



Establishing Ireland's First Women's Regional Caucus

*Successes & Learning from the
First 18 Months*



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“From the outset the WoMeN’s Regional Caucus has trialled new flexible ways of working which are better suited to the needs of women councillors. [...] We did not wish to adopt the formal and informal norms of conducting council business unless they specifically worked well for us as women in local politics in terms of efficiency and flexibility. Instead, we have meetings and recap meetings held at different times and voting by polls left open for an extended period of time”.

(Caucus Submission to Joint Committee on Gender Equality)



Ministers Foreword



I am delighted to welcome this progress report from the WoMeN's Regional Caucus. As part of a broader programme focussing on gender balance and diversity at local government level, the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage has brought forward a number of funding streams over the last number of years aimed at supporting activities to increase the number of female and diverse candidates running in the Local Elections in 2024. My Department and I are delighted to see the progress and impact that has been made both at a local and regional level. The WoMeN's Regional Caucus progress report will serve as a useful tool in illustrating key learnings and insights since its establishment in September 2021 which other local authorities and local caucuses can learn from.

We know that our political system benefits from the inclusion of more women in our core political processes and it is time that society is reflected in our council chambers and indeed the Oireachtas. Research has shown that local and regional

level political life across party lines and create a space for women to engage more on policy and issues which affect their work. We must ensure that we continue to provide the supports and structures necessary so that the role of the councillor is accessible to all and attracts the diversity we see in our communities.

I commend the WoMeN's Regional Caucus for its achievements to date and their ambitious programme of work in advance of 2024.

It is my hope that this progress report along with the key recommendations set out will help and provide a roadmap for other caucus networks. Finally, I can assure women councillors across the country that you continue to have the full support of myself and my officials in all your undertakings and we continue to operate an open door policy when it comes to supports and suggestions.

Kieran O' Donnell TD

Minister of State with responsibility for Local Government and Planning

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Chairperson Foreword



As Chairperson of the WoMeN's Regional Caucus it is with great pride that I welcome this progress report. The word "Caucus" has become a familiar phrase as numerous local women's caucuses' have emerged across the country at local authority level. The ambition of these networks is to enable women to strengthen their impact and bring about equality between women and men in the membership and work of Local Authorities.

Only 26% of county councillors throughout Ireland are female and we have a much lower percentage of female councillors in rural counties compared to more urban centres such as Dublin – it is because of this reality that the very idea for the WoMeN's Regional Caucus was born. Planning and forming the Women's Regional Caucus as a new and innovative political institution within local government is no easy task and I wish to thank all the female members of the caucus for their commitment to driving this initiative and to each of the 13 participating local authorities to date for their support.

We have been extremely fortunate to have a strong secretariat resource from the Association of Irish Local Government (AILG) and See Her Elected (SHE) who support the caucus from their own resources. Thanks to assistance from the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage the caucus was also able to avail the services of an Independent Facilitator to document the journey of the WoMeN's Regional Caucus. This combined support has been crucial in enabling the Caucus to operate more effectively and to have a meaningful impact.

It is my hope that this document acts as a helpful resource for other local caucuses and local authorities considering setting up their own support networks for women councillors in their local areas. The WoMeN's Regional Caucus is determined to support and enable women to get involved in, and stay in politics – I look forward to continuing this important work collectively with my caucus colleagues.

Cllr. Carmel Brady,

Chairperson of WoMeN's Regional Caucus

A Word from the Author



The WoMeN's Regional Caucus is the first regional caucus in Ireland – and perhaps in Europe! Currently in its pilot phase until March 2024, this new political institution held its first meeting online in September

2021. Its aim is to strengthen collaboration between women Councillors in the region and to provide a mechanism for them to collectively advance gender equality in the Council chamber and beyond.

In mid-2021, I was commissioned by the Association of Local Government (AILG) and She Her Elected (SHE) to support the Caucus in its set-up phase. My role is to provide advice and guidance on building inclusive, transparent and participative caucus structures, to act as the Independent Facilitator for meetings and to produce a report on learning from the pilot phase.

This mid-term report captures the key stages of the caucuses' development and sets out the main factors which have determined its shape and direction. The report displays how a

group of committed, like-minded women councillors can work cross-party and strategically to build a strong, inclusive structure with an ambitious programme of work. It also sets out the challenges faced and provides tips and advice on creating a robust caucus at local and regional level.

As this report goes to print, the Caucus has been nominated for a prestigious "Innovation in Politics Award" which is awarded annually by the European Innovation in Politics Institute. The awards ceremony recognises creative politicians from across Europe who show the courage to break new ground to find solutions to today's challenges. The Caucus's nomination is a suitable testament to the groundbreaking approach and hard work of its members, the Association of Irish Local Government and See Her Elected over the past 18 months. Ádh mór orthu go léir!

Sinéad Doody,

Doody Facilitation and Consulting Ltd

April 2023

What is a Caucus?

The Merriam Webster dictionary tell us that a caucus is 'a closed meeting of a group of persons belonging to the same political party or faction usually to select candidates or to decide on policy'.

A *women's* caucus can be described as membership-based network of women councillors from all political persuasions who come together to strengthen cooperation and work towards agreed goals. Around the world, women's caucuses are more common in national parliaments however, in recent years, they have become more prominent in Irish Local Government.

A regional women's caucus brings together women politicians from different areas in a defined region. The WoMeN's Regional Caucus brings together councillors from 13 counties in West, Midlands and Northern region of Ireland. (see page 8)

In the past number of years, caucuses have been established across the island of Ireland at local, regional and national level. These include:

- Cork City Council Women's Caucus
 - Cork County Council Women's Caucus
 - Fingal Women's Caucus
 - Limerick Women's Caucus
 - Meath Women's Caucus
 - Monaghan Women's Assembly
 - South Dublin Women's Caucus
 - Tipperary Women's Caucus
 - Wexford Women's Coalition
 - Wicklow Women's Caucus
-
- Irish Women's Parliamentary Caucus
 - Northern Ireland Assembly Women's Caucus

What's in a Name?

The WoMeN's Regional Caucus is a network of women councillors from 13 local government areas across three connected regions in Ireland:



Western – Galway City, Galway County, Mayo, Sligo

O

Midlands – Laois, Longford, Offaly, Roscommon, Westmeath

e

Northern – Cavan, Donegal, Leitrim, Monaghan

Participating Counties

“

Each participating county council was selected due to the fact that these neighbouring local authorities account for some of the lowest proportion of female elected representatives across the State and the fact that, individually, there were insufficient numbers of women councillors in each of these local authorities to form a meaningful caucus at the county level.”

