

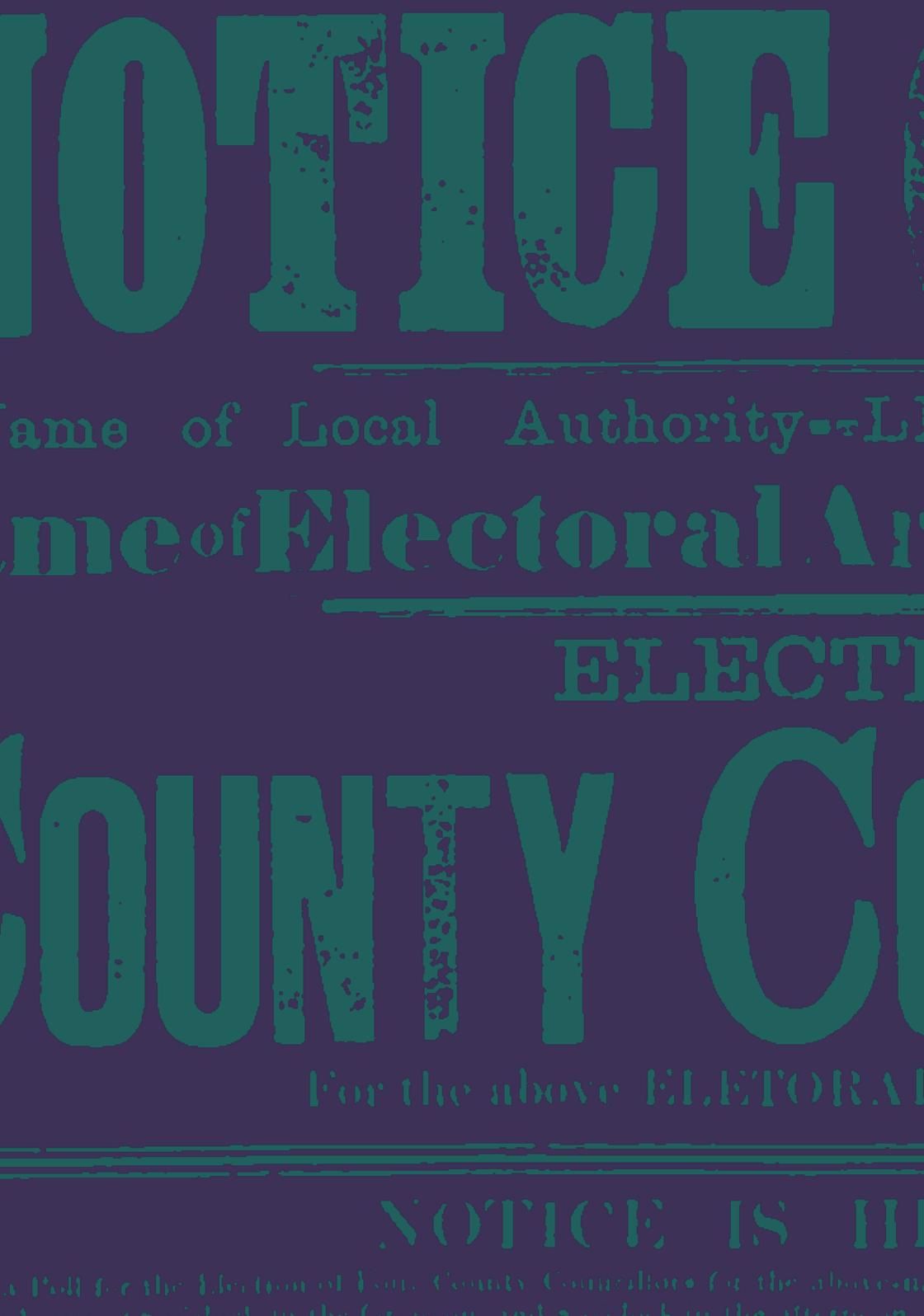


National Women's Council of Ireland  
Comhairle Náisiúnta na mBan in Éirinn

# WOMEN BEYOND THE DÁIL: ESTABLISHING LOCAL CAUCUS FOR WOMEN COUNCILLORS

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## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this document is to act as a practical and brief guide to those considering establishing a Women's Caucus or Network within their Local Authority area. This is a joint project between the National Women's Council of Ireland (NWCI) and the National Collective of Community Based Networks (NCCWN).

