

Conference Report

National Public
Participation
Networks
Conference

10th and 11th October 2019

Woodfod Dolmen Hotel, Carlow

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Introduction

The National Public Participation Network (PPN) Conference, organised by Carlow PPN, Carlow County Council and the Department of Rural and Community Development (DRCD) took place on the 10th & 11th of October 2019 in the Woodford Dolmen Hotel Carlow.

The PPN is the framework for public engagement and participation and is the main link through which the local authority connects with the community. The primary aim of the PPN is to facilitate and enable the public and the community to interact with local government and other relevant agencies

The annual PPN conferences seek to provide an important and unique opportunity for PPN members, staff, representatives of the Department of Rural and Community Development and local authorities to come together, share information and experiences and learn from each other through workshops, panel discussions and field trips.

DAY 1 - Introductory Speeches

Welcome and Introduction – Molly Aylesbury (Carlow PPN) and Cllr.

John Pender

The conference was opened by the conference chair, Molly Aylesbury representing the Carlow PPN Secretariat. She welcomed all the delegates to Carlow and to the conference and expressed her hope that the conference would be a positive learning experience for all present. Molly introduced John Pender Cathaoirleach of Carlow County Council.

John extended a warm welcome to all present noting that it was an honour for Carlow County Council to co-host the conference in 2019. He spoke of the importance of meaningful democracy and of the importance of people having a say in the decisions that affect their lives. He expressed the hope that the conference would provide enriched and new learning opportunities to all those attending and took the opportunity to thank all those involved in the organisation of the conference.

Bairbre Nic Aongusa – Assistant Secretary Department of Rural and Community Development (Speech presented by Ciara Bates)

On behalf of Bairbre Nic Aongusa, Ciara thanked Carlow PPN and the members of the National PPN Advisory Group and the DRCD for all their work in organising and supporting the Conference. She also thanked Carlow County Council for their invaluable backing of the event.

In her speech Bairbre acknowledged that while organising events of this nature require significant levels of time, effort and resources, they come about primarily in response to a need and a genuine desire by participants to learn from each other, hear experiences and gain the where with-all to improve their PPNs and communities. She commended those who have taken the time to be part of the 2019 national conference and highlighted the achievements of the PPNs as set out in the 2018 annual report, noting that at the end of 2018, PPN membership stood at over 14,800 member organisations. This growth in membership, she said continues unabated with some 16,000 groups now affiliated to PPNs around the country.

Bairbre reiterated the Department of Rural and Community Developments commitment to supporting PPNs in achieving their potential and meeting the challenges and complexities that they face. She thanked

the members of the National Advisory Group (NAG) for their work and for their support, knowledge and experience in the development of PPNs. The NAG she said, provides oversight, monitoring and evaluation of PPNs and has a real voice in the ongoing development of PPNs. Bairbre encouraged delegates to acquaint themselves with members of the NAG present at the conference.

She acknowledged the work of the Resource Workers Network and commended the establishment of the functioning representative body for PPN Secretariats at a national level.

PPNs Bairbre said, 'are about "US", us as in everyone out there in our communities relying on us to do, say and act in the best interests of our communities'.

She concluded by wishing the delegates an informative conference and a very positive experience during the field trips 'What better way to learn and get good ideas to bring back to your own PPN, than to experience the success of others'.

Kathleen Holohan – Chief Executive Carlow County Council

Kathleen welcomed the Cathaoirleach of Carlow County Council, elected members and delegates, to County Carlow. She spoke of the importance of active citizenship involving as it does people, communities and voluntary organisations having a key role in decision making processes of direct relevance to them and she noted the vital role that local authorities have to play in ensuring that this participation happens effectively.

She described Carlow County Council's relationship with Carlow PPN as a positive one and expressed Carlow County Council's appreciation for the role and work of the PPN in enhancing the ability of the council to reach out to communities, to hear their issues and to provide a platform for meaningful participation and engagement with organisations and service providers.