- Cavan
- Donegal
- Galway City
- Galway County
- Laois
- Leitrim
- Longford
- Offaly
- Mayo
- Monaghan
- Roscommon
- Sligo
- Westmeath

Key Personnel



Cllr Mary Hoade
Founder



Cllr Carmel Brady
Chairperson



Cllr Shelly Herterich-Quinn
Vice chairperson



Elaine Lynch
AILG Secretariat



Dr. Michelle Maher
SHE Secretariat



Sinéad Doody
Independent Facilitator

Caucus Working Group



Cllr Carmel Brady
Chairperson



Cllr Shelly Herterich-Quinn
Vice chairperson



Cllr Uruemu Adenjinmi



**Cllr Finola Armstrong
McGuire**



Cllr Kathy Bennett



Cllr Marie Casserly



Cllr Emer Kelly



Cllr Niamh Kennedy



Cllr Rosaleen O'Grady



Cllr Hazel Smyth

Members of the WoMeN's Regional Caucus

Cavan



Cllr Carmel Brady



Cllr Madeleine Argue



Cllr Áine Smith



Cllr Patricia Walsh



Cllr Sarah O'Reilly

Donegal



Cllr Niamh Kennedy



Cllr Marie Therese
Gallagher



Cllr Noreen McGarvey



Cllr Rena Donaghey

Monaghan



Cllr Kathy Bennett



Cllr Aoife McCooley

Offaly



Cllr Clare Claffey

Galway County



Cllr Shelly Herterich-
Quinn



Cllr Evelyn Francis
Parsons



Cllr Mary Hoade



Cllr Eileen Mannion



Cllr Geraldine Donohue



Cllr Karey McHugh

Galway City



Cllr Imelda Byrne



Cllr Clodagh Higgins



Cllr Martina O'Connor

Members of the WoMeN's Regional Caucus

Leitrim



Cllr Finola Armstrong
McGuire



Cllr Mary Bohan

Longford



Cllr Uruemu Adenjinmi



Cllr Peggy Nolan

Mayo



Cllr Annie May Reape



Cllr Donna Sheridan

Laois



Cllr Aisling Moran



Cllr Catherine Fitzgerald



Cllr Marie Tuohy



Cllr Caroline Dwane
Stanley



Cllr Thomasina Connell

Roscommon



Cllr Emer Kelly



Cllr Orla Leyden



Cllr Valerie Byrne

Sligo



Cllr Rosaleen O'Grady



Cllr Marie Casserly



Cllr Sinéad Maguire

Westmeath



Cllr Hazel Smyth



Cllr Louise Heavin



Cllr Aoife Davitt



Cllr Emily Wallace

Lead Partners

Association of Irish Local Government (AILG)

The Association of Irish Local Government (AILG) is the primary national representative body that represents and supports the role of the 949 elected councillors across Ireland.

As the national representative body for the 949 city and county councillors across the State, AILG is a central stakeholder in the local government sector and plays a vital role in promoting the role, profile, work, and contribution of the local councillor and their local authorities. As the primary national body for councillors, AILG also has a necessary and obligated role in the promotion of greater diversity within the local government membership, especially in terms of greater participation and support for women and minority groups. Ensuring that currently elected female councillors are retained within the local government system is a key objective of AILG.

www.ailg.ie



See Her Elected (SHE)

Concern at the under-representation of women in county councils in the North West and Midlands areas of the country was the catalyst for the formation of the See Her Elected (SHE) programme in 2019. SHE is part of Longford Women's Link and is a joint initiative with 50/50 NorthWest. It is a feminist, community-led programme that supports women into local politics. It has developed into a national programme, yet retains its strong emphasis on rural Ireland where the number of women in local government are lowest. It supports women to be local election candidates and election campaign team members for female candidates through its innovative and award winning free online SHESchool courses and workshops, and the free SHE Guide to Running in the 2024 Local Elections.

www.seeherelected.ie



The Process so Far

1

March 2020 - March 2021

- Inaugural Women's Local Government Network meeting held at AILG Annual Conference
- AILG National Women's Councillors International Women's Day Webinar
- Discussions between AILG and SHE re collaborating on a pilot regional caucus

2

June/ July 2021

- AILG-SHE funding application approved by DHLGH for an Independent Facilitator for pilot regional caucus
- Sinéad Doody (Doody Facilitation and Consulting Ltd) appointed to guide the process of establishing caucus and report on learning

4

October 2021- June 2022

Creation of Caucus structures, constitution, decision-making processes and programme of work

3

September 2021

- Online briefing to female councillors and agreement to establish a regional caucus on a pilot basis
- Inaugural meeting of WoMeN's Regional Caucus

5

July 2022- March 2023

Implementation of Programme of Work – Phase 1

- Submission to Joint Committee on Gender Equality on Supporting Gender Quotas for Local Elections
- Engagement with Irish Women's Parliamentary Caucus
- Contribution to development of Family-Friendly Toolkit for Local Authorities
- Participation in "UN 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence" campaign
- International Women's Day "Flipping the Council" coordinated event

6

February 2023

Caucus shortlisted for the prestigious EU Innovation in Politics Awards

Section 1

**Why is this
Important?**

Gender Inequality in Irish Local Government

Women continue to be underrepresented in local government, currently holding only 26% of Council seats. After the 2019 local elections, only 10 Councils had 30% or more women councillors.

