Submission to the Draft National Volunteering Strategy 2020-2025

By

County Wicklow Public Participation Network

January 2020

County Wicklow Public Participation Network
CEART
Crinion Park
Wicklow Town

Tel: 087 189 5145
Email: countywicklowppn@gmail.com

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 290 diverse member groups, 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; all of the Wicklow County Council Strategic Policy Committees; 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, County Wicklow Partnership, and Co Wicklow Joint Policing Committee. PPN Representatives strive to ensure that the needs of the community sector are prioritised within local policy processes.

Consultation with Communities

Co Wicklow PPN invited member groups to a focus group meeting on Tuesday 21st January in Little Bray Family Resource & Development Centre. The purpose of the meeting was to introduce people to the various aspects and headings in the Draft National Volunteering Strategy and to ask their views on its content. Participants represented a cross section of volunteers and volunteer involving organisations and included representatives from the social inclusion, community & voluntary and environmental sectors.

In 2018, Co Wicklow PPN consulted community groups across the 5 Municipal Districts of Co Wicklow, asking them "What is your vision for community wellbeing for this and future generations?" We asked them to consider this question under the following headings:

- Environment & Sustainability
- Health (physical & mental)
- Work, Economy, & Resources
- Social & Community Development
- Participation, Democracy & Good Governance
- Values, Culture & Meaning

The responses we received were documented and are available to download from our website: www.countywicklowppn.ie . We ran 11 workshops, 5 online consultations and accepted 2 submissions in total. The consultations facilitated the development of an overarching vision for each Municipal District along with

community visions and high-level goals under each heading. The county vision was developed in the same way.

These consultations and resulting visions informed the Co Wicklow PPN submission to the Call for Input (CFI) on Key Aspects to be included in a National Volunteering Strategy

This submission is based on our focus group discussions, our Vision for Community Wellbeing Consultations as well as what we are hearing in our daily engagement with our member groups.

At the end of this submission we have included a brief section on connecting Our Vision for Community Wellbeing to the Global Goals for Sustainable Development

Co Wicklow PPN hopes that this submission is useful to the National Advisory Group

Co Wicklow PPN looks forward to reading the final National Volunteering Strategy 2020 - 2025.

Opening Statement

Co Wicklow PPN is disappointed that PPNs are not referred to in the draft Strategy.

"The PPN recognises the contribution of volunteer-led organisations to local economic, social and environmental capital. It facilitates input by these organisations into local government through a structure that ensures public participation and representation on decision-making committees within local government. These PPNs have been established in every local authority area in Ireland. By the end of 2018, over 14,700 community and voluntary, social inclusion and environmental organisations were members of a PPN. Over 900 PPN representatives were elected to over 370 committees on issues such as strategic policy, local community development, joint policing and so on. Local authorities and PPNs work together collaboratively to support communities and build the capacity of member organisations to engage meaningfully on issues that concern them. PPNs have a significant role in the development and education of their member groups, sharing information and promoting best practice and facilitating networking. Local authorities also have a vital role to play in facilitating participation through open consultative process and active engagement" (Public Participation Networks Annual Report 2018, Department of Rural & Community Development)

Citizen engagement in local and national policy development is an important element of volunteering and very different to the types of volunteering referred to in the draft strategy. The excerpt from the PPN Annual Report 2018 (above) highlights the diversity and vast amount of voluntary groups engaged in this process. We would suggest that this makes PPNs key stakeholders in facilitating and supporting volunteering and therefore PPNs should be included in the strategy.

Overall Strategy Vision

"A society where volunteering is promoted, valued, facilitated and supported so that people can contribute to developing and maintaining vibrant, inclusive and sustainable communities" (page 11)

All the elements of the draft vision resonate with our consultations however; the Vision does not mention **resourcing** volunteering. While the value of volunteering is referred to on page 13 of the draft strategy, the cost of volunteering needs to be recognised and acknowledged both in regard to the volunteer and for the volunteer involving organisations. To highlight the importance of this, challenges and examples in relation to the lack of resources are highlighted in further sections of our submission.

