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PSI POLICY BRIEF: LOCAL PUBLIC SERVICES AND TRADE UNIONS THROUGH THE COVID PANDEMIC

THE CASE OF THE COMMUNITY CALL (IRELAND)

Local council workers voluntarily delivering community welfare services

ABSTRACT

With the imposition of social distancing and stay-at-home rules, the Covid-19 outbreak has posed major challenges to the welfare and well-being of the most vulnerable and isolated within local communities. The Community Call national initiative of Ireland precisely **sought to break the isolation of single households and to support the most vulnerable throughout the public health emergency**. Community Call showcases a **nation-wide initiative channeled via local government services** and the voluntary sector to deliver a community-driven, solidarity-based response to the social hardship caused by the pandemic. Through this initiative - with the help of local government staff, trade unions and the community - Irish local councils were able to provide home social welfare services at no additional cost for the public purse. The initiative strengthened community bonds and has enhanced social cohesion, resilience and preparedness in case of future emergencies.

Photo credits: FÓRSA

INTRODUCTION

PUBLIC WELFARE CARE SERVICES THROUGH THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Covid-19 has affected virtually everyone across the globe. As of March 2022, it recorded over 462 million confirmed cases worldwide with more than five million deaths. Victims concentrate among the vulnerable and marginalized groups of our societies, including senior and disabled residents, as well as those already isolated or going through socio-economic hardship. Privatization, austerity policies, and the chronic underfunding and understaffing of public social care services across the world meant that such services have been under duress since the onset of the pandemic, jeopardizing equitable access to vital services for residents and patients while leaving workers exposed to major risks, exhausted and in often appalling working conditions.

Many elderly residents of privatized long-term care homes died of Covid-19, while private care operators made profits practicing tax avoidance, exploiting workers, and rationing food and sanitary items. Meanwhile, Covid-driven health protocols and lockdowns forced local public services and non-profit organizations delivering social welfare services to communities to pause, adapt and – when possible - redeploy their activities to ensure service continuation and reach the most fragile.

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1.

COMMUNITY CALL: AN EMERGENCY COMMUNITY WELFARE SUPPORT SCHEME ROOTED IN SOLIDARITY

Against the backdrop of the Covid outbreak, in April 2020 the Irish government launched a nationwide volunteering initiative called "Community Call" to coordinate local government services - as well as the community and voluntary sectors - to support the most vulnerable residents in their daily needs. A form of collective welfare community care forums provided on a voluntary basis, Community Call aims to bring services directly to vulnerable residents' homes while they are in lockdown. The initial focus was on the elderly and the most vulnerable, but the service expanded later to the broader population to ensure "everyone is looked after." Indeed, as the country went into a nation-wide lockdown, many residents and public service users were left isolated and in vulnerable situations, such as the elderly, the disabled, single households and pensioners.

Irish local councils established their own helplines residents could call or email to ask what they needed and run enquiries.

Those requests would then be channelled down by the local authority to the relevant local services staff and volunteers, including those working remotely from home, and a volunteer would be dispatched to carry out the task. "*The system worked effectively, and someone would almost instantaneously respond to the call. There would not be a backlog of requests*" says Brendan O'Brien, SIPTU Sector Organiser Local Authorities Sector.

Delivered services included, among others:

- Delivering fuel, medication, food and ready meals
- Taking pensioners to the doctor, the bank and/or the post office
- Ensuring social contacts by sending someone to check on people talk to and spend some time with
- Advice and support to at-risk members of the community
- Keeping an eye on the wellbeing and health of local people.

The Community Call
Advice & contact information for your county

Mobilising resources, connecting communities

Community Call also helps identify those going through economic hardship. Volunteers help them running errands and groceries, and they can therefore quickly identify those struggling for purchasing basic staples. In these cases, local council workers are a real asset as they can direct residents to the appropriate social and income support services acting as a dispatch hub, facilitating the connection between residents in need and the relevant territorial services.