The establishment of such a caucus or network is one of the ways that could enable women to strengthen their impact and bring about equality between women and men in the daily operations and work of Local Authorities. Their success stems from their capacity to build solidarity amongst women elected representatives, to rally support around common objectives and rising above political divisions to adopt a collaborative way of working.

There is no single caucus model. The structure and purpose of the caucus varies in terms of structure, composition, areas of interest, budget, the context in which they evolve, and the name chosen.

We are grateful for the feedback from stakeholders including the Association of Irish Local Government, Longford Women's Link and four NCCWN projects (Donegal, Dun Laoghaire, Limerick and Monaghan). Feedback from an exploratory discussion held in December with women councillors from Limerick, Louth, Dun Laoghaire/Rathdown, Meath and Fingal and women's community organisations are also included.

This guide is kindly supported by the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government.

# CONTEXT OF WOMEN IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Like parliamentary politics, local government in the Republic of Ireland has historically been highly male-dominated and has some distance to travel before a ‘critical mass’ of women councillors is achieved nationally. In the 2019 local elections, only 226 women candidates or 24% women were elected to local councils. This compares to an EU average of 32% for local/municipal councils.<sup>1</sup> Research has made the link between low levels of women’s representation in decision-making and poor outcomes for women’s interests.<sup>2</sup> With its proximity to women’s lives, local government is uniquely positioned to strengthen women’s participation and improve the representation of their interests. Local political experience is also a key pipeline for national office and is statistically more significant for women than men in Irish general elections<sup>3</sup>.

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1 [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2019/635549/EPRS\\_ATA\(2019\)635549\\_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2019/635549/EPRS_ATA(2019)635549_EN.pdf)

2 <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0160323X17732608?journalCode=slgb>

3 <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/1554477X.2015.1050912>

# WHAT IS A CAUCUS? WHAT IS ITS PURPOSE?

Broadly speaking, **women’s caucuses or parliamentary groups are ways that have been created within political assemblies in many countries to strengthen cooperation between women in political life.** Caucuses bring women elected representatives together across party and ideological lines in effective alliances around a common goal.<sup>4</sup> In cases where women are significantly under-represented within their own political parties and men are over-represented, caucuses can be particularly important in strengthening the capacity of women to effect change.

The Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) identifies multiple purposes<sup>5</sup>:

- Women’s caucuses establish cross-party co-operation.
- Women’s caucuses defend women’s legislative priorities and increase their influence in parliament.
- Women’s caucuses can also work in other policy areas, not necessarily focused on women, analysing a broad range of issues from a gender perspective and addressing the needs of other marginalised groups, including children.
- Women’s caucuses can help to build the capacity of women parliamentarians, especially newly elected women politicians, by organising and providing support and training.
- Women’s caucuses promote gender mainstreaming in the work and functioning of parliament.

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4 <https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/reference/2016-07/guidelines-womens-caucuses>

5 <https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/reference/2016-07/guidelines-womens-caucuses>

Importantly, caucuses also act to bridge the gap between the formal political system and civil society groups working in areas that affect women and gender academic experts.<sup>6</sup> These strategic partnerships are key to the advancement of gender equality policy.