Kathleen highlighted the hard work being done by PPNs on producing Wellbeing Statements for their counties and for all the municipal areas to find out what is required to ensure the wellbeing of people and communities, now and for future generations. This work, she noted will impact on how local authorities plan and deliver their services.

She expressed her interest hearing what is happening in other parts of the country through the presentations and discussions which she said, would provide a valuable opportunity for learning and networking.

She took the opportunity to thank everyone involved in the organisation of the conference and expressed the hope that delegates would enjoy the field trips getting a snapshot of what communities in Carlow have to offer.

Good Practice in PPNs

Universal Access – Caroline Toal Kerry PPN

Caroline presented the work of Kerry PPN in undertaking an in-depth county wide consultation on disability and Access for All in the four municipal areas of Listowel, Tralee, Killarney and South & West Kerry.

The consultation process sought to contribute to the creation of an environment where people with disabilities can participate in communities, with equal rights to live life to their full potential, and to

promote an understanding, embracing and real acceptance of what is known as the social model of disability. “It is the structures, systems and decisions of society that are disabling”¹

Caroline noted that according to the last census 13.5% or 20,000 people in Kerry have a disability yet at local level there remain numerous unresolved simple basic access issues for people living in Kerry.

During the development of the Local Economic and Community Plan 2016 – 2022, Kerry County Council, recognised that in order to affect change, in order to be progressive, collaboration between all stakeholders - private/public and organisational/individual was of paramount importance.

Caroline referenced the high-level goal 3.7 of the Kerry Local Economic & Community Plan 2016-2021 i.e. ‘To create an environment where people with disabilities can participate in communities with equal rights to live life to their full potential’ and explained that Kerry PPN was identified as lead partner for the delivery of this action.

The Kerry PPN linked with other partners, the Disability Federation of Ireland and the local access groups to develop a consultation process with people with disabilities.

From the outset it was agreed that the vision for the consultation was that the voice of people with disabilities would be documented as expressed.

The objectives of the workshops were to; Create an awareness of the challenges people with disabilities face. • Strengthen links and improve communication between community, voluntary and statutory agencies. • Support the involvement of people with disabilities in decision-making, through the PPN. • Develop a disability representative group at county level linked to the PPN which represents people with disabilities in Co. Kerry. • Hold workshops that would be strategically solution focussed around the work of the four Strategic Policy Committees of Kerry County Council. • Have clear next steps built in so that at the end of the workshop including a feedback meeting.

Key issues raised across the workshops included; Lack of opportunity to participate • Extra costs • Fears in emergency situations • Community involvement • Sense of isolation • Not feeling welcome • Few opportunities for employment • Feeling more vulnerable • Needs compromised • Limited independence • Poorer mental health.

Caroline notes that the primary outcomes from the workshops were; Relationships built between members of local access groups, Kerry County Council and the HSE with a new campaign on dog fouling initiated. • The PPN increasingly prioritising disability with access being kept on the agenda, linking in regarding walkability audits and now having their own portable loop system • Local Link Kerry now having access as a standing item on their agenda • Good foundation laid for development of linkage groups in County Kerry. • All elected members of Kerry County Council receiving an access report and Kerry PPN working on having the PPN as a standing item on the newly adopted Strategic Policy Committee Scheme.

Resilient Communities - Annette Dupuy Wexford PPN

Annette presented the work of Wexford Community Resilience Group, a cross agency committee, established in late 2018 and facilitated by Wexford County Council.

She noted that fundamental to the concept of community resilience, is that individuals and communities can use their strengths to, ‘Prepare’ for ‘Respond’ to and ‘Recover’ from emergencies (weather, health

¹ Conference participant

etc.). She highlighted that community resilience encourages local communities to engage in innovative activities that enhance their resilience.

Wexford Community Resilience Group comprises a broad range of stakeholders and sectors (e.g. health, emergency, sport, community and voluntary). The aim of the group is to promote a safe, sustainable, and resilient community through practical planning, for risk mitigation (prevention) preparedness and recovery in the community in County Wexford and stakeholders. The objectives of the Wexford Community Resilience Group are:

- To take an active role in the advancement of community resilience, through community safety and awareness campaigns and activities.
- To undertake an active role in disaster recovery planning through the promotion of an informed and engaged community.
- To develop and deliver emergency management arrangements that have a practical application and direction, to the community and stakeholders.

