



Submission to Our Public Service 2020

By

County Wicklow Public Participation Network

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Introducing County Wicklow Public Participation Network

County Wicklow Public Participation Network (PPN) was established in July 2014 under the directive of the Department of the Environment, Community & Local Government and in accordance with legislation in the Local Government Reform Act 2014 (Section 46). Public Participation Networks were established to be an independent structure that would become the main link through which local authorities connect with the community, voluntary and environmental sectors in a process to facilitate communities to articulate a diverse range of views and interests within the local government system. Co Wicklow PPN has 168 diverse member groups including sports groups, women's groups, older people's groups, tidy towns, LGBT groups, Travellers groups, community councils, resident's associations, youth groups and more. Member groups span the 5 Municipal Areas of Co Wicklow and the 3 PPN colleges which are Social Inclusion, Community & Voluntary and Environment. Some of these groups are networks in their own right.

PPN representatives serve as a voice for the community on structures including: the Local Community Development Committee; Housing & Corporate Estate Strategic Policy Committee; Planning & Development Strategic Policy Committee; Transport, Water & Environment Strategic Policy Committee; Community, Cultural & Social Development Strategic Policy Committee; Economic Development & Enterprise Strategic Policy Committee; Wicklow County Childcare Committee; Co Wicklow Children & Young People's Services Committee; Co Wicklow Local Sports Partnership; Wicklow County Tourism Board; Co Wicklow Volunteer Centre and Co Wicklow Joint Policing Committee.

PPN Representatives strive to ensure that the needs of the community sector are prioritised within local policy processes.

Purpose

An invitation was extended to Public Participation Networks through the Department of Housing, Community and Local Government on 24 July this year to engage with the public consultation on Public Service Development and Innovation Framework.

This submission draws on various consultations that Co Wicklow PPN has been involved in or organised, as well as the opinions and experience of the Co Wicklow PPN Secretariat and Representatives. Co Wicklow CIS, a member of Co Wicklow PPN has provided valuable information from their experience. Co Wicklow PPN also promoted this consultation through its Facebook Page and monthly E-bulletin

Preamble

While Co Wicklow PPN appreciates the opportunity to participate in this consultation and acknowledges the 6-week time frame from receipt of the information to the submission date, we would like to point out the challenges in preparing this submission in the hope that they will be taken into consideration for future consultations.

- For Co Wicklow PPN to consult all member groups time is needed to send out information to the group contact, allow them time to meet, consult with the members of their group and feed back to us prior to our collating a collaborative response. Even if member groups agree to make their own submission they need time to facilitate meetings and compile a response.

- It is extremely difficult to participate in consultations during traditional holiday times i.e. Easter, summer, Christmas and this response has been adversely impacted by the holiday period
- National and Local Government appear to run the majority of consultations during the summer months. Co Wicklow PPN has highlighted 11 calls for public consultation in the last 6 weeks. As mentioned above summer time is not conducive to qualitative consultation and a vast number at the same time promotes consultation fatigue and can prevent engagement.

Public Consultation on Public Service Development and Innovation Framework

Co Wicklow PPN would like to point out that experiences vary greatly and that the following comments, while based on the direct experience of PPN members/member groups and public consultation, they do not necessarily apply to all public servants or services.

Delivering for the Public

1. Drive efficiency and effectiveness in service delivery

[Do you have any views on how to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of Public Services?]

- Ensure that service delivery is primarily focused on good respectful client relations.
- Ensure that the message/language of service delivery is easily heard and understood
- Ensure that information relating to service delivery is centralised, kept current and available in different formats – that it is easily accessible to everyone
- Ensure that the Public Services are sufficiently resourced – that staff are not spreading themselves too thinly
- Ensure all services have a full-time and focused communications officer – develop a comprehensive, practical and efficient communications strategy and implement it diligently
- Develop a culture of openness – requests for information, particularly regarding strategy and policy can be met with a defensiveness that militates against respectful relationships
- Public transport in Ireland is very poor compared with other countries and services are being cut rather than expanded. This has a direct impact on access to jobs and services.
- When local authority representatives travel out to meetings with community groups they often arrive in separate cars – this increases the cost to the taxpayer – paying mileage to each of them. There should be an obligation on local authority and other public service staff to car-share in circumstances like this.
- Public procurement procedures have been made so complex that smaller companies, who may be the best to deliver the job, can't compete against larger firms who have somebody with experience of the tender process. This is not in the public's best interest. It appears that local authorities are outsourcing the assessment of tenders, this is contrary to implementing efficiencies and value for money. It adds another layer of cost that doesn't deliver anything on the ground.
- The public sector, local authorities and government departments appear to work slowly, it takes a long time to get answers, to get things approved. Sometimes this seems to be down to cumbersome procedures, or long chains of approval, or just lack of motivation. If the private sector moved at this pace they would receive no investment and be out of business.