The scheme has since been operational in all Irish local authorities across the 31 counties. It has involved over 30,000 local and regional government (LRG) staff from a wide variety of services including local administration, first medical responders and ambulance services, road and public space maintenance, school and traffic wardens etc. To date, the Community Call has handled about over 70,000 calls, 13,000 home service deliveries, 24,000 check-in calls to see how people were doing during the pandemic. Although access to vaccines and vaccination rates

have markedly improved the situation and calls to the programme have significantly declined since, Community Call is still in place and operational, and can be rapidly triggered again in case of need.

As of December 2021, statistics on the inquiries received by local councils part of the Community Call programme showed the following breakdown:

- Calls Received - 65,419
- Forum Meetings – 728
- Collection and Delivery Calls - 13,177
- Social Isolation Calls - 11,237
- Meals Service Calls - 4,389
- Other Health Service Calls - 4,491
- Follow-up Calls - 24,702
- Other Requests Calls - 30,426

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LOCAL COUNCIL WORKERS AND TRADE UNIONS DID THEIR SHARE

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Local government workers were the largest constituents of the volunteer pool and the section that provided the largest share of community support services. Most workers are members of the FÓRSA and of the Service Industrial Professional and Technical Union (SIPTU) trade unions. Many of the services provided by LRG workers were designed in Ireland as essential early on at the onset of the Covid pandemic.

Prior to the launch of Community Call, the local councils' human resource department approached the trade unions. "*There wasn't any formal sit down with between the union and local authority management*" recalls Dessie Robinson, FÓRSA National Secretary for the Local Government Division. "*Yet, trade unions were willing to be part of as long as the initiative served the community*". The unions were supportive and worked very closely to ensure that the programme remained based on a voluntary commitment by local government workers, with no obligation and no negative consequences in case they declined. Unions also ensured workers would be able to slip back into their jobs smoothly. At a national level, the Irish government and the Irish
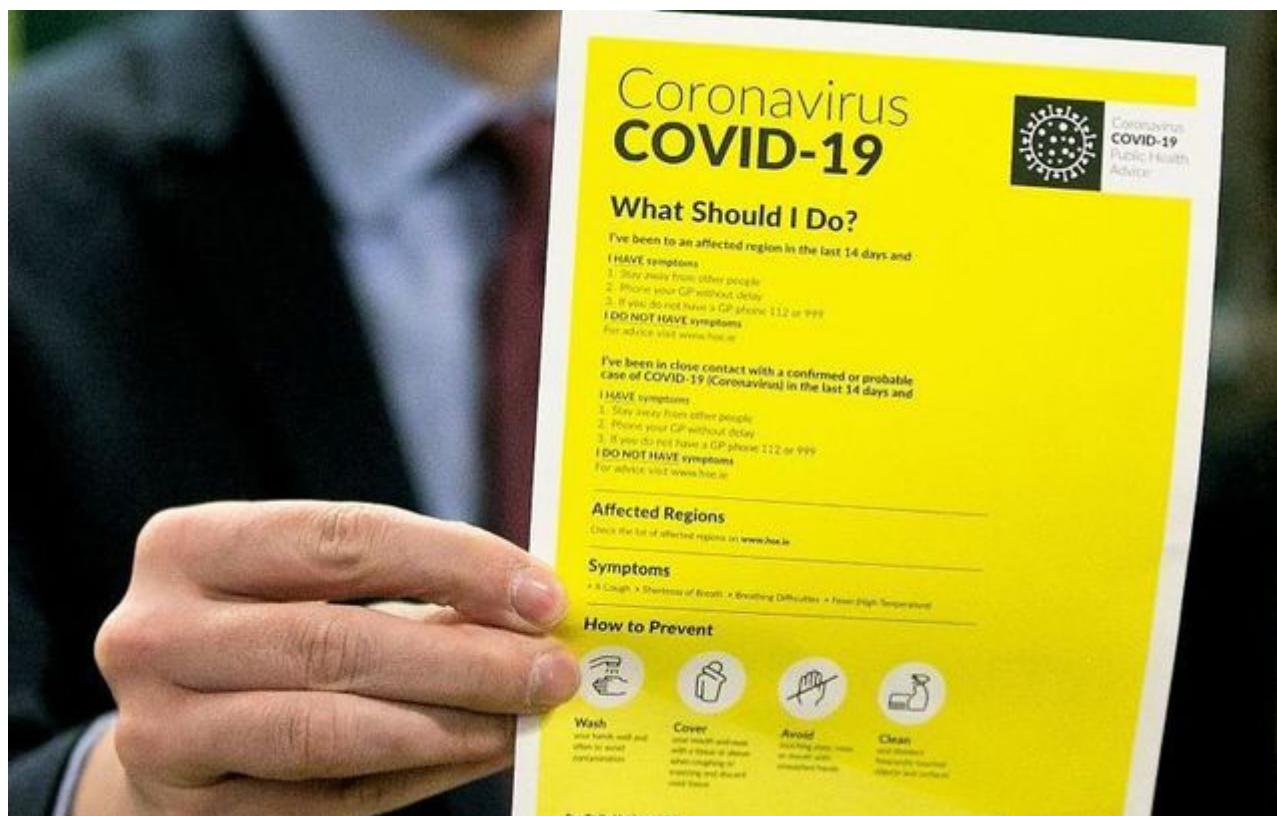
Photo credits: FÓRSA

Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) had agreed that this would be a temporary measure and that it would be re-absorbed as the emergency phased out. Unions also had to sort together with management what would happen around bank holidays, and oversee that there would be no staff shortages in essential services because of the programme.

Irish local council workers delivered this programme going above and beyond their jobs and duties. Taking part in the Community Call meant LRG staff worked seven days a week as opposed to Mondays to Fridays. They fixed shifts to cover the full-time service as they could volunteer during working hours, after working hours, or be redeployed with no change in pay and condition. They accepted to do this to serve the community and in the public interest. "*Local council staff showed so willing to take part in this considering they had no obligation to do it. Some continued to do it even when the peak of the emergency eased or once they retired*" *says* Dessie Robinson. "*There was no single complaint from any members over the two years the scheme has operated*" adds Brendan O'Brien.

The trade unions also played a key role in the implementation of national occupational safety and health (OSH) Covid protocols developed by the Health Service Executive (HSE) in local councils covering workers, volunteers and users alike. They established a Covid lead union representative in local council workplaces to act as a liaison between LRG staff and the management over Covid-related issues, which ensured workers were consulted and had a say on setting altered start and finish time and break changes to reduce contacts; remote work; crowding levels reductions in vehicles to comply with social distancing rules; and on the setup of drivers/passengers separations to minimise contagion risks. FÓRSA and SIPTU also negotiated special Covid sick leave and economic support scheme in case of income hardship. Many of these measures are still in place. For all Community Call volunteers, a standardised guideline was enforced not only for their own safety and health, but also to protect service users.

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3.

GOOD COLLABORATION BETWEEN THE COUNCIL WORKERS AND THE NON-PROFIT SECTOR IN IRELAND GOES BACK A LONG WAY

Even before the Covid pandemic, there has been a strong long-standing tradition of community-based solidarity within the local government sector in Ireland. Therefore, the cooperation between the local council staff volunteers and non-profit and voluntary organisations is very good, while the coordination of volunteer actions rests on the local councils. Non-profit organisations that took active role in Community Call included sports club, notably the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA), which virtually has a branch in every single Irish village, and is a *de facto* a cultural organisation integral to Irish social fabric.