Examples of work undertaken to date include; resilience workshops, a guide to 'Preparing for the Unexpected' (a written guide to help individuals prepare for emergencies such as severe weather events) and community Cardiac First Responder (CFR) training, involving the setting up of a mass certified (CFR) training session at Wexford County Hall in which 70 participants were trained.

Plans for the future include mapping Key Contacts for additional emergency support; the production of a fridge magnet with key contact information and undertaking a series of Winter Ready actions.

Annette noted that involvement in this initiative has been very positive for Wexford PPN with benefits such as increased awareness and understanding of Wexford PPN and their role amongst a broader audience and the further development of contacts and relationships. The project, she stated, highlighted the benefits of cross agency collaboration for both PPNs and the communities they serve.

Sustainable Futures Event - Mags Whelan Kilkenny PPN

Mags presented the work undertaken by the PPNs in Kilkenny, Carlow, Wexford, Waterford and Tipperary in association with the Irish Environmental Network and the Environmental Protection Agency. This collaborative initiative involved the organisation of a regional conference which sought to: address deficits in relation to information about the environmental pillar; build capacity in the community especially in relation to the Environmental College within the PPN and the Irish Environmental Network and strengthen the role of the PPNs in this regard.

In advance of the conference a series of regional meetings took place in Tipperary, Waterford, Wexford, Carlow and Kilkenny.

The conference was attended by over 120 delegates from throughout the region. The event concentrated on local action with the aim of giving attendees some real and positive actions that can be taken back into their communities and used for local change. The conference included four workshops designed to establish a list of actions and ideas that can be used by groups and individuals to tackle the issues associated with climate action. The themes of the workshops were: Global Goals for Local Change - Bringing the Sustainable Development Goals to Life; Community Initiatives - Expanding the Conversation; Water Catchments - Local Response to Climate Action; Actions for Biodiversity.

Mags highlighted the common issues emerging as being those of: Perceived inadequate and conflicting policies and actions by national and local Government

- Perceived apathy and lack of leadership on the issue
- Perceived ignorance or uncaring attitude by those in positions of power
- Communities demanding action with few policies there to lead action at local level

PPN's it was stated have a vital role to play in respect of engagement and interaction with local authority and relevant agencies in respect of all issues outlined, locally and collectively. The importance of using the SPC's to lobby and make effective on the ground change was also highlighted.

The conference voted that PPN's regionally adopt the Sustainable Development Goals and incorporate them into their work. It was also suggested that PPNs should seek to raise awareness about SDG's and how to achieve goals at local level.

A key message from the conference and the collaborative initiative was that community groups are far ahead of the policy developers in respect of implementing practical actions on the ground which will positively impact on climate action and our environment.

Mags highlighted the importance of collaboration amongst PPNs as key to the work in terms of; maximising resources and achieving common goals, engaging a broader audience, sharing knowledge and experience and overcoming obstacles. She noted that the regional nature of the event offered groups a high calibre event relatively locally and an opportunity to network. The feedback Report Mags said, was fed in to local and national policy.

Responses from the Floor

- Collaboration is key for PPNs, sharing best practice across counties and within regions
- The SDGs are critically important and local authorities have a particular role in their implementation. Social Justice Ireland have produced resources on each of the SDGs which could be used by PPNs. The PPNs could also consider joining the SDG Coalition 2030.
- In some areas all public buildings being designed must include consultation with the PPN
- PPNs are positioned to view issues and solutions in a holistic way drawing together various best practices.
- Good structures and processes with good support and resources are key to delivery of effective actions
- Access for all should be part of all well-being statements and full support in relation to universal access should be given by the CCMA
- Ways in which disability concerns and universal access can be incorporated and mainstreamed into the work of PPNs include: setting up task groups and Access for All groups; ensure representation of disability and seek to ensure that universal access is up front on SPC agendas
- A data protection policy is needed for all PPNs
- PPNs should get in touch with local colleges and schools to link students with the work that is going on
- LAs played a role in all of the good practice examples including facilitation, support, funding, attendance at events.
- PPNs do not have a direct role in addressing direct provision concerns but should link with those groups working on the issue.

