sector. She talked about the need to strengthen the C&V sector's capacity to represent itself so that it could effectively support local government make itself more community orientated. She also raised the need to feed into the social partnership process. Rita also referred to the myriad of expectations from different perspectives

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<sup>8</sup> See [www.cavancommunity.ie](http://www.cavancommunity.ie) for presentation.

and the gate keeping that can happen. She looked at the practical needs of community forum members and the need to deliver a strategic response, with vision, leadership, and accountability.

### **It's a dance and more than a two step!**

Rita described the delicate balance between representative and participatory democracy as a 'dance' that we needed to support. She suggested that the local authority had a role in providing greater support to Forum members through the proactive support at the County Development Board, SPCs and other forums and to make greater use of the community forum for consultation purposes. She felt it was important to form stronger alliances around our common agendas, and acknowledged the right of the Forum to advocate and be critical. It was important to respect the tension between councillor and Forum positions.

### **Comments from the Floor**

Michael Kenny mused on how we had arrived at this 'chaos'. Rita suggested it might have been because the structures were established before the buy in from the community – like putting the cart before the horse. It was pointed out that in the experience of participative communities in Africa and Nicaragua had led to structures being set up which responded to the community. Jerry Fitzpatrick welcomed Rita's contribution and indicated that the key issue is sharing power between the councillors, the community and the public service. The local authority is the command structure, the acting bureaucracy and as such the power tends to reside in the public service. Eileen Cullen from Wicklow discussed the issue of 'personalities' that come into play and asked how the council body could support vision, accountability and representation from the Forum. She also pointed to the huge diversity of forum participation across county councils and the different levels of operation, saying it made it hard to develop shared vision and experience.

## **Threats or Supports?**

The issue of councillors being threatened by the community representatives was raised as active members could go on to take seats. Conversely, it was pointed out that Community Forums can provide values and supports to councillors.

## **What Can Be Done?**

Rita was asked what Directors of Service could do to provide more supports.

- 1) the network of directors could help provide training in conjunction with the National Forum
- 2) Representative of Community Forum could attend DoS network in local authority.

## **Friday 18 September 2009 – the Day of the Elected Representative**

### **Minister Finneran – Working in Partnership**

Jack Keyes, County Manager, chaired the day. He welcomed Minister Finneran and thanked him for coming. The Minister highlighted the co-operation that exists between the local authority and the state and the local authority and the community forum. He commended the Community Forum for the hosting the conference and re-iterated his belief in the value of the community voice shaping the environment. He went through the structures that exist and reassured conference delegates that the Department would continue their support of the Community and Voluntary Fora.

Following the Minister, councillors from Cavan, Monaghan and Leitrim each had five minutes to present their views and experiences of the Community Forum and 'sharing power'.

## **What do Councillors Think?**

### **Cllr Sean McKeirnan. Cavan.**

Sean talked of the affection he had for Cavan Community Forum and the difficulties it had faced at an early stage when he was a member...it was dependent on the Council and it had no-one to listen to its concerns. Things have changed, and the Cavan Community Forum was engaging in a range of different projects and seemed to have a strong voice. He indicated that councillors should not fear competition from CCF members and celebrate a strong community as a result of its work. He felt the Community Forum would strengthen the local authority and that we needed to work more closely together to challenge the difficulties the bureaucracy can present. Sean felt we needed strong public reps. He also felt that the SPC in Cavan had not reached its full potential and that more practical and policy work needed to be done.

### **Cllr Heather Humphreys. Monaghan.**

Heather discussed how local government exists to serve the community and that therefore a community voice is essential. Community involvement leads to civic pride. Use the Forum to consult with community – they have solutions. If local people buy in, then the Local Authority run different awards (tidy towns, local environment award, community grants) and there are 12 community reps on 4 SPCs. Elected reps have final responsibility but councillors need community.

### **Cllr Sean McDermott. Leitrim**

Sean was a community forum member – led to his being a councillor and led to his awareness of the local authority. Political party role shouldn't affect the Forum. Leitrim County Councillors would seek Forum to play a serious role, though while he was on the Forum, he didn't have a grasp of the role of the Community Forum.