- The movement of civil servants between government departments is frustrating, relationships are developed, they start to understand the sector, and next thing they're promoted and/or transferred. The movement of functions from one department to another exacerbates this as each time there's a loss of experience, and a period where no decisions are taken. The 'Community' section has moved Department 3 times in less than 7 years (following 2011 general election, 2016 general election and again following new ministerial appointments in June 2017). In addition to those changes, the Minister with responsibility for this area changed in 2010 and 2014 – seven different ministers in less than 8 years.
- Public service consultations seem to be tick box exercises – online questionnaire, or at best questionnaire and a few regional meetings. How does this rate on Arnstein's ladder of citizen participation - <http://www.citizenshandbook.org/arnsteinsladder.html>. It would be good to see some more innovative and inclusive consultations. Some consultation documents are presented in a way that they are impenetrable to all but the dogged. Show people that ideas submitted through consultation processes have been taken on board.

2. Accelerate digital delivery

[What is your experience of the online Public Services? Do you have ideas about how to improve online services?]

- Many of our member groups report the lack of effective broadband coverage which makes using online services difficult to impossible
- Mixed reactions are reported with some services working well e.g. Revenue on line services. Attempts to order a passport on line were reported as being unsuccessful.
- Co Wicklow PPN has used online portals to make submissions to public consultations on state services, policies and plans. As an organisation we have had no trouble using it however we note that there is not a big take up of this form of consultation. The recent consultation on the Open Government Partnership Review of the National Action Plan shows a very poor response. Perhaps promoting this type of consultation more might increase usage, however it is our experience that the majority of people will not invest their time in using this method and many are just unable to do so.

The Co Wicklow CIS Experience

The Citizens Information Service's (CIS) experience of online Public Services is very mixed. For people who are computer literate (typically younger people), who have access to computers, for whom English is a 1st language and those who don't have literacy difficulties then the online services work very efficiently. However, a large proportion of CIS clients do not fall in to the categories above. People are feeling marginalised and left out of modern society. The drive for everyone to use online services is alienating large sectors of our society as they do not have means or the know how to access information and/or apply for entitlements via the internet.

Give people the choice. Not everyone has an email address or access to a computer or even use a computer. The Citizens Information Service assists people to fill out forms and can assist with online applications but if the client does not have an email address (and sometimes two email addresses) the service cannot apply on their behalf.

3. Optimise the use of data to provide services

[How can govt. use data better to deliver more effective Public Services?]

- Ensure that data is centralised and kept current. E.g. It has been reported that hospital appointments have been posted out to people who are deceased and who died in the hospital issuing the appointment
- Take into consideration that not everyone uses online services or is IT literate – accommodate and value these people
- Look at Scotland's National Performance Framework, an outcomes –based Programme for Government with performance measured by collecting data for a wide range of national indicators. It would be great to see a similar framework introduced here. Northern Ireland has adopted this model, but has yet to put a comprehensive data gathering framework in place to support it. For information on the Scottish programme see <http://www.gov.scot/Resource/0049/00497339.pdf>.

The Co Wicklow CIS Experience

It depends on how the data is collected. If surveys are conducted on line then the data used will be skewed toward those who are already using these services. While the majority of public service users may fall into the categories that are happy and confident in using online services, how is the data gathered? Is the opinion of those who are not using online service being sought?

Linking various benefits schemes would be useful so that clients do not need to repeatedly complete the same questions for different schemes.

4. Professionalise customer service

[Have you experienced positive and professional customer service from Public Services? What was it about your experience that was positive? Or was your experience less than positive? How can govt service improve?]

- From a Co Wicklow PPN organisational perspective our dealings with Public Services such as the local authority and An Garda Siochana have always been respectful and positive. This is not always the case for our member groups who have reported challenges and experiences vary greatly. The competence of some civil servants appears questionable, but it seems there are bigger problems to do with leadership and motivation in the sector.
- Ultimately our experience of public service is that it is not people-centred, it is focused on process.
- Provide diversity training so that services can interact respectfully and confidently with disadvantaged and minority groups – include disability and dementia/autism awareness training

The Co Wicklow CIS Experience

Have you experienced positive and professional customer service from Public Services?