Also, an ethos of the public service willingness to serve, as well as a tradition of mutual help in communities exist in Ireland, which have made the difference, too. Local council staff would look after vulnerable community members and carry out voluntary work to help them even during normal times. "*Local council workers live in their communities, and those they look after would be their family members, their friends and their neighbours*", explains Brandan O'Brien. The compassion and empathy of public service workers

for their communities represents the very heart of the public service ethos: serving and listening to residents and users greatly contributes to building community-based solidarity and resilience ahead of future emergencies.

Besides, in Ireland, 25 years ago, so-called "Social Partnership Committees" were established at a local council level. They would coordinate the provision of a wide variety of welfare services (e.g. drug rehabilitation, meal deliveries for the elderly, community public works such as cutting the grass of the local football court, etc.). Traditionally funded by central government, the funding of these Committees has more recently been devolved to cash-strapped local councils. "*In some respect, Social Partnership Committees stemmed not only from a form of 'underdeveloped social state', but also from a strong sense of community that is quite unique to Ireland when you compare it to other industrialised western countries*" explains Adrian Kane, SIPTU Divisional Organiser for the Public Administration & Community Division.

4.

PUBLIC SERVICE ETHOS IS PRICELESS: BUT LOCAL COUNCILS NEED ADEQUATE STAFFING AND RESOURCES, NOT OUTSOURCING AND PRIVATISATION

For Dessie Robinson *"Community Call has strengthened the human connection across communities and made them more resilient in the case of future crises. Local government workers have been pivotal to this solidarity-building process that will have long-lasting effects "*. The mobilisation of local public service staff made it possible to implement a national level emergency support programme such as Community Call at a neutral cost basis for the public sector. *"The private sector would have not been able to deliver a programme such as the Community Call, as the cost of providing the same level of support through private operators would have been astronomical"* in terms of intervention and required support, according to Brendan O'Brien.

However, Covid and the Community Call also highlighted the shortage of local government resources, as vital community welfare care services at times of crisis could only be delivered thanks to the goodwill of local council workers and volunteers, not as an established, waged service all year round, as it is the case in some countries (e.g. Belgium's Welfare Care Centres). In addition, Ireland local

government funding and autonomy has been historically bottom of the queue among its EU peers, which is why the Irish unions have been leading the "More Power to You" campaign since 2018, calling on enhanced local authority powers, democracy and resources. The experience of Community Call points to the urgent need to (re)build the financial and staff capacity of Irish local government to deliver community services, and even more so as – according to SIPTU – especially after COVID, Irish councils they are running average deficits of about 18%.

Also, the fact that it was the local council receiving calls – instead of private call centres - enabled the rapid dispatch of local council workers and volunteers to support residents, and to connect them to the relevant local public services, depending on their specific needs. Such swift, holistic action and professional counsel at zero cost for the public purse would have just been wishful thinking had the Community Call and its related services been externalised. *"This system would have just been unworkable in the private sector, because everything would have had to be tendered*

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whereas the local authority staff had that build-in flexibility that made all the difference" concludes Brandan O'Brien.

But now a systemic trend is emerging that is pushing local councils to move away from traditional social, non-profit service delivery via several organisations to for-profit, single large private multinationals bidding for local service contracts through competitive tendering that local councils have to embrace because of EU procurement legislation. "*There is a huge community sector in Ireland that had never been tendered. However, [SIPTU has recently had some strikes in the sector](#) as private local government service delivery multinationals such as Maximus have settled [seeking to take over local social services](#) turning them into for-profit operations"* warns Adrian Kane.

Finally, during Covid times Irish local council workers took their country's tradition of community solidarity and dedication to volunteer to the next level, going the extra mile and stepping in for the public good for free. The programme positively changed the perception of local government staff and work among residents and public service users, enhanced their appreciation, and gave them credit for their commitment to the community and the public good. "*The local authority services worked so well that it was probably the first time that I can recall there was a such a greater public appreciation for the local authorities"* confesses Brandan O'Brien. Regardless, a due collective bargaining credit and acknowledgement for these workers is still to be redeemed.

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