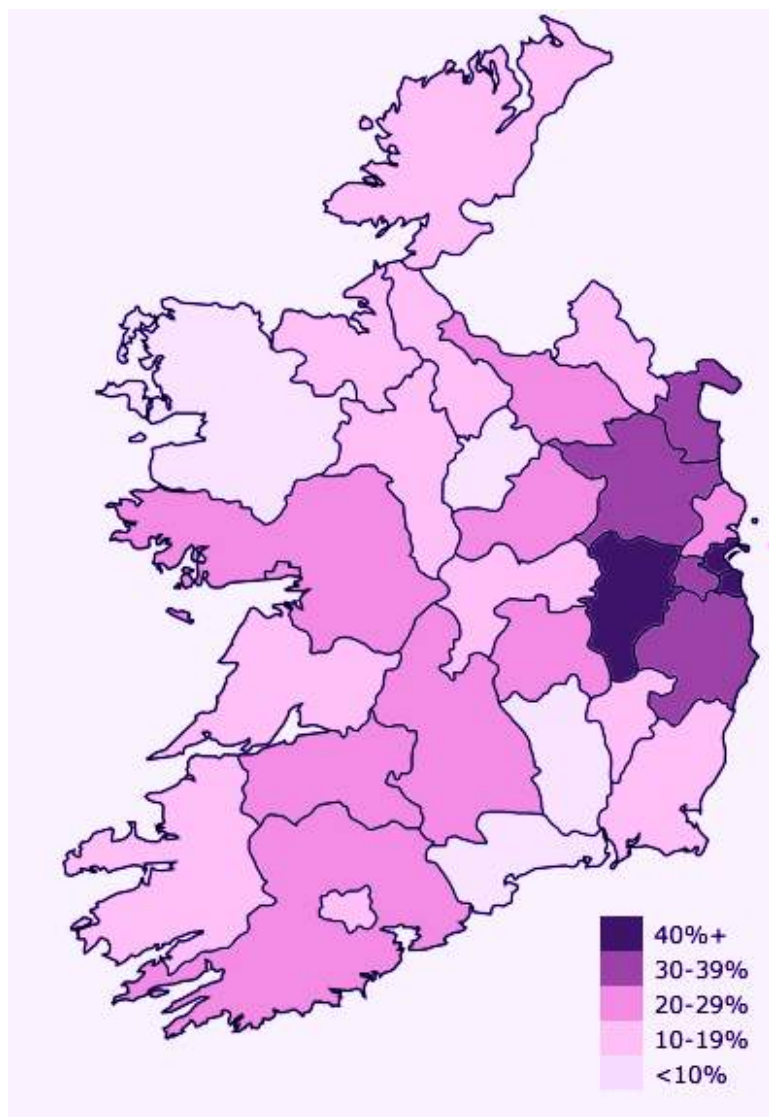
There is considerable urban and rural disparity in women's representation, with many rural Councils having less than five women councillors.

Women from minority backgrounds are even more underrepresented in local government: women in ethnic minority communities (incl. Traveller and Roma women); women with disabilities; women on low incomes; women parenting alone and women in the LGBTQI+ community.

Recommendations from the Citizens' Assembly on Gender Equality call for urgent and transformative actions to diversify political institutions, change the wider culture of politics and provide family-friendly and inclusive policies.

The gender imbalance in local government has significant implications for candidate selection processes for general elections as local government is a key pipeline for national office.

Research has made the link between low levels of female representation in decision-making and poor outcomes for women's interests in policy-making.
(Mackay 2014, Fawcett 2017)



Council	% of Seats held by Women after the 2019 Local Elections
Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown	48
Dublin	41
Kildare	40
Wicklow	34
Cavan	33
South Dublin	33
Louth	31
Meath	31
Fingal	28
Galway City	28
Cork County	27
Laois	26
Limerick	20
Westmeath	20
Cork City	19
Galway County	18
Monaghan	18
Tipperary	18
Wexford	18
Leitrim	17
Roscommon	17
Sligo	17
Clare	14
Kilkenny	13
Kerry	12
Carlow	11
Donegal	11
Offaly	11
Mayo	7
Longford	6
Waterford	6

Why is a Women's Caucus Important?

The WoMeN's Regional Caucus was established in response to a 2021 report commissioned by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, and undertaken by the National Women's Council of Ireland ("Women Doing Politics Differently") which examined the development of local and regional caucuses in Ireland. A precedent had been set in 2017 with the establishment of the Irish Women's Parliamentary Caucus which was formed as a cross party forum for women parliamentarians.

Caucuses are important because they provide a unique and powerful platform to highlight the significant gender imbalance in political representation and enable women to work strategically and purposely to challenge this imbalance.

There are many benefits to establishing a caucus – at national, regional or local level, including:

- A women's caucus harnesses the power of women working collectively to advance issues – not only issues that effect women in their day-to-day lives, but also men and society as a whole. Caucuses play an important role in highlighting concerns at local, regional and national level and can provide an effective platform for collective action towards meaningful change.
- Membership of a regional caucus can strengthen the capacity and influence of councillors to advance policy initiatives within their local Councils. Regional caucuses can mitigate against local challenges by providing a larger group to act as a sounding board and achieve consensus.

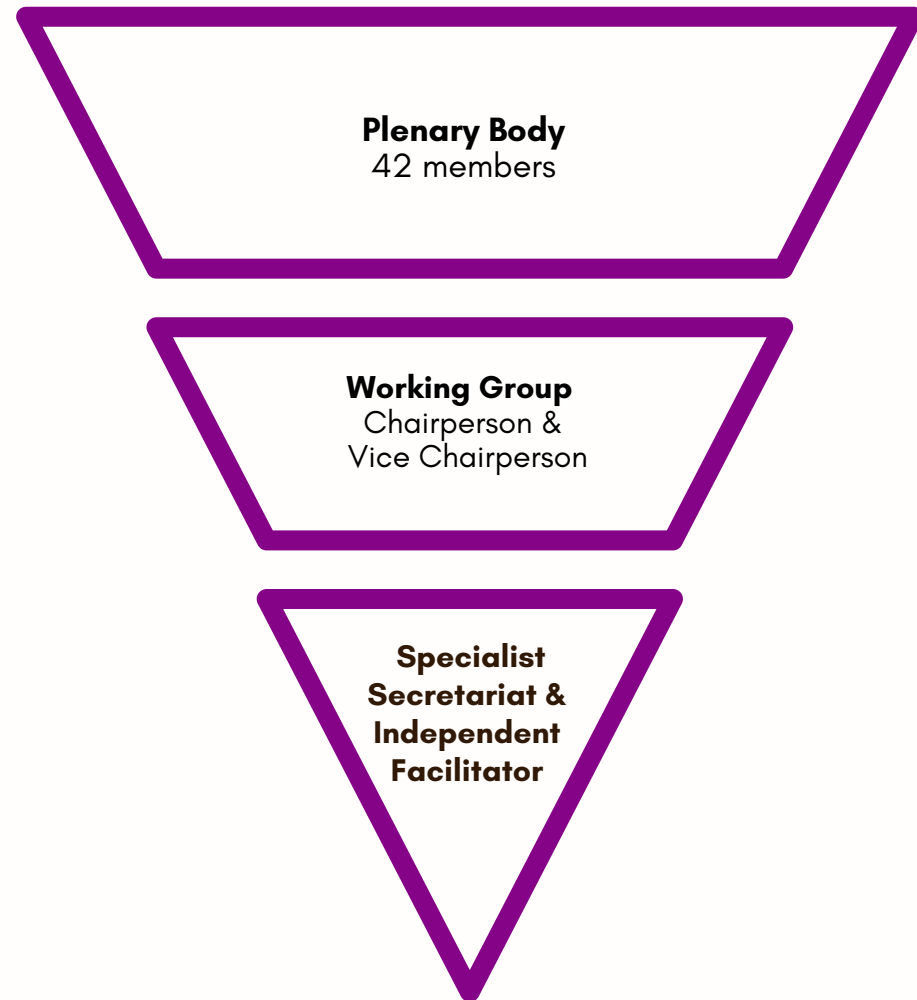
- By working together, caucus members can act as a collective counterweight to balance inequality in political representation, where required.
- Multipartisan working at regional caucus level demonstrates the possibilities and benefits of cross-party collaboration at local level. Projects and initiatives which work at regional level can be mirrored at county level and adapted to suit local circumstances and needs.
- Caucuses can help to build the capacity of women councillors, by offering members bespoke training and mentoring support in response to their identified needs. They also provide opportunity for members to benefit from the wisdom and experience of peers and provide a safe space for support and advice. For example, longer serving councillors can have a depth of institutional knowledge that is useful to newer councillors. Equally, younger councillors can bring a perspective and comprehension of how issues are viewed differently by generations.