### **Cllr Danny Brady. Cavan**

Role of community workers is very important as the volunteers in the community need support and the councillors would not be able to do their work. The community should have a say in the running of the area. Councillors should not be ignored as they are elected. They should be informed and debate the issues. Trust is needed between councillors and community. He raised concern that comments were made the previous day about councillors that were wrong. He felt councillors are needed.

### **Cllr Pat Treanor. Monaghan.**

Pat's political involvement began in the community when he realised that council staff couldn't respond to the issues being raised. He felt better decisions were made in the local authority with the engagement of the community fora. The community forum has an important role, particularly around consultation. The Community Forum should also provide leadership to community.

### **Comments from the Floor**

Michael Kenny asked what people felt about the issue of representative v participative democracy and how to improve the consultation and input people had to the county development plan. Given the decreasing level of participation, did people have ideas as to how to further encourage involvement?

### **Who Represents Who?**

Jerry Fitzpatrick referred to the importance of community forums being truly representative of the community sector and said that Cavan Forum was striving to do that. He felt there was some difference between Forums and Councillors in terms of representation. Councillors represent individual constituents and community forum representatives represented community groups and issues. Best to work together and this could be done through the Strategic Policy Committees.

Bob Gilbert said he thought all the councillors made salient points and noted that there were 12 community forum reps on SPCs in Monaghan. He felt that the community forum role of supporting empowerment and engagement were very different to the role of consultation which seeks opinions.

Heather Humphreys felt that to be truly representative you needed education and training – altogether.

### **The Common Touch**

Kate Ennals pointed out how so many speakers over the conference period had referred to common ground and common interests. She said that the experience in the Cavan Community Forum was that as the Community Forum had developed and become more prominent and assertive, members had realised that the current way of operating needed to be considered. To date we had had no real contact or dialogue with councillors. The council and the community forum were operating on two twin tracks, never meeting. Given the development and energy of the Forum, we wanted to openly talk and see what structures we could put in place to support each other.

### **Workshops**

The conference then broke into workshops 'Challenging the Tensions and Working in Partnership'.

The workshops discussed four key questions: What are the tensions about working in partnership? What partnership processes could be put in place? What can the Council do? What can the councillors do? What can the community do?

### **What are the tensions about working in partnership?**

- Misconceptions in the community as to what the councillors can do
- Perception of conflict of interest as community forum perceived as being used by community forum to advance political career

- Inexperience of structures and roles
- Fear of community groups taking over
- Lack of information and communication channels between councillors and Forums
- Community groups see councillors as party political
- Groups work within groups
- Paid workers operating in community groups
- Different opinions
- Competition between forum reps and councillors (adversarial attitudes)
- People undermining each other
- Ownership issues
- Chasing limited resources
- Uncertainty in uncertain world
- Use of acronyms.

### **What partnership processes can be put in place**

- Build on existing partnerships and support each other
- Joint training through Strategic Policy Committees (all workshops)
- Timely distribution of committee/board papers (two workshops)
- Acknowledge positive approaches
- Set up structured regular dialogue (all workshops)
- Set up structured meetings at area base
- Work with other county wide bodies
- Be respectful (two workshops)
- Shared input into SPC agenda (all workshops)
- Attend training and education (all workshops)
- Joint councillor and community training for SPCs (all workshops)

- Make training relevant and accessible – no jargon
- Listening and working on one to one level
- Set up communication channels between councillors and Forum members

### **What can the Council Do?**

- Provide description of different structure
- Provide training for forum members (confidence building)
- Sending out agendas minutes in advance
- Consult on agendas
- Use workers to facilitate and help networking
- Provide recognition to Community Forum
- Fund better facilitation between councillors and members
- Require all Directors of Service to engage with Community Forum

### **What can the Councillors Do?**

- Work across party lines relating to community issues
- Support and attend community events
- Support new liaison structures
- Try not to see community forum as competitors
- Protect budgets for community sector and Forum

### **What can the Community Forum Do?**

- Take part in education and training
- Be aware of boundaries
- Promote community and community events
- Remain apolitical
- Bring back information to communities