At national level, a Women's Parliamentary Caucus was established by women Oireachtas members in 2017. It is a cross-party forum for Irish women TDs and Senators to discuss and campaign on issues predominantly affecting women. The Caucus operates according to a Constitution.<sup>7</sup>

## MAPPING OF AREAS WHERE THERE IS INTEREST OR WHERE WORK IS ALREADY HAPPENING

### Limerick City and County

Working from the Women's Parliamentary Caucus established in the Oireachtas in 2017, NCCWN/Limerick Women's Network established a local women's caucus in September 2019. It is the first structure of this kind at local level in Ireland. The NCCWN/Limerick Women's Network provide the secretariat. They are independent, know the issues for women and they understand the busy role of councillors. The caucus has met four times and has a sub-group that sets the agenda and decides on press releases. Although challenges remain, the caucus has enabled women to begin to transcend party lines to share their experiences as women and process the elements of running and assuming office. A key aspect of making the caucus work is providing a space for trust to be established between women councillors. This has contributed to *"changing dynamics on the main*

6 <https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/reference/2016-07/guidelines-womens-caucuses>

7 [https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/communications/other/2018/2018-07-12\\_constitution-of-the-irish-women-s-parliamentary-caucus\\_en.pdf](https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/communications/other/2018/2018-07-12_constitution-of-the-irish-women-s-parliamentary-caucus_en.pdf)

*floor"* as male councillors see women supporting each other. The caucus has worked together to highlight the 16 days of action to end violence against women. According to a NCCWN/Limerick Women's Network stakeholder, the experience has been "fantastic so far" and the group has made a submission to the call for proposals from Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government (DHPLG) on supporting female and diverse representation in local government. The following motion was passed at the Council Meeting on the 27th January 2020;

*"That, Limerick City and County Council formally recognise the local Women's Caucus. This organisation is a group of female Elected Councillors, whose membership is committed to ensuring that female members are supported in the Local Government system. It will be the first recognised at Local Government level and, in doing so, will ensure Members get the support required in political life."*



### Monaghan

NCCWN/Dóchas for Women Monaghan, NCCWN/Blayney Blades and NWCI held a joint post-local election event in October 2019. The

aim of the event was to enable local women to have their say about community issues and to interact with their local representatives.

Two actions emerged on the night:

1. To hold another similar event in the future.
2. To create a council observing group for women, whose activities include attending local council meetings, inviting councillors to ask a question on their behalf, writing up a summary of findings for the wider group and possibly issuing press releases. The aim of the group is to demystify the local political process for women and, by documenting the process, to encourage the council chamber to professionalise how it conducts its business.

NCCWN/Dóchas for Women Monaghan stakeholders advocated that a local caucus needs to be “a two-way system” between elected representatives and local women. Male and female councillors can engage with women’s and family issues by meeting with women in the community to hear about their concerns (it was noted that one woman councillor in particular is always happy to do so). Meanwhile, local women can be mentored by elected representatives to enhance their engagement with local decision-making processes and to encourage them to run for office themselves: “*At the moment, we have more women interested [in the council observing group] than we have in it [the council]*”. A local caucus should give women the space to raise their issues and “*everyone is winning*”. A stakeholder emphasised that, in order to keep women engaged with the process, a caucus should “*not be a talking shop*” but resourced and enabled to effect change.

## Wicklow

Newly elected Councillor Lourda Scott (Green Party, Greystones LEA) has called for the establishment of a women’s caucus in Wicklow County Council, which returned 13 women councillors (34%) in the 2019 local

elections. Councillor Scott recently outlined her vision for a caucus.<sup>8</sup> Building on the progress already made in Wicklow, the caucus would have a two-pronged approach of encouraging more women candidates to run and strengthening the capacity of women currently elected.



## THINKING ABOUT SETTING UP A CAUCUS IN YOUR LOCAL AREA?

### How should a Local Caucus be geographically structured?

Most stakeholders stressed that a caucus for women councillors should operate at a local level rather than on a national or regional scale. Different local authority areas have their own

<sup>8</sup> <https://wicklownews.net/2019/11/green-party-councillor-calls-for-the-establishment-of-a-womens-caucus-for-local-authority-councillors/>

specific histories, experiences, needs and resources in relation to women's participation and representation (including the presence/absence of a funded women's community group) and the caucus should fit the local context. To quote one NCCWN stakeholder: *"A caucus needs to be tailored and flexible"*.