Section 2

The Building Blocks

Overview

- There are 42 members on the caucus. Once elected, councillors are automatically deemed a member of the caucus unless they choose to opt out.
- The full membership meet quarterly, in plenary session.
- The caucus has a Chairperson and Vice-Chairperson who are selected at General Meetings.
- A Caucus Working Group, with 10 members, acts as the caucus executive.
- The work of the caucus is supported by an Specialist Secretariat.
- Working Group and Plenary meetings are facilitated by an Independent Facilitator.





**The mission of the
WoMeN's Regional Caucus
is to bring together women
councillors from all parties
and none to:**

- work purposefully, promoting and supporting women's participation in politics, locally and nationally;
- develop and advocate for legislation, policy and other initiatives that address issues affecting women and society;
- advance the agreed agenda of the caucus within political parties and other spheres of influence.

Values

Equality
Solidarity
Diversity
Inclusion
Flexibility
Democracy

Vision

As part of a more gender equal society, the vision of the WoMeN's Regional Caucus is an Ireland where there is equal representation of women and men on City and County Councils and in the Oireachtas.

Trialling New Ways of Working

"The overall aim was to ensure that the business of the caucus fitted with the day-to-day council, career and family commitments of caucus members."

From the outset the caucus trialled new ways of working. Members agreed that they did not wish to adopt the formal and informal norms of conducting council business unless they specifically worked for women in terms of efficiency and flexibility. As a result, the Caucus focused on building consensus approaches by facilitating inclusive meetings and decision-making processes.

Inclusion, Equality, Diversity, Efficiency

The election of the Chairperson and Vice-Chairperson was conducted via an online poll which was held open for 24 hours to ensure all members had equal opportunity to participate in the vote.

Where significant issues are being decided upon, recap meetings are held in the evening to facilitate women who could not attend during the day due to caring, work or other personal commitments.

When deciding on meeting dates and times, a Doodle Poll is used to facilitate members to indicate their availability. In this way, a date can be found that suits as many members as possible.

Structures and Roles

Plenary

- The plenary is the democratic core of the caucus and is its ultimate decision-making body. It meets 3 – 4 times per year. Where possible, in order to facilitate attendance, members are offered the opportunity to attend plenary meetings in person or online (i.e. hybrid meetings). Where helpful, recap meetings are also held to facilitate members who could not attend on the day.
- Meeting dates and times are arranged by Doodle Poll to ensure that meetings are held at times that suit the circumstances of as many members as possible. A draft agenda is produced by the Chairperson, with support from the Secretariat. Members are invited to contribute agenda items in advance of meetings.
- Most plenary decisions are arrived at by consensus. Where consensus is not achieved, decisions are made through simple majority voting. Where significant decisions are being made, an online polling platform is used to facilitate as many members as possible to vote. This has been a key factor in enabling the caucus to function as a transparent and equal structure, with limited hierarchy and equality of participation.

Officers

The Caucus Chairperson and Vice-Chairperson are selected by online poll at General Meetings which take place every two and a half years. The Chairperson also acts as the caucus spokesperson. The Independent Facilitator works closely with the Chairperson and Vice-Chairperson to ensure inclusive and effective meetings and processes.

Working Group

The Caucus Working Group comprises ten members. In its establishment, every effort was made to ensure that the Working Group reflected the geographic and political diversity of the plenary body. It meets 6 – 8 times per year and plays a key role in driving and shaping caucus activities.

The role of the Working Group is to work closely with the Specialist Secretariat to set meeting agendas, produce and drive the annual programme of work, represent the caucus on agreed issues and respond to matters as they arise.

While the Secretariat does most of the behind-the-scenes work to ensure that the caucus functions effectively, the Working Group – with its demographic mandate – acts as the beating heart of the caucus, providing its compass, energy and focus. It achieves a delicate balance of driving the programme of work while ensuring that the plenary retains its central position as the caucus' decision-making forum. The Specialist Secretariat and Independent Facilitator help to maintain the balance and avoid a hierarchy by ensuring transparent decision-making processes and by keeping the plenary up-to-date on Working Group meetings and activities.

Inclusive Decision Making

This has been a key factor in enabling the caucus to function as a transparent and equal structure, with limited hierarchy and equality of participation.

Case Study

Transparent and Informed Decision-Making

Transparent and fair decision-making, based on equality, care and respect, is a key component of a successful caucus. When devising its programme of work, the caucus strived for consensus in selecting priority themes and actions. For example, on the one hand, there was unanimous support for including a theme relating to supporting more women to run in the local elections. Conversely, when deciding whether to include an action relating to gender quotas in local elections, there was strong, but not unanimous support. Therefore, the Specialist Secretariat and Independent Facilitator put in place a robust process to ensure that caucus members could make a transparent and well-informed decision, through the following steps:

- The National Women's Council was invited to provide an online briefing to caucus members in June 2022. The meeting was recorded and made available to those members unable to attend on the day.
- Thereafter, an online poll was held to determine how the caucus would proceed. 81% of members agreed that the caucus should support gender quotas for 2024.