Concerns that Volunteers have become key service providers were highlighted in our consultations. Volunteers are fearful of this burden of responsibility, particularly in regard to legal requirement and protection, and it has become one of the biggest barriers to volunteering. **Volunteers believe they should be complimenting community services as opposed to "propping them up".**

Shared values

- *Commitment to a vibrant volunteering landscape and to people within the communities it serves*
- *Trust & integrity*
- *Inclusion*
- *Partnership*
- *Quality & excellence*
- *Appreciation   (page 13)*

The shared values were accepted and their importance acknowledged. Concerns were raised in relation to implementing them and achieving the desired outcomes. Within the "Government's clear commitment to supporting volunteering" (Pg. 13) must be a proactive will to review, change, develop and **implement policies** that will make it easier for people to volunteer and for volunteering organisations to accept volunteers. These policies must be clear and understood by all stakeholders.

Definition

"Volunteering is any time willingly given, either formally or informally, for the common good and without financial gain" (page 15)

Volunteering is not just the giving of time; it includes the sharing of skills and expertise. This should be reflected in the above definition.

More clarity is required in relation to "the common good". It was suggested that "the common good of the community" would be more in line with the ethos of volunteering.

Our consultation cautioned that the word "volunteer" may not be commonly used to encompass all types of volunteering e.g. sports club coaches and board members might not always describe themselves as volunteers.

Discussions on this section raised questions in relation to volunteers doing the work that should probably be the task of a paid employee. **Should there be a definition of what is not volunteering?** Concerns were raised on two levels:

- Private companies/organisations using internships etc. as a means to benefiting from unpaid work
- Companies/organisations in the community sector that depend on volunteers because they do not have the resources to employ paid staff (lack of resources).

Concerns were also raised in relation to "informal volunteering" such as dropping in to see if an elderly neighbour who needs help. Is this an act of good citizenship or is it volunteering (particularly if it becomes a regular habit)? , and if it is regarded as volunteering could it have implications for social welfare payments?

Key Challenges

We agree with all the challenges listed across pages 28, 29 and 30. Here we highlight the challenges that were of particular significance in our discussions

Funding & Resources:

- Volunteers should receive out of pocket expenses. VOIs often do not have the resources to do this even though they would love to, so who should pay them? Should there be some form of reimbursement from government? E.g. a community games organisation must have officials such as referees but they are not funded to pay them travel and expenses
- A number of volunteers have told us that they have been threatened with a social welfare reduction if they take up a voluntary position. It seems that in some cases volunteering with certain well known listed charities does not affect social welfare payments. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the decision in relation to eligibility for social welfare payments while volunteering often comes down to the knowledge/understanding (or lack of) of the particular social welfare officer dealing with the volunteer.
- Insurance is crippling VOIs both in cost and in the requirements/restrictions of cover
- VOIs and volunteer support organisations need additional resources.

Governance, Regulation & Capacity Building:

- The majority of volunteers did not volunteer their time to having to deal with administrative bureaucracy
- Many volunteers don't have the time or the skills set to deal with all the governance & regulatory procedures that they are faced with
- VOIs do not necessarily have the skills and resources to recruit, train, support and manage volunteers. They may not have the HR experience or resources to deal with

conflict between staff and volunteers or the organisation and volunteers. Where should they seek help if things go wrong? How do they protect themselves from litigation?

- As much as they might want to, many VOIs do not have the capacity or resources to engage with volunteers that are under 18, people with disabilities, people with mental health challenges, vulnerable adults, Travellers, refugees and migrants.

Protection for Volunteers

- Does/should a volunteer have the same rights of protection as a paid worker?
- Can a VOI get insurance cover to 1. Protect the volunteer from a mistake they might make 2. Protect the organisation and its clients from a mistake the volunteer might make and at what cost?
- Volunteers should not be expected to lead work in essential services. It needs to be acknowledged that voluntary work cannot take priority over employment and family commitments.
- Does a Health & Safety Policy cover the work of volunteers?

Policies and Procedures

- A volunteering risk assessment needs to be undertaken and clear and simple policies and procedures are needed to protect all volunteering stakeholders

Implementation of the Volunteering Strategy

"The White Paper recognised that it is not the role of Governments to control and be involved in every aspect of volunteering, but to put in place an enabling framework that strikes the right balance between nurturing volunteering and also having proper accountability" (Draft National Volunteering Strategy, page 9)

Our consultations accept that while the government needs to delegate responsibility for action plans, the ultimate responsibility for implementing policy lies with it.