Field Trips

At this stage conference delegates divided into groups to attend field trips for the afternoon in the following areas;

MD of Carlow

Community Gardens – An Gairdin Beo

Established in 2015, An Gairdin Beo – A living garden for Carlow, is a two-acre community garden and registered charity in the centre of Carlow town where people work together and reap the rewards

together. Their ethos is based on valuing diversity, sustainability, organic methods and indigenous species. The overall vision of the garden is of a space where people can connect more with nature, with the growing and making of food and with one another.

St. Catherine's Community Services Centre – Traveller Health Workers

St Catherine's Community Services Centre Carlow is a community and voluntary agency based in Carlow Town. The Centre delivers a wide range of services to communities, groups and individuals using community development principles of empowerment and inclusion. The centre operates a Traveller primary health care programme which focuses on improving health outcomes for members of the Traveller Community, through direct work with the community and health services.

MD Muinebheag

Social Enterprise – BEAM Services Ltd.

Established in 2000, BEAM Services (Barrow Valley Enterprises for Adult Members with Special Needs) based in Bagenalstown provides training and services to adults with special needs. Training is provided in a supportive and secure environment that maximises their participants likelihood of success. Beam's mission is "that all persons live in a state of dignity, share in all elements of living in the community, and have the opportunity to participate effectively". BEAM Housing Association Ltd. has been providing housing for its members since 2006, giving them the opportunity to live independently, in a supported environment and to maximise their role within the community. Current accommodation includes Respite Facilities, Supported Living, and Independent Living.

Community Development – Borris Our Vision

Organised by the Blackstairs, Barrow and Valley Group, the Borris Our vision project engaged a large number of people who live in Borris and use it as their hub. The process of creating the vision which began in late 2017, involved the engagement of a facilitation team to ensure the vision for Borris was developed through genuine broad-based community participation. The aim is that 'Borris our Vision' will be an important pillar to inform future projects and responsible development in Borris and its environs in the years ahead.

MD of Tullow

Social Farming Project – Cairdeas Centre

Cairdeas Centre Services provide day services to Adults with Intellectual Disability and Autistic Spectrum Disorders. The centre provides service users with the opportunity to experience ordinary places, work experience, part time work and living independently in the community or to be supported to do so. Participants have an opportunity to work on a social farm in the area for a period of time. Social Farming is the practice of offering activity on family farms as a form of social support service. In other words, a working farm offers a welcome to individuals from a therapeutic setting and this participation in the working life of the farm day provides an opportunity to increase their self-esteem and improve health and well-being.

Bishops House – Regional Youth Services Project

Up and running for more than 20 years, Tullow Youth Project is located at Bishop's House on Chapel Lane in Tullow. Its broad remit includes youth counselling and helping pupils transfer from primary to secondary school as well as assisting the elderly. The project runs 6 days a week and its members are aged between 12 and 24 years and come from Tullow and surrounding towns. The purpose of the

Tullow Youth Project is to promote, develop and operate an organisation with the aim of developing the character and personality of young people and also to promote links between schools and other youth agencies in the locality. The aim is to empower young people and to help them reach their full potential

Delegates who attended the field trips were extremely appreciative of the opportunity to visit these innovative and interesting projects throughout the region. They noted the importance of field trips of this nature at national PPN conferences providing as they do, opportunities for shared learning, ideas generation and a chance to see day to day work at community level in operation. Delegates thanked all of the projects for their time and generosity during the field trips.

Ministers Speech

Address by Seán Canney, TD, Minister of State at the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment

The Minister began by thanking the conference organisers for the invitation to speak at the event and congratulating Carlow PPN for and their partners in Carlow County Council on the success of the conference.

He paid tribute to the time, dedication and commitment of those involved in PPNs in making them part and parcel of the fabric of our communities.