Even where there was a strong majority in favour of proceeding in support of gender quotas, the caucus as a collective acknowledged and respected the diversity of opinion within its membership and ensured that this was recognised before proceeding and also when making public comment.

Specialist Secretariat

The Specialist Secretariat is the backbone of the caucus, delivering a wide range of essential functions.

- Supporting the effectiveness of caucus structures (e.g. drafting the Caucus Constitution, convening meetings, minute-taking, drafting the caucus programme of work)
- Liaising with the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, the Women's Parliamentary Caucus and other external bodies
- Coordinating the implementation of activities and projects set out in the caucus programme of work
- Liaising with the Caucus Independent Facilitator to support effective, inclusive and interactive structures, processes and meetings
- Securing and administering funding for the implementation of caucus activities, in line with Local Government audit requirements
- Providing communications and PR support, including social media, press releases and interviews
- Providing knowledge and expertise on gender politics and gender equality
- Providing general support, information and advice to the caucus
- Coordinating and provide training for caucus members
- Maintaining the caucus' momentum and progress

It is clear that an expert and dedicated secretariat is vital. The secretariat function should be a properly constituted role and adequately resourced. This will help to ensure the success of caucuses as vibrant, effective and enduring political institutions in the landscape of local government in Ireland.

Independent Facilitator

The role of an Independent Facilitator is essential to guiding and supporting members to meet their shared goals and to deliver on the caucus programme of work. A skilled facilitator supports the caucus by:

- Working with the Chairperson, Vice-Chairperson and Secretariat to establish momentum and drive progress
- Advising on the creation of structured, transparent caucus processes which facilitate participation and clarity
- Facilitating inclusive, interactive meetings, ensuring that diverse opinions are heard
- Setting ground rules and guiding proceedings
- Advising on inclusive approaches to agenda-setting, decision-making and priority setting
- Creating and maintaining an open environment for sharing ideas
- Acknowledging differences while also building bridges to consensus
- Facilitating the Working Group and Secretariat to give input and advice without being seen to imposing their views
- Supporting members to clearly articulate and record decisions and actions points
- Providing space for members to reflect on and improve caucus proceedings

"I think having a facilitator who can help the councillors sort through their ideas and form them into a comprehensive plan is essential. Without one, either the Chairperson, Working Group or the Secretariat could be seen as imposing their agenda on proceedings, which in turn could undermine the caucus."

The Importance of Adequate Funding



In recent years, the Irish Government has made significant inroads to promoting and enabling gender equality in politics. At policy level, the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth has committed under the National Strategy for Women and Girls 2017- 2025 to work for greater women's representation in local and national politics. At resource level, the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage has provided funding streams which promote the participation of women in local government.

Funding at local and national level for caucuses is essential to ensure that they function effectively and deliver impactful projects and initiatives. Ringfenced funding is necessary to cover the day-to-day costs involved, including appointing a specialist secretariat and independent facilitator, meeting project expenditure, and having a budget for training and meetings costs.

Caucus resources are secured from a number of sources:

- The Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage provides grant funding to enable the caucus to secure the services of an Independent Facilitator.
- The majority of the 13 local authorities make financial contributions towards caucus projects and activities.
- AILG and SHE provide significant contribution-in-kind towards the caucus' administrative and coordinating costs. Both organisations make available a skilled and experienced staff member from their own resources to sit on the Specialist Secretariat.

Case Study

The Role of the Specialist Secretariat

One of the ways a well-resourced Specialist Secretariat can create and maintain momentum is by co-ordinating caucus activities and communications. An example of its key role was demonstrated through the International Women's Day project in March 2023 where the Secretariat played a central role behind the scenes to help make this a success.

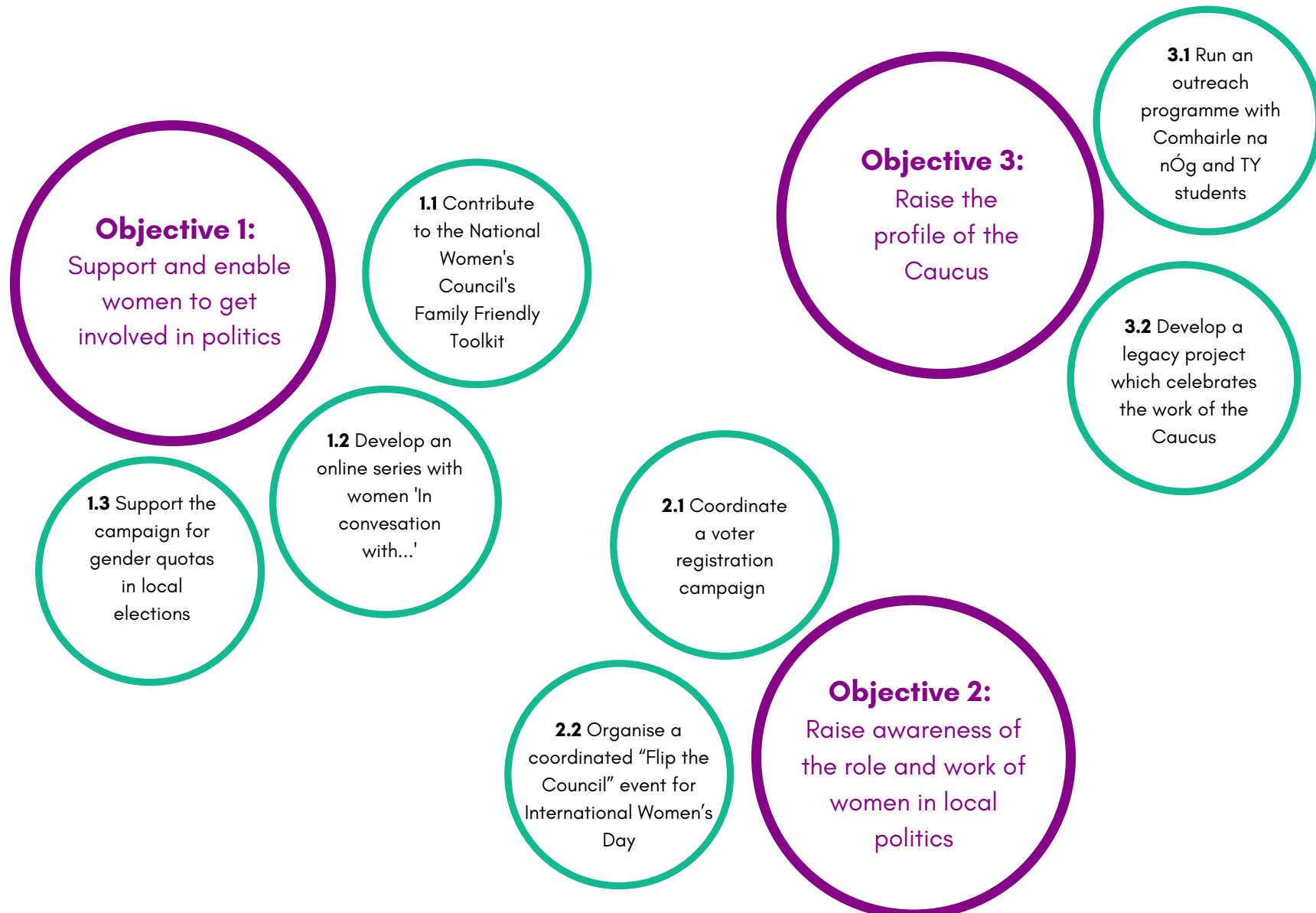
- The Secretariat made initial contact with local authority officials across the region on behalf of caucus members to brief them on the project and to seek support for its coordinated implementation.
- It organized the event's public relations by creating graphics and generic press releases which were issued to caucus members for them to tailor to their own local requirements. It also curated a vibrant social media campaign in the lead up to and after the event.
- It acted as a single point of contact for media enquiries. The availability of a single point of contact to co-ordinate a communications strategy was instrumental in the decision by RTÉ to commit their resources to (a) covering the project, and (b) making it a multi-location piece. This, in turn, provided invaluable coverage for the caucus.
- It worked with the Independent Facilitator to support local discussions between caucus members, other elected members, and local authority officials to ensure the smooth operation of the event.