From a CIS perspective, this is positive. However, this is not always the case for CIS clients.

What was it about your experience that was positive? Most members of staff of public services are very professional, efficient and treat their clients with respect. Communication with CIS staff is timely and efficient.

Or was your experience less than positive? Many of our clients are afraid of going to the local Social Welfare Office as they fear that the payment they are currently on could be put in jeopardy. Some clients are not treated with respect and there can be long waiting periods before entitlements are processed. There can also be considerable delays with respect to appeals and so on.

How can govt service improve? In the case of local DSP offices they need to adhere to their own customer charter and treat all of their clients with dignity and respect.

5. Make services more accessible

[How do you think govt. can make Public Services more accessible to all?]

- Maintaining and establishing services in local communities will ensure that everyone can access them. This is imperative for older people and rural communities.
- Consider inter-agency working, building and/or resource sharing to support services to stay in the community e.g. outsource services to local post offices or support the integration of a post office into a local shop.
- Could libraries be an outreach base for services to support both/more services to be accessible locally
- Longer opening hours for public counters and phone lines.
- People-centred (customer-focused) language and procedures, fostering a culture of respect for service users.
- Organisational chart on every department / public sector organisation website – who does what. Members of the public find it difficult to know who to talk to.

6. Engage more with the public

[What ideas do you have for greater engagement between Public Services organisations and citizens?]

- Despite the increase in IT communications many people still like personal interaction when it comes to services that are important to them eg health care, banking etc
- People need to engage socially for their mental health therefore ensure that it is always possible to do so despite having the choice of using IT communications
- When running public consultations, provide adequate time for qualitative two-way information
- Ensure that client/public engagement is seen and felt to be valued
- Ensure transparency in decision making by making minutes of meetings available to the public as early as possible, or by uploading recordings of decisions made
- Ensure that submissions to National and Local Plans are made available for public comment
- Use social media, share short videos

- Implementing participatory budgeting will encourage people to have their say in local development

The Co Wicklow CIS Experience

Have non-online services for people who can't use them and do more customer feedback with those who use the service.

7. Significantly improve communication

[Do you have any suggestions about how govt. can communicate better?]

- Keep it simple
- Show that consultation is valued i.e people are listened to and what they say is respected with a definite outcome whether it is a positive outcome or a reason otherwise.
- One size does not fit all – good communication uses all forms of media, written and spoken
- Do not run consultations in traditional holiday times ie Easter, summer or Christmas
- Work with other service providers and government departments to ensure that people are not subject to a lot of consultations at the same time
- Allow time for communities to receive information, consult with their peers/members, and formulate a response

Innovating for our Future

8. Establish a Public Service Innovation Centre

[What Public Services innovations are you aware of in Ireland or elsewhere? Do you have any examples of innovation in your organisation or your community? Do you have ideas on particular systems or services that could be done better?]

9. Strengthen whole of Government collaboration

[What improvements do you think govt. could make to coordinate and collaborate more across the Public Service?]

- Talk to each other more, share information e.g. The Dept. of Public Expenditure and Reform developed a “Consultation Principles & Guidance” Document in November 2016 – this is a good document and it should be adhered to
- Interdepartmental working groups.
- Encourage a bottom up approach, as well as the top down communication and decision-making process that is currently prevalent.

10. Embed programme and project management

[Do you think programmes are delivered and projects carried out well by the Public Service? Where is it carried out well? Can govt. learn from best practice?]

- It is our experience, particularly in the case of the local authority, that there is not enough human resources to implement programmes, plans or policies to their full extent. This leads to a dilution of focus, less qualitative outcomes and the perception of “just a box ticking exercise”

- The National Traveller & Roma Inclusion Strategy Steering Group has been highlighted as a good model of project management and engagement. Our members in Bray Travellers group report that the culture of the group is respectful and positive. The group includes Senior Civil Servants which ensures that decisions can be made and acted upon quickly, there is no delay in communicating decisions upwards for approval prior to implementation. It has been noted that beneficial changes are happening through this forum.

11. Prioritise evidence and evaluation

[How can govt. measure the real impact of the services they deliver?]

- Look at these indicators and how they are measured - <http://www.gov.scot/About/Performance/scotPerforms/indicator>
- Through constructive consultation (online, written and through person to person feedback) – see 7 above

The Co Wicklow CIS Experience

Customer feedback surveys with the option of being anonymous.

12. Build strategic planning capability

[What important long-term challenges do you think the Public Services needs to prepare for? What should govt priorities be in relation to strategic planning?]