It was felt that geographic barriers would hamper the effectiveness of a regional or national caucus as participants would have to travel long distances to attend.

However, in cases where individual councils have very low levels of female representation (e.g. Longford and Offaly with one women councillor or Carlow and Waterford City and County with two), it may be necessary to merge councils together if there is interest in establishing a caucus.<sup>9</sup> To facilitate participation in local and or regional caucus the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government should look to amend Circular LG 01/2018 – Expenses and allowances for elected members to include the NWCI/NCCWN and local caucus activities as eligible bodies/activities for councillors' training expenses.

Alternatively, these council areas could operate a different model of caucus whereby local women's community groups or voluntary feminist networks work with all councillors and the local authority in question to allow local women to better engage with local decision-making and to encourage their future candidacy (e.g. Monaghan case study above).

Representatives from different caucuses should be given the opportunity to meet at a national level to share local best practice and lessons learned and to act as a lobby group advocating for women councillors and women's equality issues, e.g. pushing for family-friendly reforms in local councils. The AILG has confirmed that their conference facilities could be used to allow representatives from each local caucus to meet once a year. To maximise their

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<sup>9</sup> [https://www.housing.gov.ie/sites/default/files/publications/files/lg\\_01-2018\\_appendix\\_i\\_expenses\\_and\\_allowances\\_for\\_elected\\_members.pdf](https://www.housing.gov.ie/sites/default/files/publications/files/lg_01-2018_appendix_i_expenses_and_allowances_for_elected_members.pdf)

impact, local caucuses could also put forward motions across different local authorities on issues of mutual agreement.

## Have women councillors expressed an interest?

Research on the current cohort of local councillors reveals a considerably high level of awareness about gender equality issues, particularly among women councillors. In a recent survey of councillors<sup>10</sup>, a majority of women and men representatives strongly agree/agree that local government is a good place to progress gender equality issues and believe that more women in politics would lead to better decision-making. Their interest in gender issues should be leveraged through the development of local caucuses and this work may also raise the gender consciousness of other women councillors. Thirty-nine women councillors have expressed an interest in being kept informed of developments.

## Will other members be perceptive? Will efforts to establish a Caucus face resistance?

Stakeholders argued that getting male councillors to become meaningfully engaged with women's projects is the biggest challenge they face, as opposed to active forms of resistance from men. One NCCWN stakeholder saw a local caucus as "an opportunity to bring men into feminist thinking" and to further raise their awareness of gender issues. At national level, the Women's Parliamentary Caucus has not faced any significant active resistance from male parliamentarians as a group and many men have publicly supported their work, including party leaders.

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<sup>10</sup> [https://www.nwci.ie/images/uploads/\\_NWCI\\_Research\\_Report\\_WEB.pdf](https://www.nwci.ie/images/uploads/_NWCI_Research_Report_WEB.pdf)

## What themes are likely to unite women?

Party and ideological differences between women politicians have been identified as a key barrier to women's cross-party work.<sup>11</sup> It is important to assess the prospects for women uniting and building consensus on specific issues. Cross-party aims and initiatives that all women councillors can prevent gridlock. Some policy issues, such as violence against women, period poverty, women's access to paid employment and increasing women's representation in politics are less partisan than others. Each caucus should aim to find common ground on policy issues they can collectively support. As one stakeholder pointed out: *"the caucus has to be about the group and not about individual profile and advancement."* Importantly, this ensures that the local caucus is maintained in the run-up to future general and local elections, where members may be running against each other and/or will be supporting their own party's candidates. The setting up of these networks involves understanding and respecting the diversity among women, establishing guidelines to respect and listen, and creating an atmosphere of trust. It is critically important, particularly in the earliest stages, when identifying the business or policy issues that will make up the work programme, to focus on where members agree rather than disagree.

Broadly, a local caucus can serve the following functions (each caucus may have different priorities depending on the local context):

- Strengthening the impact of women councillors.
- Demystifying the role of councillor for women in the community and encouraging their own candidacy.
- Connecting more women into local politics.
- Supporting and retaining currently elected women councillors.
- Making women councillors visible to the public and media.

