



**Local
Development
Companies
Network**

Collective Vision, Fairer Society.

2026
National
Conference

Local Development in Ireland

Bridging Policy, People and Place

Two days of dialogue on how the role of
Local Development Companies
is critical to a **sustainable, inclusive,
resilient and socially cohesive Ireland**
in rural and urban areas.

1st and 2nd October 2026
Cork



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Imeacht Gaolmhar | Associated Event



Conference Programme 1st October

12:00 **Welcome and opening remarks** MC - Noelle O'Connell

12:10 **Official Opening** Deputy Lord Mayor, Cllr. Gary O'Brien
Ministerial Address Minister Jerry Buttimer

12:25 **Setting the Scene** Máirín Ó Cuireáin, CEO LDCN

Ireland is experiencing profound social, economic, demographic, environmental and technological change. These changes are being experienced differently across communities and are intensifying existing inequalities. The role of LDCs is more important than ever.

12:35 **Community Resilience | Climate no longer just an environmental issue**
Prof John Sweeney, Maynooth University

12:55 **PANEL: How can Local Development Companies prepare communities for future change?** Representatives of LDCs.

1:30 Lunch

2:30 **How the right support at the right time enables people to thrive**
Izz Alkarajeh, Izz Café - introduced by Tony Regan, Cork City Partnership

2:40 **Who is being left behind?** Assistant Prof Barra Roantree, Trinity College

3:00 **What happens when people become disconnected from opportunity and participation?** Prof Niamh Hourigan, Mary Immaculate College.

3:10 **How people behave when facing change and uncertainty**
Prof Pete Lunn, ESRI

3:30 **Cultivating sustainable change through integrated local responses**
Prof Anna Davies, The Trinity Centre For Future Cities , Trinity College

3:40 Q&A: Anna Davies, Barra Roantree, Niamh Hourigan and Pete Lunn

4:00 **Area-based initiatives to transform neighbourhoods** Talia Melic, OECD

4:20 **PANEL: Why individual programmes alone cannot solve complex problems** Nesson Vaughan; Paul Ginnell; plus LDC representatives.

4:50 Wrap-up



Conference Programme 2nd October

- 10:00 **Welcome and opening remarks** MC - Noelle O'Connell
What does the future look like in rural communities?
- 10:05 **Rural Development and LEADER - What does community-led local development look like when it works?** Associate Prof Karen Keaveney, UCD
- 10:25 PANEL: **Community-led local development and LEADER** Karen Keaveney, Josephine O'Neill, Macra na Feirme, and representatives of LDCs.
- 10:45 **How can stronger local food systems support economic, environmental and community resilience?** Ruth Hegarty and Evonne Boland, Food Policy Ireland
- 11:05 PANEL: **Rural Economies and LEADER.** Humphrey Murphy ILC and LDC reps.
- 11:20 **Creative Places: From policy to practice — What can long-term arts investment do for communities?** Peter Prendergast, Cork County Council
- 11:30 Coffee *Building trust, belonging and democratic participation from the ground up.*
- 11:50 Spoken word performance by FELISPEAKS
- 12:00 **How can place-based policy rebuild trust?** Prof Niamh Moore-Cherry, UCD
- 12:25 **What can we learn from communities that have navigated division?** Gerard Deane, Holywell Trust
- 12:50 PANEL: Niamh Moore-Cherry, Gerard Deane, FELISPEAKS and LDC reps.
- 1:30 Lunch
- 2:30 **What does a truly inclusive community look like?** Liam Herrick, IHREC
- 2:50 **Social Cohesion: What really works?** Conleth Burns, More in Common
- 3:05 PANEL: **The LDC Experience** - followed by Q&A.
- 3:55 **Concluding Remarks** Sean Lavery LDCN Chair
- 4:15 **Owning our own story** Leon Diop Black and Irish
- 4:40 **Closing Address** An Taoiseach Micheál Martin

Speaker Bios



Our event MC, Noelle O Connell is a Taoiseach-appointed Member of Council of NESC, whose current work programme is centred on social cohesion, and has spent her career at the interface of Irish civil society, community organisations and the European institutions. She brings first-hand fluency in the partnership model that sits at the heart of Ireland's local development approach. As CEO of European Movement Ireland for over 14 years, and elected a Vice President of European Movement International, Noelle has engaged directly with EU policy at both national and institutional level across Europe. An expert in EU affairs, public policy and international expansion, Noelle is a trusted advisor to businesses, NGOs and government bodies.



