



Open Government Partnership Second National Action Plan

Have Your Say

Creating a new National Action Plan 2016-2018

By

County Wicklow Public Participation Network

September 2016

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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 144 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.

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County Wicklow PPN welcomes the opportunity to participate in this consultation and share our experiences to date in relation to citizen engagement through Co Wicklow Public Participation Network.

This submission focuses on Aim 1 – Increased Citizen Engagement while crosscutting the themes of: improving citizen engagement, improving the transparency of sharing data, and strengthening governance and accountability

Specifics:

1. The Council for Europe, through the European Committee on Democracy and Governance and the Conference of International Non-Governmental Organisations is currently in the process of preparing guidelines to help ensure meaningful civil participation in political decision-making in its member states. The draft guidelines (see: http://www.coe.int/t/dgap/localdemocracy/CDDG/Guidelines-civil-society-consultation_en.pdf) that were produced for consultation (up to the 4th September 2016) is a very good starting document. The Department of Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government should be aware of this process and the guidelines should be adopted at national, regional and local level as well as European Level.
2. The framework for Public Participation Networks as laid out in the Public Participation Networks (PPNs) Draft User Guide (Dept. Environment, Community & Local Government, May 2016) is a good model, however it should not become stringently prescriptive, nor should the evaluation of a single PPN be based completely on the structures and protocols laid within. It is our experience that individual PPNs are as

diverse as their membership base and should therefore be allowed to grow and develop organically **and in line with their members needs** as long as the ethos of public participation and civic engagement is seen to be at the core of their work. As such the annual reporting for PPNs should be qualitative as well as quantitative.

3. Citizen Engagement should be supported and promoted nationally as well as locally, both at a PR and development level. The Department of Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government should provide and promote a national identity for PPNs as well as providing or identifying a support structure that will
1. Enable PPNs to share resources and experiences
2. Support PPN workers, their Secretariats and community representatives
4. Citizen engagement requires both resources and commitment particularly from the statutory sector. If statutory agencies wish to foster genuine citizen participation and engagement, then they need to be aware of the need to work outside normal office hours. Their offices and facilities should also be available to facilitate such meetings and engagement. In addition, people should receive adequate notice of meetings and receive agendas, minutes and reports in a timely manner.”
5. Access to information is one of the most important elements of civil engagement. Information should be freely available in a clear and easily understood format. To ensure that everyone has access, information must be circulated through every available media source. Most importantly if genuine consultation and feedback is a true goal, then information must be circulated in a timely fashion allowing communities time to receive, share, consider and formulate a response. This is particularly important in relation to funding schemes. However in our experience this is often not the case and is contrary implementing the PPN Framework and guidelines issued to PPNs by Government. As well as being contrary to procedures for Local Authority Strategic Policy Committee Schemes.

We suggest that Government Departments and Local Authorities should develop a communications policy to ensure that communications are provided in a timely manner that promote genuine citizen engagement as well as putting measures in place to ensure that the policies are implemented properly.

6. Training and awareness raising is key to ensuring meaningful civil participation in practice, and any framework for civil engagement should include aims and objectives that ensure that statutory agency staff and NGO staff are provided with, and encouraged to participate in training that emphasises partnership between the two and fosters an ethos of genuine collaborative working. We believe that all statutory departments should be obliged to participate in the training thus ensuring that the importance of civil engagement is understood and fostered at all levels