11 <https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/reference/2016-07/guidelines-womens-caucuses>

- Collaborating on a cross-party basis and working with the national caucus to link the local with the national.
- Influencing policy and legislation from a gender perspective.
- Creating opportunities for formal and informal mentoring from incumbents for newly elected councillors.
- Embedding women's equality across the work of local government, including on committee structures.

## Who is a member and how would membership apply?

Every local councillor who identifies as a woman will be a member of the local caucus unless she opts out. Gender diverse and non-binary councillors may join as full members. To link the local with the national, local women TDs and/or Senators may be invited to join as associate/non-voting members.

Based on the positive experience of the national caucus, the Limerick caucus is currently exploring whether to expand the group to former women councillors (this would develop institutional memory and aid durability).



## How would meetings work and how should decisions be made?

At present, the Limerick Caucus has a rotating Chair for meetings. If a caucus wishes to formalise its structure (this may not be practical in councils with very low numbers of women representatives), the Irish Women's Parliamentary Caucus constitution<sup>12</sup> provides guidance on working arrangements that can be adapted to suit the local context if needed. Importantly, the document also ensures continuity for the local caucus between electoral cycles. The decisions process to be adopted should be considered in light of the caucus's expected political party breakdown, e.g. simple majority, two-thirds majority or consensus.<sup>13</sup>

## What is the role of the secretariat and who should provide that role? How could this be resourced?

As discussed, the NCCWN/Limerick Women's Network provide the secretariat for the Limerick Caucus. At national level, NWCI is the secretariat for the Women's Parliamentary Caucus. The role of the secretariat may include convening meetings, minute recording, group development, establishing and maintaining group contract, which can be developed separate to the constitution, as well as providing support to the executive. It is important that secretariats do not overly influence the agenda and discussion and that boundaries are clear, particularly after the initial set up. Secretariat members would not have voting rights. The active involvement of an independent women's community sector or voluntary network is key to ensuring that the caucus takes a multi-party, community-based approach to local work on women's issues. Resources are essential to allow these groups to invest their time and expertise in this initiative. A membership fee

12 [https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/communications/other/2018/2018-07-12\\_constitution-of-the-irish-women-s-parliamentary-caucus\\_en.pdf](https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/communications/other/2018/2018-07-12_constitution-of-the-irish-women-s-parliamentary-caucus_en.pdf)

13 <https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/reference/2016-07/guidelines-womens-caucuses>

is one potential source of funding for the caucus<sup>14</sup>, but this should be an eligible expense item for councillors if so. Funding from central government will be key to ensuring that the caucus has enough funds to function properly and achieve its goals. The DHPLG has a responsibility under the National Strategy for Women and Girls 2017-2020<sup>15</sup> to work for greater women's representation in local and national politics. Funds should be ring-fenced for the women's community group or voluntary network providing the role of secretariat.

## What is the role of the Local Authority?

The Local Authority has an important role to play in ensuring that the women's caucus is legitimised. Caucuses should bring forward a motion to councils to support the caucus and for formal recognition. To reduce the burden of time and travel for members, Local Authorities can bring women's caucuses together before or after council meetings. This is especially important in larger geographic areas. If possible, the existence of a caucus should be written into corporate plans.



14 <https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/reference/2016-07/guidelines-womens-caucuses>

15 [http://justice.ie/en/JELR/National\\_Strategy\\_for\\_Women\\_and\\_Girls\\_2017\\_-\\_2020.pdf/Files/National\\_Strategy\\_for\\_Women\\_and\\_Girls\\_2017\\_-\\_2020.pdf](http://justice.ie/en/JELR/National_Strategy_for_Women_and_Girls_2017_-_2020.pdf/Files/National_Strategy_for_Women_and_Girls_2017_-_2020.pdf)