Emeritus Professor **John Sweeney** has been a member of the Geography Department at Maynooth University since 1978. He has been involved in a number of international research projects and has led a number of national funded research projects examining various aspects of climate change in Ireland. Professor Sweeney contributed to the reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, which was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2007. He is also a regular contributor to print and broadcast media on matters related to climate change science and policy.



Barra Roantree is an Assistant Professor and Programme Director of the MSc in Economic Policy at Trinity College Dublin. His research focuses on the design of the tax and welfare system, and the evolution and distribution of living standards in Ireland. He previously worked as an economist at the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) in Dublin and the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) in London. He was a member of the Irish Government's 2021-22 Commission on Taxation and Welfare.



Professor **Niamh Hourigan** is Vice President of Academic Affairs at Mary Immaculate College Limerick. A sociologist, she is the author of a number of landmark studies on social change in Ireland. She works with a wide range of social justice organisations in Ireland including Threshold, Barnardos and the Simon Community. She is a regular contributor to the Irish media on matters of sociological interest.



Professor **Pete Lunn** is the founder and head of the Behavioural Research Unit (BRU) at the ESRI. The BRU has pioneered the use of behavioural experiments for addressing policy problems in Ireland. His primary area of study is how people make decisions, especially those that affect environmental, health and financial outcomes. Pete and his team at the BRU have recently published multiple research studies on public perceptions, understanding and engagement with climate action.



Anna Davies is Professor of Geography, Environment and Society at Trinity College Dublin where she leads the Environmental Governance Research Group and is Co-Director of the Trinity Centre for Future Cities. She examines whose voices, values and visions count when shaping policy and practice in matters of sustainability and how this impacts people and the planet.



Talia Melic is a Policy Analyst in the OECD's Local Employment and Economic Development (LEED) Programme. In this role, she leads research and facilitates global dialogues on innovative approaches to strengthening local economies and communities, working with governments at the national and subnational level. This includes leading a workstream and new OECD Programme on area-based initiatives in neighbourhoods and communities. Prior to joining the OECD, Talia gained fifteen years of experience in international policy with the Australian Government. She has been engaged in local community initiatives in her neighbourhood in the Paris suburbs for the past two decades. She holds a PhD in Human Geography and a masters in Community and Regional Development.



Associate Professor **Karen Keaveney** is Head of Rural Development in the School of Agriculture and Food Science, UCD. She is a Human Geographer and a qualified Regional and Urban Planner with research interests in community-led local development, rural governance and co-design for evidence-based policy. She was previously a Lecturer in Rural Spatial Planning in Queen's University Belfast. She is Programme Director of the MSc (Agr) in Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Development in UCD. Karen was a member of the European Commission Rural Pact Coordination Group (2023-26), and is currently the Chair of the National Decarbonising Zone Advisory Group (DCEE). She is a member of the Royal Irish Academy Geography and Geosciences Committee, and a former President of the Geographical Society of Ireland.



Ruth Hegarty is director of Food Policy Ireland, researching, advocating, and taking action towards healthy, sustainable and fair food systems. She has spent over 20 years advocating for short food supply chains, resilient local food economies, healthy food environments and food education and is currently campaigning for better school meals, public food procurement reform, and community food hubs as key levers to achieve these. Ruth is a co-coordinator of the Feeding Ourselves, a Community of Practice for food sovereignty, and a board member of Talamh Beo. Previously she was Secretary-General of Euro-toques Ireland for 10 years. She holds a masters in Food Policy and a masters in European Policy and lectures in food policy. She is also an experienced facilitator and MC, and is a regular media commentator on food policy issues.



Evonne Boland is a co-founder of Open Food Network Ireland and a Director of Food Policy Ireland, dedicating her efforts to the advancement of democratic, community-led, and open-source food networks. Her work over the past decade has centered on strengthening local food systems, with a focus on the role of Community Food Hubs, short food supply chains, and community-led responses to drive this transition. Evonne co-coordinates the Feeding Ourselves network of community led food initiatives and works closely with the farming organisation Talamh Beo. She holds a BA in Economics and Sociology from Trinity College Dublin, a Certificate in Community Development from Maynooth University, and regularly speaks on the connection between digital marketplaces, cooperatives, and rural renewal. Grounded in community advocacy, Evonne also serves on the Kildare Public Participation Network (PPN) Secretariat and the Kildare Local Community Development Committee (LCDC), driven by the belief that communities hold the key to stronger, more resilient local food systems.