He described the PPNs as partnerships encompassing a wide and diverse range of people, local authority and Department personnel, elected representatives and others, all supporting the work of the Network. That level of achievement could not have happened, he said, without people like those gathered in the room.

He noted the importance of the voluntary work and engagement of those present, seeking to influence what should be happening in terms of local development and speaking for those who cannot speak for themselves.

Referring to the challenges that exist in relation to volunteering, the Minister noted the forthcoming National Volunteering Strategy and the contribution and expertise PPNs have to make to the development of the strategy. He commended the representation of the PPNs on the Advisory Group who are assisting the Department in the process.

The Minister stressed the role of PPNs as key partners in local decision making and community engagement citing as an example, the role of PPNs in preparations for Storm Lorenzo.

He spoke of the importance of Citizen Engagement, and the of belief that citizens have a right to have a say in local government decisions that affect them, their lives and the wellbeing of their communities. He spoke of the need to 'leave the self on the shelf', and to focus on the empowerment of those whose voices need to be heard locally and nationally.

He cited the number of groups 16,000 affiliated to PPNs and expressed his own and the Department's commitment to continuing support for the PPNs into the future whilst recognising the reality of competing demands

On a positive note the Minister announced that he has secured additional funding in 2020 specifically for PPNs to continue with the engagement of Support Workers. He noted that during 2020 an in-depth review of the structure and operations of PPNs will be undertaken, five years since PPNs were first established. This process he said, will involve the input of PPNs and all stakeholders and will commence at the start of 2020.

The Minister concluded by referencing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which also come under his own brief. He highlighted the connection between the work of PPNs and the SDGs both being about communities and the issues that need to be addressed. He wished delegates a rewarding conference and best wishes for the future.

Day 2:

PPNs and LAs Working Together - Rebecca Loughry Cork City Council

Rebecca began her presentation with an introduction to the Local Government Management Agency. The LGMA is a State agency of the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government which was established in 2012 to provide a range of services to the Local Government Sector and to the City and County Management Association (CCMA) and its committees. The CCMA is a network of Local Authority Chief Executives across the country which engages with stakeholders including government departments and agencies, makes submissions, develops best practice and ensures consistency in interpretation and implementation of policy across the sector.

In 2019 two nominees were nominated by the Economic, Enterprise, Community & Culture Committee (EECC) of the CCMA to the PPN National Advisory Group (NAG). Rebecca noted that 2019 is an important year for PPNs with representatives involved in new local authority boards and committees and the development of LECPs and Corporate Plans.

She highlighted joint work between DRCD & the NAG in progressing a number of initiatives to support PPNs (e.g. review of user guide, PPN review in 2020, community wellbeing statements) and stated that the local government sector and the CCMA is committed to participating in these developments. Other commitments include: the adoption of a user-friendly approach to support PPN participation; a communications protocol between LAs and PPNs and more regular meetings between PPNs and LAs.

Rebecca highlighted feedback from LAs in 2018 which underlined the need for long term funding and supports for PPNs and a national training programme. Feedback also acknowledged the importance of independence and autonomy.

With regard to the update of the PPN User Guide Rebecca noted that this is a timely initiative and requires input from PPNs and also from LAs whose input will be facilitated by the CCMA. With regard to the Review of PPN structures in 2020, she stated that this is a key opportunity for supporting the development of PPNs and a good opportunity to learn from models of good practice that exist between the LAs and PPNs.

Rebecca spoke of the experience of establishing the PPN in Cork City which she said was a challenging one for all involved in terms of a new model of operation, recruitment of staff, creating a shared understanding of the role of the PPN representatives, links with democracy and local government etc. A number of key factors she said, have developed this into a positive collaborative engagement for both partners. In terms of working together she highlighted: the critical support provided by the PPN to local communities and the LA in the boundary extension; the support provided by the PPN to the LA in relation to a number of LA consultative processes; the PPNs valued participation on a number of structures – SPC, JPC, LCDC etc. and the undertaking of a number of joint initiatives between the PPN and Cork City Council.