# ESTABLISHING A CAUCUS – THE CHECKLIST

1. Establish a clear, transparent and inclusive process to prevent perceptions of bias or partisanship. Consider establishing a preparatory committee, with cross party and independent representation to establish the process and prepare options.
2. Define the vision and objectives as early as possible. These will be essential in underpinning and guiding the caucus in their work, in rising above political divisions and in giving it strategic direction.
3. Determine the relationship with the Local Authority. Speak with officials to let them know your plans and how they can support you.
4. Who takes the lead? Decide how leadership is chosen.
5. Define the role of the member. What are the rights, responsibilities, and obligations of members to the caucus?
6. Writing the rules. Formalise decisions and agreements in writing, in an openly available document. This can be done through a charter or constitution. This document should include the rationale for establishing the caucus, the name of the caucus, its objectives, the definition of membership, structures, leadership, meetings, functions and resources.
7. Activities: The possibilities are endless but decisions on activities should be based on the objectives of the caucus as already defined.
  - Consider facilitating discussions among citizens and politicians through briefings on issues of importance to the caucus and building networks with interested individuals. The development of networks and partnerships both inside and outside can be an important step towards effective advocacy, greater public awareness and action.
  - Raise the visibility of specific issues and caucus visibility by organising press conferences, interviews and speeches.
  - Promote signing up to the European Charter for Equality between Women and Men in Local Life.
  - Observe, analyse and learn from the Women’s Parliamentary Caucus and identify opportunities to bring the local to the national.
  - Identify specific policy issues that require deeper examination. Where possible, collect data and conduct investigations to strengthen the advocacy impact of the caucus – and also to encourage buy-in from other decision makers. These activities could be undertaken in collaboration with universities and research institutions, or with civil society organisations.

## FURTHER RESOURCES

- AGORA-iknowpolitics.org (2011) *Women’s Caucuses - Joint AGORA – iKNOW Politics Virtual Discussion Summary*.
- European Charter for Equality of Women and Men in Local Life - <https://charter-equality.eu/>
- Houses of the Oireachtas (2017) *Constitution of the Irish Women’s Parliamentary Caucus*.
- International Congress of Parliamentary Women’s Caucuses (2018), *Dublin Declaration*.
- Inter-Parliamentary Union (2013) *Guidelines for Women’s Caucuses*.
- Inter-Parliamentary Union (nd) *Database on Women’s Caucuses*.
- National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (nd) *Women’s Caucus Fact Sheet*.
- Women’s Democracy Network - Uganda Chapter (2014) *Guide for creating and sustaining women local councillors’ caucuses at district and sub-county levels in Uganda*.
- *Welcome Manual for Women elected officials in Spain (2015)*