- The impacts of climate change on local communities
- Government needs to ensure more prudent use of natural resources – this is partly about fuel and energy consumption but also care for the other natural resources such as water, air and landscape that underpin our well-being.
- Ensure that strategic plans are well researched, achievable, regularly reviewed in relation to changes, are communicated and understood, and are implemented
- In our experience there have been many policies, strategies, and plans written, some of them the result of extensive quality consultation but due to lack of resources or lack of understanding they are not implemented to the extent that they should be.

Developing Our People and Organisations

13. Embed strategic human resources management in the Public Service

[What improvements do you think govt. can make to ensure strategic HRM is meeting the needs of the Public Service?]

- Ensure that staff are supported to do their job efficiently and thoroughly

14. Mainstream strategic workforce planning in the Public Service

[What important challenges and opportunities do you think strategic workforce planning could help the Public Service meet?]

15. Build capability and skills

[What skills do you think should be a priority for the Public Services?]

- Communication skills and customer service including equality/diversity/disability training etc. See 4 & 17
- Most organisation have customer charters, and various policies that are not always adhered to. Ensure that staff understand the importance of these policies and that they are implemented.

The Co Wicklow CIS Experience

Communication skills and customer service. In the case of DSP offices a more holistic approach to informing their clients of the full range of entitlements and benefits.

16. Strengthen performance management

[Do you think that having performance management will help deliver better quality public services?]

17. Promote equality, diversity and inclusion

[Do you think the Public Service is sufficiently representative of our population? What improvements could be made? How can govt. better fulfil our public -sector duty to promote human rights and equality and prevent discrimination both for customers and staff?]

- Encourage & support minority groups to become public servants.
- Provide regular training for civil servants. See 4 & 15
- Implement a zero-tolerance policy for bigotry and racism in the public service and be seen to be implementing it.

18. Articulate Public Service vision and values

[What do you think our Public Service Vision should be? What do you see as the most important Public Service values?]

- Be user focused and respect service users
- To provide a respectful service that addresses each client's needs on an individual basis and to the satisfaction of the client.

The Co Wicklow CIS Experience

What do you think our Public Service Vision should be? One that is focused on the needs of the individual client .i.e. putting the client at the centre of all that you do.

What do you see as the most important Public Service values? Respect, humanity, confidentiality, efficient service

19. Increase employee engagement

[Do you have any ideas about how govt. could engage more with and listen better to their employees?]

- Provide regular opportunities for genuine 2-way appraisals

- Engage directly, don't assume the unions will articulate the concerns of public sector employees

20. Review Public Service culture and values

[Are there improvements Public Service organisations can make to improve their organisational culture?]

- The Public Service must be as its name suggests, a service for the public with the individual client at the centre of research, planning and implementation of all services as well as its primary beneficiary. The culture must change from chasing unrealistic targets to focusing on individual need. Organisational culture should also change if all public servants undertook the training highlighted in 4, 15 & 17 above.
- You can put modern streamlined processes in place, but some of the biggest challenges in achieving better public service delivery aren't really dealt with here, 'culture' finally arises in q20, yet that seems to be huge; public service unions appear to block change and reform (e.g. ASTI, in the health sector, transport); and the public servants we deal with on a daily basis are often poorly led and poorly motivated feeling like tiny cogs in a very big system they have no control over.

The Co Wicklow CIS Experience

From a CIS perspective, a lot of the problems with the Public Service come from the fact that it is trying to provide services to large numbers of people and the individual can be forgotten in the mix.

The Public Service should exist for the good of the public, the public should come first, not the employees and not the government at the top. In most large bureaucratic organisations the reason for their existence eventually gets lost. Patients stop being the centre of focus for hospitals, the education of students can become secondary to other interests in schools and colleges, the efficiency of the system can be put before the "social welfare" of the population.

The current trend, for example, in the Department of Social Protection in putting some of its core work out to commissioning is a negative development on a number of levels. From the client's point of view an outside for profit organisation (such as Turas Nua) is performing a function that should be done by the Department. Commercial companies exist to make a profit not for the public good. These companies are paying the staff, who deal on a one to one basis with clients, the public minimum wage which is below any wage paid by the public sector and therefore they may not get the calibre of worker that is needed to deal with the complex issues. The structure which pays its staff on prescribed results may mean that certain clients are selected as they may have greater chance of gaining employment, for example, which may mean other more vulnerable clients are neglected.

The public service as a whole is very good but it needs to remember why it exists and for whose benefit.