Section 3

Programme of Work



Programme of Work 2022-2024





Regional WoMeN's Caucus holds inaugural meeting and plan to change gender composition of councils



Members of WoMeN's (Western Midlands and Northern) Regional Caucus pictured with members of the Irish Women's Parliamentary Caucus in Leinster House to discuss common areas in their programme of works



Laois



Galway County

We Flipping Did It!



WoMeN's Regional Caucus inverts gender balance in council chambers across the region to mark #IWD2023



International Women's Day



AILG



SHE
See Her Elected



Roscommon



Sligo



Longford



Monaghan



Leitrim



Westmeath



Donegal



Cavan



Campaign calls for gender balance in politics

See Her Elected: Council 'flip' highlights current disparity

Leonie McKiernan
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There are 18 councillors currently sitting on Leitrim's local authority. Just three of these public representatives are women.

This imbalance in gender representation was recently highlighted by a 'flip' exercise where women were brought in to join the three female sitting councillors on a reversed Council where female representatives held the majority instead.

The exercise brought home the challenges that women face in not only securing a seat, but in making the decision to seek election in the first place.

Organiser Assumpta Kelly, who also serves on the Steering Group of See Her Elected as well as working with North West 50:50,

organisations which both aim to increase female representation in politics at all levels, stressed that politics should be a reflection of society and politicians should also reflect the diversity of our communities.

Noting there has never been more than three female councillors sitting on Leitrim County Council at any one time, she said that women have a unique perspective, unique skills and understanding which enrich the political process.

"Society should be reflected in our politicians," she said, pointing out that half our population is female but Irish politics is still dominated by men.

The women who volunteered to fill the seats of the 15 male councillors in the chamber at a special meeting to mark International Women's

day reflected different ages, backgrounds and interests.

They spoke of the need for greater female representation and also acknowledged the barriers to seeing this become a reality.

It's not men's seats that we're seeking to take, they are our seats. There is room for strong men and strong women in the Council.

Leitrim Comhairle na nÓg representative, student Brianna Faughnan, said that the low levels of female representation aren't down to "a lack of drive or want".

"Women are often looked down upon if they don't start a family or choose a career," she said.

"There is also nepotism in politics. This is not necessarily a bad thing but it means that seats are taken and filled and this is usually with sons, not daughters. Son's are put forward more and moulded to be politicians," she observed.

Lola Gonzalez Farrell, who is an advocate for social justice and has decided to run

as an Independent candidate in the Local Elections 2024 according to seeherelected.ie.

She stressed that men and women can "learn from each other" within the political landscape.

"We all need to work together, we are stronger together and we all need strong local government," she said.

Women are often looked down upon if they don't start a family or choose a career

Bernie Linnane who has signaled her intention to seek selection to contest next local election on behalf of the Labour party in the Manorhamilton MD area, said that greater representation for women in politics is vital.

"Women have been involved in one way or another in politics since the foundation of the State," she pointed out.

She spoke of her own great grandmother's activism in 1918 and said that "it's not men's seats that we're seeking to take, they are our seats. There is room for strong men and strong women in the Council."



Pictured at a special meeting convened in the Chamber of Leitrim County Council earlier this month to highlight the need for greater gender equality in political representation are back row (l-r) Cllr Paddy Farrell, Assumpta Kelly, Nicola Burke, Osa Peter-Osibiyi, Mary Moran, Cllr Sean McGowan, Bernie Linnane, Nandini Singh, Mary McManus, Lola Gonzalez, Brianna Faughnan, Majella McGovern, Tricia Maye and Cllr Enda Stenson. Front row (l-r) Pat Tearall, Cllr Finola Armstrong McGuire, Cathaoirleach Cllr Ita Reynolds-Flynn, Lar Power, chief executive, Leitrim County Council and Cllr Mary Bohan. PICTURE: WILLIS DONNELLAN

Women at heart of decision-making

The Cathaoirleach's chain of Roscommon County Council was passed from Cllr Tom Crosby to Cllr Emer Kelly, in what was a symbolically important gesture to mark International Women's Day last week.

As a further unique step to mark the day, the representation on Roscommon County Council Chamber in Aras an Chontae was 'reversed' from its current complement of 14 men and four women to highlight the inequalities of female representation on local authorities, nationwide.

There was a large attendance of women in the chamber for this special occasion, which reflected the various issues and concerns of Roscommon women. The attendance also reflected the cultural and demographic diversity of women who contribute to society locally.