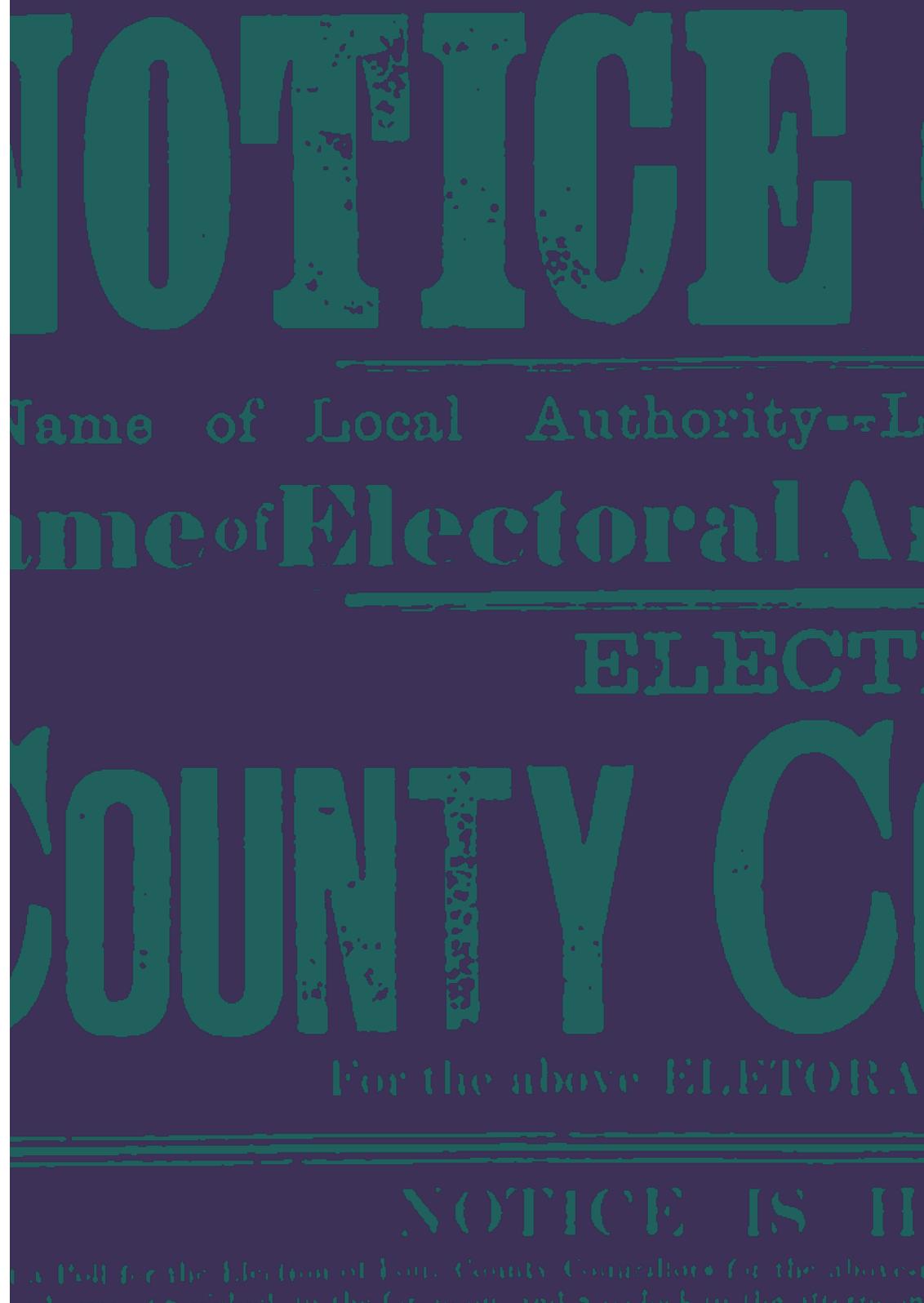
## GLOSSARY OF TERMS

### **Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government**

We support local government in its role of promoting the well-being and quality of life of citizens and communities through the efficient performance of functions and delivery of good-value services at local level.

### **Association of Irish Local Government**

The AILG is a networking, policy development and training resource for the elected members of Ireland’s thirty-one County and City Councils. It works to ensure that the contribution of Ireland’s democratically elected councillors is appreciated in Government Departments and throughout the full range of public agencies.





The National Women's Council of Ireland's (NWCI) mission is to lead and to be a catalyst in the achievement of equality for women. We are the leading national representative organisation for women and women's groups in Ireland. A non-governmental, not-for-profit organisation, founded in 1973, we seek to achieve equality for women. We represent and take our mandate from our over 190-member groups from across a diversity of backgrounds, sectors and geographical locations. We also have a growing number of individual members who support the campaign for women's equality in Ireland. Our mandate is to take action to ensure that the voices of women in all their diversity are heard. Our vision is of an Ireland and of a world where women can achieve their full potential in a just and equal society

The National Collective of Community Based Women's Networks (NCCWN) is a collective of 17 grassroots women's networks located in some of the most disadvantaged areas across Ireland. They have an expertise in working on the ground with women's groups to identify barriers and needs across a wide range of intersectional issues and barriers. They work with women in their communities and women's groups to identify and develop female leaders and role models. Several Networks have focused on increasing women's awareness and participation in local politics.

Find out more: [www.nwci.ie](http://www.nwci.ie)

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