Peter Prendergast is an arts manager with extensive experience across the visual arts, cultural production and community-based practice. He is currently Project Coordinator for Creative Places West Cork Islands, a Cork County Council and Arts Council initiative working across seven West Cork islands to develop and sustain community-led cultural activity. He holds an M.Phil. in Art History from Trinity College Dublin and has worked across grassroots, commercial, and institutional arts organisations in roles spanning arts management, curating, production, audience development, and gallery direction. Peter is also a writer and researcher on Irish visual art. He is the author of *Declarations of Abstraction: Welded Abstract Sculpture, Ireland, 1970s and 1980s*, and has contributed writing to various publications.



Professor **Niamh Moore-Cherry** is the Dean of Social Sciences and College Principal for the UCD College of Social Sciences and Law. Niamh's research explores how urban and regional policy is developed, implemented and its impact on communities at different scales. She serves as an independent member of Ireland's National Economic and Social Council and has previously advised the OECD, and a number of government departments, regional assemblies and local authorities on Urban Governance, Place-Based Policy, Sustainable Communities and the National Wellbeing Framework.



Gerard Deane is the Director of Holywell Trust, a leading community relations and development organisation in the North West of Northern Ireland. Gerard works to create positive and lasting change in the North West by empowering people to help themselves and their communities. Under Gerard's leadership Holywell Trust has been leading on an independent exploration of the constitutional future of these islands through the Future Relationship Conversations and Forward Thinking projects. Gerard is also a Director of the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland and a member of the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust Northern Ireland Committee. Gerard has worked in leadership roles within the community and voluntary sector for more than 30 years.



Liam Herrick was appointed Chief Commissioner of the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission in November 2024, having previously served as a member of the Commission between 2013 and 2016. He has worked in the area of human rights in Ireland for over 25 years, including as the Executive Director of the Irish Council for Civil Liberties (ICCL) and of the Irish Penal Reform Trust (IPRT). He has also worked for the Irish Human Rights Commission as its first Senior Policy and Legislation Review Officer, and for the Law Reform Commission and the Department of Foreign Affairs. Between 2014 and 2016, Liam worked as Advisor to President Michael D. Higgins. He was also a member of the Minister for Justice's Strategic Review Group on Penal Policy.



Conleth Burns is an Associate Director at More in Common, where he leads research and public engagement across Ireland and Northern Ireland. Since joining More in Common in 2021, he has worked with political, business and civic leaders on issues including identity, community relations and social cohesion. More in Common has been a learning partner for the Community Connection Project working with Community Link Workers across the country since the start of this year. Originally from County Antrim, he has a background in community development and campaigning and holds a law degree from the University of Oxford.

Panelists



Nesson Vaughan worked over 30 years in the public service at the National Manpower Service, Department of Labour and FÁS. In the latter part of his career, he held a senior national policy position with responsibility for policy relating to the dual-stranded National Employment Service. Nesson left the public service to work exclusively in the Community & Voluntary sector, as a Volunteer. He has chaired several organisations in the sector and is currently Chair of Dublin Northwest Partnership and of The Employment Project (TEN). He is currently National Vice President of the Society of St Vincent de Paul (SVP) where he is also Chair of SVP's National Social Justice Committee, of the Vincentian Minimum Essential Standard of Living (MESL) Research Centre Committee and the National Governance Committee. Nesson also serves as a Trustee on the Boards of Peter McVerry Trust; Archways; SAOL Project; Crosscare; St Andrew's Resource Centre and ATD Ireland. He is a social justice and human rights advocate.



Paul Ginnell is a social policy researcher and organisational consultant. He has over 30 years experience working in social justice, equality and anti-poverty organisations at local, national and European level. Up to 2025 Paul was the Director of the European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN) Ireland, having previously been the Policy Officer with the organisation. During his time with EAPN Ireland Paul was an external representative on the Government's Social Inclusion Roadmap Steering Group overseeing implementation of the Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025 and coordinated a number of alliances including the Community Platform and Add the 10th Alliance. He is currently an active member of the Solidarity Network advocating for a civil society for transformative change and a visiting lecturer in the Department of Applied Social Studies in Maynooth University.