- Sell itself to wider community
- Active participation
- Work closely with councillors

### **Comment from the floor**

There was discussion re the attendance of paid workers representing groups on volunteer committees (Cavan). This doesn't happen in Leitrim nor Fingal though it was pointed out that often disadvantaged groups (Travellers) need representation through paid workers. Budgets were discussed, some delegates felt community for a should be allocated the government grant. It was felt that there was a positive view of community forum at national level. It was said that local government can't look after needs of everyone and the community sector has to be integral. It was important to promote the role of local government and governance. Ultimately the councillors have the mandate.

Trust is needed between the centre and local, between for a members and councillors and between representatives and council officials.

The last point made was that the Sharing Power Conference could not have been held without the support of the full time worker. Over the last three years the work of the Cavan Community Forum had gone from strength to strength and it was important to recognise that without a full time worker in place, the energy and commitment of the volunteers could not have been channelled so effectively. For participatory representation to work, it needed the support of a full time worker.

### **In Conclusion**

Jerry Fitzpatrick did a final summary before Minister Curran gave his closing speech. He said that the CCF will produce a final report with clear recommendations as to improved partnership working which will be circulated to conference delegates who had given email addresses. It would also be put on the Cavan Community Forum website. He praised the local government

service and central government for providing a structured voice for the community sector and for having the vision to provide guidelines to ensure community engagement in different cohesion processes.

The conference had had a powerful agenda. It had started with the origins and then provided a case study of what Community Forums can achieve with a full time worker (given by Cavan Community Forum). We had shared experiences in an open and frank way and acknowledged differences. We had heard from the experience of Forum members from across the six border counties and Rita McNulty had provided a powerful perspective for the Community Directors of Services. We have had clear demands for training – particularly joint training of SPC members in their teams. We need to feed into SPCs in a stronger way, working with the Council and Community groups. It is clear from what has been said that we need to set up structured dialogue between Forum representatives and the councillors.

### **Taking Us Forward**

He indicated that no one is perfect. We are all here to listen, with respect. It has been an enormously useful and positive conference. We have communicated well and he felt it would open the doors to a new way of working.

### **Minister John Curran, Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs.**

The Minister discussed how participative representation has strengthened local communities since the introduction of the Community Fora – and referred to the strong volunteering base of Irish citizens. He commented on how the Government has encouraged the dynamism of the community and voluntary sector and will continue to support but in a targeted and effective manner. He discussed the huge diversity of organisations and how groups will need to work together to achieve shared ambitions. He indicated that he was seeking improved alignment of the Local Development Social Inclusion and the Community Development Programmes in his Department and planned to merge the two programmes. He referred to the Forum on

Philanthropy to deepen and strengthen a culture of philanthropy and the new volunteer centres being supported by the Government.

Jack Keyes, county manager and chair, thanked the Minister for his attendance and hoped that he had found it interesting. He concluded saying that he had found the conference to be a very positive and worthwhile discussion which he felt we would be able act on to the betterment of all our communities.

## ***Conference Recommendations***

### **Training and Education**

Both councillors and community forum representatives felt that training and education was needed and sought:

- Accessible in-house training for all representatives in the structures, bodies, and operation of the county council, state and community sectors
- Accessible in house training of SPC members in the role of their SPC, the work to date and work planning for the next five years
- Training in effective representation for both councillors and Forum representatives
- Training in work planning for Community Forum members
- Training for council officers on the role and input of the Community Forum

### **Improved Dialogue**

- Establish regular structured meetings between local Community Fora representatives and councillors
- Establish regular contact between Community Forum and all local Directors of Service to share information on work plans

### **Information and Communication**

- All stakeholders to promote and support the Community Forum
- Council to circulate papers and minutes well in advance of meetings
- Council to seek items for the agenda
- Council to avoid use of jargon where possible

- Community Forum to develop strong information and communication systems

### **Financial/Budgets**

- DoEHLG to make Community Forum budgets available to Community Forum
- Councillors to protect community forum budgets and community grants schemes
- Council to include training budget for community forum and council representatives