A certain tension she said exists between both structures, but this is a healthy and therefore a positive one. Rebecca concluded that it is critical that opportunities and proposed developments are utilised to support the enhancement and further development of a strong working relationship between PPNs and LAs.

Conference Workshops

At this point the conference delegates moved into workshops focussing on the following themes;

- Plain English – Claire O’Riordan and Sean Driver, NALA
- Wellbeing Statement – Helen Howes, Wicklow PPN
- Linkage Group and Thematic Working Groups – PPN Members
- LCDCs and PPN’s – Deirdre Kelly, DRCD

Feedback from workshops

Wellbeing Statements – Helen Howes Wicklow PPN

The presentation from Wicklow PPN focussed on the process of developing their Statement of Well Being (including 11 workshops, 5 on-line consultations and 2 submissions) as well as the benefit of having the statement itself. The importance of the process, the engagement, and relationships built was discussed as was the usefulness and versatility of the statements e.g. in Wicklow the statement was used to form the basis of a submission on integration strategies and another on climate change strategies. A key concern raised in the workshop related to the resources, time and money required, to do this work. Using organisations in the area to support the work was highlighted as an important strategy including e.g. PPN member groups, ETBs, volunteer centres etc. sharing resources, contacts and information. The social aspect in doing the work (tea and sandwiches!) were seen as very important creating a space for informal chats and discussions which can often yield the greatest results. Accessible language and use of imagery that people can really connect with was noted as being very important, making connection with people’s lived experiences and ensuring that what is being said is of direct relevance to them.

In discussing how well being statements could be used it was suggested that they are relevant to a range of areas including for example, reviews of LECs, local authority corporate planning and in the development and implementation of SICAP and LEADER consultations, development plans and reviews.

Linkage Groups and Thematic Working Groups - Daniel Downey Cavan PPN

The workshop involved 3 presentations. The first was from Fingal PPN and focussed on the development of linkage groups in that area. Linkage groups have an important role to play in contributing to civil society. Training it was noted is key for representatives considering going forward. The importance of informal approaches (including tea and biscuits!) was highlighted in bringing people together. Linkage Groups also lead on projects e.g. Fingal inclusion week where the linkage group led on this on behalf of the local authority, this it was said really benefitted local people. Fingal has 5 linkage groups which are self-driven and clustered by themes. The linkage groups are led by facilitators who network, link together and support each other. Motions are submitted to SPC agendas and linkage groups have representatives on a range of committees and structures. The importance of training for PPN reps was again reiterated for members who are seeking to go forward.

The second presentation was from the Tipperary PPNs CYPSC linkage group. The work of the linkage group focuses on the 5 national outcomes for children in CYPSC programmes ensuring that the work of the linkage group is firmly embedded in work people are doing on youth affairs in Tipperary. One of the

benefits of the group was a bringing together of services and community representatives in the North and South of the county, a county that can be perceived as 2 different counties at times. The linkage group has brought people together in a unified way. One of the challenges identified in the workshop was in regard to motivation and the perceived duplication of projects – a challenge which comes to the fore in attempting to find new ways and more effective models of working.

The final presentation was from Waterford PPN and was done as a ‘conversational double act’ which proved to be a very effective way of presenting. A discussion was held on how the linkage group in this example is facilitated by a facilitator who is essentially a ‘mental umpire’. The work of the linkage groups involves an ever-expanding conversation into the community. Conversations are inclusive, open and ready to engage in a structured way to influence the city and county.

A conclusion from the workshop was that PPNs are now out of the structuring and development phase and have moved into the action phase. We learn as much from our failures as our successes and success is a motivator to continued engagement, effective representation and a stronger civic society.

LCDCs and the PPN – Deirdre Kelly DRCD

The presentation focussed on the origins and objectives of the LCDCs, review of LCDCs and information on the new cross departmental strategy Sustainable, Inclusive and Empowered Communities: A Five-Year Strategy to Support the Community and Voluntary Sector in Ireland 2019-2024.