Josephine O'Neill is the National President of Macra, representing more than 16,000 young farmers and rural young people on the issues shaping their future and the future of rural Ireland. A native of Bennettsbridge, Co. Kilkenny, Josephine comes from a beef and tillage farm and has been an active member of Callan Macra for over 12 years. A qualified Home Economics and Irish teacher, Josephine is passionate about educating young people on food production, the importance of Irish agriculture, and the vital role farmers play in producing safe, sustainable, high-quality food.



Humphrey Murphy is the founder of Irish Leisure Consultants (ILC), a consultancy working in outdoor recreation, sport, physical activity and rural tourism, from strategy and programme design to trail and facility development. He has worked extensively with communities, Local Development Companies, local authorities and state agencies to help them realise the potential of the outdoor spaces on their doorstep. As a lifelong adventure sports participant, he recognises the outdoors as a powerful space for personal development, inclusion, pride of place and rural renewal.

Representatives from Local Development Companies will join and moderate panels, grounding speaker sessions in the lived experience. 6

Artists, Storytellers and Performers



FELISPEAKS is a Nigerian-Irish visionary artist celebrated for their profound exploration of identity, social justice, and personal growth through poetry, performance and theatre. As well as being featured in the Irish Leaving Cert Curriculum for their poems "For Our Mothers" and "Rainbow Blood", their compelling work transcends borders, leaving an indelible mark on international literature. FELISPEAKS will be treating guest to a spoken word performance.



Izzeddeen (Izz) Alkarajeh is the co-founder of Izz Café, an award-winning Palestinian restaurant in Cork City. Izz arrived in Ireland in 2016 with his wife Eman and their four children after years working in Saudi Arabia. Entering the Direct Provision system, they were relocated to Cork where, with crucial support from mentors like Darina Allen and Tony O'Regan, they transformed family recipes into a thriving business. Starting at Cork's farmers markets in 2018, they opened Izz Café on George's Quay in 2019. The café quickly became a Cork institution, winning Best Café at the Cork Business Association Awards (2020) and the gold award for Best Middle Eastern Restaurant in Ireland. Izz and Eman have been recognized in the Irish Times' 50 Heroines of Irish Food & Drink and the Examiner's 50 New Irish Food Heroes. In 2025, they published their cookbook "Jibrin: A Culinary Journey from Palestine to Cork." Izz's story demonstrates how the right support at the right time enables people to thrive, bringing authentic Palestinian cuisine and Arab hospitality to Ireland while becoming an integral part of Cork's vibrant food community. Izz will be sharing his story with us.



Leon Diop is an award-winning author, founder, and activist. He is the Founder and CEO of Black and Irish CLG, host of the Black and Irish podcast, and formerly served as Head of EDI at Arts Council Ireland. His books include the An Post Irish Book Award-winning *Black & Irish* and memoir *Mixed Up*. An Obama Foundation Europe Leaders Programme alumnus, Leon works across storytelling, culture, and equity — helping people and organisations find their voice and their place. He is currently undertaking his Masters in Race, Ethnicity and Conflict in Trinity College Dublin.



John Lonergan is a native of Bansha, Co. Tipperary. He served in the Irish Prison Service for over 42 years. He was Governor of Mountjoy Prison for over 22 years and Governor of the top security prison at Portlaoise for almost 4 years. He retired in June 2010 and later that year his autobiography "The Governor" was published. In 2013 he wrote a book on parenting, 'Parenting – raising your child in Ireland today', with all royalties going to Barnardos. Nowadays he delivers talks on a wide range of subjects to communities, voluntary groups, workers and students. He is an active supporter of many charitable organisations. He is currently the Tipperary Ambassador for Active Ageing. John will regale guests with a special after-dinner speech.



The Kabin Studio are a not-for-profit vibrant music and creative hub, repurposed from a metal container in Knocknaheeny in the Northside of Cork City. Established by GMCB Beats in 2012 with the support of Music Generation Cork City, The Kabin has grown out of a love for hip hop, songwriting, performance and creative expression. **The Kabin Crew** are a crew of songwriters, rappers, musicians, creatives, volunteers and participants of all ages who believe in the power of making music and being creative. Their collaboration with Lisdoonvarna Crew on the song "The Spark" brought them international fame with the YouTube video reaching 9.7m views. The Kabin Crew will be treating guests to a special performance before the Gala Dinner.



Thank you for joining us. Keep in touch!



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