Key Stakeholders

In our Bray consultation we looked at the key stakeholders and their roles and highlight the following:

- Every community and every citizen that contributes to and benefits from volunteering is a stakeholder in this strategy
- National Government – in the first instance must take responsibility for the development and implementation of policies and strategies. Cross- departmental understanding and collaboration is key if policy is to be implemented clearly and coherently. Funding and resourcing is needed for community services and volunteering supports.
- Volunteer Ireland – 99% of participants in our consultations did not know of Volunteer Ireland or the role they take in supporting volunteering. It was suggested

that they might be the national coordinating body for the implementation of the strategy. It would be helpful if they researched the challenges, risks and costs to all volunteering stakeholders, that they could develop the policies and training programmes that would help to mitigate against these risks/fears and that they could negotiate and communicate across government departments, charities regulator, insurance companies etc to ensure cohesiveness in the supports for volunteering (including health & safety, child/vulnerable adult protection etc)

- Volunteer Centres – are the local face for supports for volunteering and are responsible for training & supports at local level. One of the main functions of the Volunteer Centres is in matching volunteers to VIOs.
- PPNs: Ensuring that the voice of the community is heard, valued and supported in local decision and policy making that impacts the wellbeing of the community (please see opening statement)
- Local authorities: have a role to play in creating an environment and system that nurtures and values volunteering in their area. At a practical level this can be achieved by; being open to community input, ensuring access to local authority staff, funding opportunities and information. The local authority also has a role to play in facilitating active citizen participation in local decision and policy making through the adoption of open, accessible and transparent governance and procedures. Through the LCDC local authorities play a part in community development through projects and actions undertaken by community groups.

Strategic Objectives

- To increase the participation & diversity in volunteering including embracing new trends & innovation
- To facilitate, develop and support the Volunteering Environment so that it contributes to vibrant & sustainable communities
- To recognise, celebrate & communicate the value & impact of volunteers & volunteering in all forms
- To promote ethical & skills – based overseas volunteering to deliver results for beneficiaries & to enhance Global Citizenship in Ireland
- To improve policy coherence on Volunteering across Government both nationally and locally

Discussions under the Strategic Objectives highlighted the following Points

- Recognition and acknowledgement of the different levels and responsibilities of volunteering roles is needed and there needs to be supports for each level e.g. a voluntary board needs support to fulfil their legal responsibilities and protect themselves and their relevant stakeholders from risk and litigation
- Action 2.3 highlights welcome and much needed support for sports related volunteering. We believe this should not be limited to sport and should be inclusive of all VOIs and volunteers
- Volunteering begins in schools with 6th classes sometimes mentoring younger students. It is important to engage young people in a way that is led by young people so they are safe and comfortable in their role. How could the Gaisce awards be used to further promote

volunteering for young people? Could volunteering be a part of Junior Certificate or be further expanded in Transition Year?

- Resources are needed to support youth involvement across the board and needs to address issues such as Child Protection and other policy requirements.
- For young people to participate within adult forums supports are needed for the young people before, during and after engagement. Most organisations do not have the capacity to provide this level of support
- Recognition needs to be given to the constraints of volunteers. As mentioned earlier employment and family commitments take priority, yet becoming the Chairperson of a voluntary board brings significant commitments
- Volunteers want to help their communities and the people that live in it but they do not want to take peoples jobs or be seen to be valued more than paid staff. Supports are needed to address these divisions and ensure harmony in the workplace and in communities

The Global Goals, also known as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), are a **universal plan of action for people and planet** to be achieved by the year 2030. These 17 goals aim to end poverty, combat climate change and ensure that we p13leave peaceful, just and equal societies for future generations.

These goals are **universal** in nature, applying to developed and developing countries alike, and place sustainable development at their core.

Connecting the Local to the Global

Working towards realising our community vision for wellbeing has a direct impact on achieving Ireland's targets for the sustainable development goals