Discussion in the workshop focussed on a range of issues including the importance of collective training for all members of the LCDCS on for example, what is community development, how to ensure inclusion, the role and structure of PPNs, what is civic engagement as well as the more operational and practical aspects of how the LCDCs work.

The workshop discussed issues around the implementation of the LEADER programme, the Local Action Groups and the LCDCs and how LEADER can be implemented more effectively. Whilst it was stated that the PPNs are best placed to be the interface between Local Government and communities, a discussion was held on the volume of work for PPNs and the need for PPNs to be properly resourced to do this. The need to move away from annual funding was stressed. This form of funding, it was said can make planning very difficult and creates particular difficulties for staff.

A discussion was held in relation to the significant undermining of the community sector in terms of funding and there was an acknowledgement that there has been little additional investment in the sector during recovery. A request was put to the local government sector to reflect on the amount of resources being allocated to the economic dimensions of local authority activity versus those being allocated to the community sections. The weighting it was noted would appear to be very much in favour of the economic dimensions which suggest that there is something amiss in terms of the focus on communities.

Lack of joined up thinking it was said, is often at the root of many of the problems that local communities are facing. There is a sense from some PPN representatives that there is no real value placed on the voice of those in the community, their input and expertise and that local authorities would prefer to pay a consultant to come up with the same results. It was stated that this mindset needs to change.

The role of LCDC members it was said seems now to be that of sanctioning funding rather than holding proactive discussion on community development. It was noted that a greater focus on the professionalisation of community development and recognition of community development as a profession requiring key skills is necessary. PPN support workers it was said need to have experience and skills in this area.

The workshop discussed the need for LCDCs to be more separate from local authorities as they are seen very much as local authority committees as opposed to interagency committees which may weaken the opportunity for PPNs and other organisations to input.

A robust training programme for LCDCs is being developed and will be piloted with a number of selected LCDCs and the potential for roll out across the country will be examined including online and person to person interaction. In relation to the new strategy it was acknowledged that while funding for the sector is a priority it has been put into the long term category in the strategy and that funding also needs to be looked at in the short term.

Plain English – Claire O’ Riordan and Sean Driver (NALA)

The workshop focussed on 4 themes: what NALAs do, what plain English is, benefits of plain English, benefits of plain English for PPNs. The workshop discussed useful resources e.g. NALAs own website and resources, the Plain English Guide for the Public Service, the passport office and motor tax office websites.

One of NALAs principles is that everyone has a right to literacy and numeracy. OECD figures for Ireland from 2012 highlighted that 1 in 6 adults have literacy problems; 2 in 5 struggle with technology and 1 in 4 struggle with numeracy. The benefits of using plain English are savings in time and resources, builds participation and will soon be a legal obligation.

Whilst it was noted that in the work of PPNs a lot of acronyms are used, PPNs have a responsibility to ensure that their members understand them. A suggestion was made that in plenaries/workshops/training laminated sheets with a glossary of terms should be widely available.

Suggestions for PPNs going forward were that: PPNs carry out a plain English audit; use plain English resources available and that each PPN would become a member of NALA.

A discussion was held on the importance of plain English in grant application forms and it was noted that some application forms are still very complicated. The DRCD Helping Hands Initiative was commended in this regard.

An example was given of an initiative in Monaghan where the PPN developed of a user-friendly grants application booklet.

The over-riding message from the workshop was that all PPNs should be using plain English. It was noted that NALAs 1-day training session, the last of 2019, will be held on Thursday 21st November in the Carmichael Centre.

Making a Successful Application - Paul Geraghty Department of Rural and Community Development

Paul’s presentation focussed on the key elements to consider in making a successful funding application. He spoke of the importance of encouraging people to combine their efforts, their talents, their insights, their enthusiasm and their inspiration to work together. The first steps he noted involves the identification, definition and articulation of the problem, why addressing the problem is important and how the applicant group can solve the problem. The next step is to identify potential funders.

Clear and focussed planning is key including the identification of partners and timelines. It is important to write a description of the project including the who, what, where, when and how the project will be delivered and the expected results. Realistic costings Paul pointed out are essential including any funds or additional income that may be used to support the project.