Opening proceedings, Cllr Kelly thanked her colleagues on Roscommon County Council for enabling the reversal of representation on the day. She said it was the first time for such an event which was part of a wider series of events, supported by Roscommon Women's Network and the WoMEN's Regional Caucus.

Last week's event was one of 13 such events in thirteen different local authorities. She said a



Cathaoirleach of Roscommon County Council Cllr Tom Crosby handing over office to Cllr Emer Kelly. Pic. Gerard O'Loughlin

range of guest speakers had been mobilised to talk about the experiences of women in respect of political representation, young women's experiences, violence against women and surrogacy.

Cllr Kelly explained that the initiative in the chamber was part of a "ground-up approach" being taken by women. She said the Roscommon Women's Group community projects "supported women and families." Cllr Kelly noted that nationally, only 25% of councillors were women with only 22% of members being women in Roscommon, which she noted, was at odds with the 50:50 gender split in

the wider population.

The Independent Councillor welcomed the forthcoming referendum on gender equality due to take place in November and commended the support of Roscommon County Council in facilitating efforts to improve diversity and gender equality in politics.

Cllr Kelly's comments were echoed by her fellow members on Roscommon County Council. Cllr Orla Leyden said the event "was a day to challenge the status quo." She said that since the formation of the local authority in 1899, there had only been three female Cathaoirligh namely herself and the late Cllr's Eithne Quin



A special International Women's Day event was held in the chamber of Roscommon County Council last week.

Pic. Gerard O'Loughlin

and Kitty Duignan.

She said the RWN manifesto group, since its inception, had developed significantly with Roscommon County Council securing €5,000 to finance a Support Worker, thanking Patricia Bohan and Director of Services Caitlin Conneely.

Cllr Valerie Byrne said it was refreshing to see the representation of the council 'reversed' on the

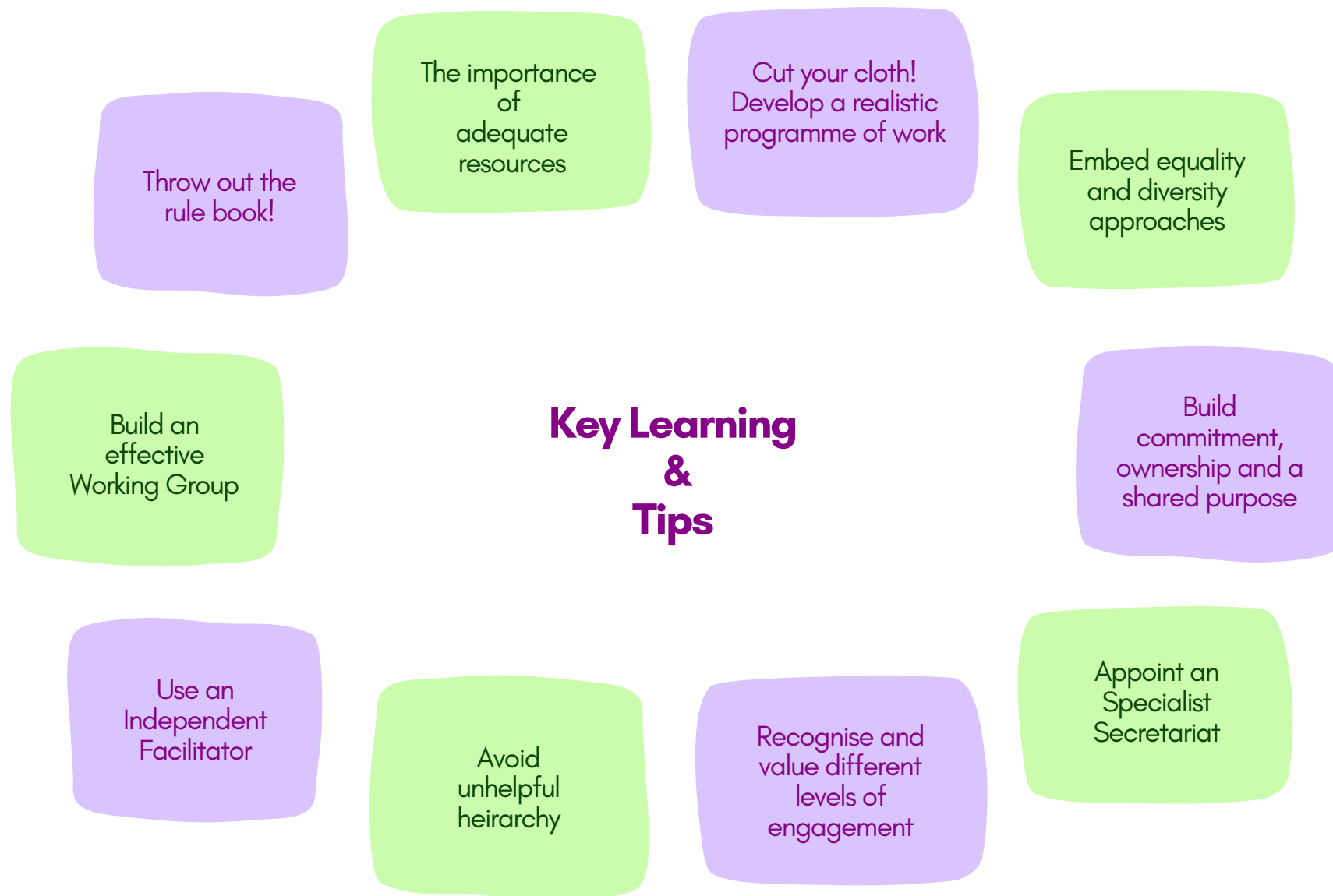
day, remarking "women are equal to men just as men are equal to women", adding: "today is a celebration of all that is happening for women but we still have a long way to go." Cllr Kathleen Shanagher said a lot of those present had to make considerable plans to attend the event and welcomed Senator Aisling Dolan to the chamber, remarking

"when women are involved in their community, we can make a difference." Cllr Shanagher acknowledged the presence of Nora Fahy and Rita Kearney of Roscommon Women's Network and Mairead O'Shea of the See Her Elected (SHE) initiative, adding: "it would be great to see more women involved (in public life)." The four women councillors were

accompanied by a number of their male colleagues, a number of whom addressed the event, including Cathaoirleach Cllr Tom Crosby and Councillors John Cummins, Tony Ward, and John Naughten. Others present included Cllrs Liam Callaghan, Laurence Fallon, Paschal Fitzmaurice, Joe Murphy and Tony Waldron.

Section 4

Lessons Learned



Key Learning and Tips

Throw out the rule book!

Throw out the rule book! Well, not quite, but don't be afraid to figure out what works in your area and to give things a try. Mistakes might be made along the way, but the learning will help your caucus to grow and thrive over time.

Avoid unhelpful hierarchy

Keep the structures as flat as possible. Avoid a hierarchy; remember, all caucus members have been elected / co-opted on their own merits, and so each voice is equal and valid. While a certain amount of hierarchy is necessary to facilitate the effective running of the caucus (such as nominating a Chairperson and Vice-Chairperson), be careful not to fall into the traditional approaches of seniority or party politics. Ensure processes facilitate equal and transparent decision-making.

Build commitment and ownership

Build commitment, ownership and shared purpose: A successful caucus is driven by its membership, not by the Working Group, officers, Specialist Secretariat or Independent Facilitator. A caucus will accomplish more when members cooperate with each other, speak as one and have a shared sense of purpose. "The whole is greater than the sum of its parts" and so, it is essential that members work together to drive the caucus forward and participate actively in activities and meetings.

Secure adequate resources

The importance of adequate resources. Funding from the Dept. of Local Government together with financial contributions from local authorities has enabled the WoMeN's Regional Caucus to develop an ambitious programme of work and to deliver important initiatives. However, it has been dependent on in-kind and pro-bono contributions, particularly in relation to coordination, administration and facilitation. This is not sustainable in the long-term and, so, post 2024, it will be important that adequate funding is made available, based on the evidenced funding model being developed by the caucus.

Cut your cloth!

Cut your cloth! The ability of a caucus to deliver on its programme of work will largely depend on the resources available to it. Some caucus activities can be funded from local or national sources, whereas others can be delivered on a no-cost/low-cost basis. But remember, even no-cost / low-cost initiatives take time and effort on behalf of members – all of whom have busy and full lives. Don't take on too much and put in place a realistic programme of work. It's better to under-promise and over deliver, rather than the other way around!

Embed equality and diversity approaches

Keep equality and diversity at the heart of the caucus. It is important that all members are facilitated to be meaningfully involved in caucus structures, processes and activities. This means appreciating the caucus' inherent diversity through age, background, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation and so on. Take time to identify the diversity of membership and to embed approaches which harnesses this. A commitment to equality and diversity must go beyond words on a page and involve actions and approaches that result in equality of outcome.

Recognise and value different levels of engagement

Recognise and appreciate different levels of engagement: Make best use of your members' time and skills by facilitating different ways to be involved and by respecting all levels of engagement. Members will participate in different ways; some will be on the Working Group, others will help with numerous projects, and others again will roll up their sleeves for practical initiatives. Bear in mind that lack of participation does not necessarily mean lack of interest; some councillors have inflexible work hours or other commitments that limit their ability to engage.

Build an effective Working Group

Take time to build an effective Working Group: The Working Group works on behalf of caucus members to oversee the programme of work. It engages closely with the Specialist Secretariat and Independent Facilitator to ensure the smooth functioning of the caucus. It is important that there is a geographic and political balance in the Working Group and that members understand the need to commit the necessary time to it.

Use an Independent Facilitator

Use an Independent Facilitator to support equality and participation. An Independent Facilitator should be independent of, and external to, the caucus. A successful caucus is built on cooperation between members who have a shared vision and can work strategically towards agreed goals. A skilled facilitator will help to build this vision and embed strategic approach. S/he will help to ensure that processes are robust, meetings are effective, all voices are heard, decisions are transparent and activities are deliverable.

Appoint an Specialist Secretariat

Appoint a Specialist Secretariat to support the work of the caucus. A Specialist Secretariat enables the smooth running of a caucus and helps to ensure that momentum is maintained. **Its role is essential to the success of a caucus;** it provides subject matter expertise, advice and guidance, coordinating functions and administrative support. The Specialist Secretariat should have knowledge and expertise relating to gender politics, gender equality and local government.

Section 5

Members Survey

In late 2022, members were asked to complete a survey on their experiences of the caucus. Members were first asked to rank the role of the caucus in order of importance, with the following results:

- 1** Advocating for measures to enhance women's representation in local politics e.g. work-life balance measures
- 2** Supporting more women to enter and remain in politics
- 3** Progressing policy goals for women's equality
- 4** Facilitating networking, peer support and information sharing between councillors

Members were asked how membership of the WoMeN's Regional Caucus has benefited them, with the following responses:

It provides me with opportunities to network with, and get support from, other women councillors in the region

It enables me to be actively involved in advancing issues of shared interest with other women councillors (through the Caucus' Programme of Work)

It enhances my understanding of equality and diversity in politics and in wider society

It facilitates me to be more involved in promoting and supporting the role of women in politics

It strengthens my capacity and confidence to advance gender issues in my role as a councillor

It enhances my local profile

Regional caucuses seem to have the advantage of being able to transcend differences (political or personal) that might occur in a single local authority setting.

Members were asked what measures have helped them to engage more effectively in caucus meetings and activities, with the following responses:

Holding evening recap meetings for councillors unable to attend important caucus meetings during the day (due to work, childcare or other commitments)

Making recordings of caucus information sessions available online for councillors who could not attend at the scheduled time

Holding most meetings online to facilitate members' attendance

Appointing a Secretariat with expertise in local government, gender politics and gender equality

Using online polls to enable members to vote in caucus decision-making processes

Using an external facilitator to ensure that caucus meetings are effective and inclusive

Using online polls to identify meeting dates and times that suit the majority of councillors

Members were asked to rate their overall experience of being a member of the WoMeN's Regional Caucus, with 1 being "Very Poor" and 10 being "Excellent".



Conclusion

In this report, I capture experiences and learning from the first 18 months of the WoMeN's Regional Caucus. Through trial and error, commitment and hard work, the caucus is continuing to develop as a robust forum with an ambitious programme of work and early successes. The report displays the strategic and considered approaches that were embedded from the outset to position the caucus as an inclusive, participative and democratic political institution in Ireland.

In a country where women in local government inherit established institutional ways of conducting politics created predominately by and for men, the WoMeN's Regional Caucus stands out as a ground-breaking political institution created by women and for women.