Telling your story is key. Paul pointed to the need to make sure the evidence presented in the application is up to date and factually correct supporting the case for funding.

Researching funders, he said is also an important element including focussing on the funder's own aims and objectives, levels of funding which they may give and any guidelines they may have. He pointed out that funders usually look for evidence of accountability, transparency and a track record in doing the type of work proposed.

Top tips from Paul were; • Understand or clarify the funder's eligibility and selection criteria • Read each question carefully – note the text limits • For online forms – log on early • Note the closing date and time • Note the method for submission and who can submit • Check that you have all relevant information needed to attach to your application form • Proof read • Keep a copy of your application form.

See link to the full presentation here <https://www.carlowppn.ie/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Paul-Geraghty-Presentation-PPN-Conference.pdf>

Panel Discussion: Volunteerism – The Future Improving Governance – Overcoming Challenges – Promoting Best Practice

Panel members acknowledged the issues and challenges that were identified in the membership survey. They concurred with the PPN members that compliance with, and adherence to, the Governance Code and associated best practice can be onerous and can pose challenges for population cohorts who experience social inclusion / inequality.

However, they injected a note of optimism and encouragement into the deliberations, as they reported that the process is not as onerous as groups may genuinely perceive it to be. They encouraged groups to take on board the spirit and the letter of the governance code, and they referred to the benefits, including easier access to public funding and improved organisational efficiency.

The panel members acknowledged that while governance compliance is time consuming and requires investment and commitment, it benefits community groups in the longer term. Thus, they encouraged groups to avail of the supports that are open to them, including through the Local Development Companies (SICAP – Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme) and Volunteer Centres.

The discussion noted the need for 'ongoing supports', including funding – not just once-off interventions – in enabling groups to adopt excellence in governance. They also indicated that the most recent guidelines issued by the Charities' Regulator have made the process more realistic and attainable for smaller groups.

In essence, the panel members encouraged groups to engage with the process and to pursue it. They remarked that good governance engenders trust – trust with funders and with the general public. Referring to the logistics of governance compliance, the panel noted that the system is based on 'comply or explain', and that this allows for bespoke responses and tailored approaches.

When asked about best practices and the mainstreaming of supports, the panel members noted that those groups that have good governance systems in place are now able to concentrate on strategy and development; they have time for discussion and engagement.

The panel referred to the usefulness of information sessions in promoting good governance, and they underscored the value of inter-group and inter-PPN networking and information sharing.

The panel discussion noted that as groups put governance systems and procedures in place, they can find themselves moving beyond service delivery and local development, and assuming advocacy roles. This brings them into increased interfaces with local government and the statutory sector, and helps engender an environment and context that are more amenable to citizen engagement.

Good governance, community development and advocacy require particular skills, and groups were advised and encouraged to invest in their personnel – voluntary and staff. Thus, they may co-opt people with particular expertise and skillsets, although this process needs to be motivated and underpinned by a commitment to community development principles and to the inclusion of all population cohorts, including those who are currently under-represented in decision making.

Citing the five-year strategy and other evidence, the panel members referred to the economic and societal value of the community and voluntary sector, and its role in sustaining vital public services. The sector delivers public goods and needs to be acknowledged more in that regard.

Thus, there is a need for metrics and for greater celebration and publication of the outputs and impacts of community and voluntary groups. There is also a need for more continuous and systematic approaches to partnership on behalf of statutory bodies, and there are merits in the community and voluntary sector being involved in the co-delivery and monitoring of the five-year strategy ‘Sustainable, Inclusive and Empowered Communities.

Conference Close

The Chair-person closed the conference thanking all those who contributed, the presenters and facilitators, the community organisations who hosted the field trips and the bus drivers, Carlow County Council, Carlow PPN, the Carlow College musicians, the hotel staff and last but not least the delegates all of whom contributed to an excellent 2 day conference.

Please note that a number of the full presentations made at the conference can be found here <https://www.carlowppn.ie/membership/national-ppn-conference/>