



**Submission to the Public Consultation on
Commissioning Human, Social and Community Services**

By

County Wicklow Public Participation Network

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Introduction

The aim of the Public Consultation on Commissioning Human, Social and Community Services is to agree a common understanding of “Commissioning” in an Irish context and to elicit views on how best to allocate resources when providing human, social and community services. Having studied the consultation paper “Commissioning Human, Social and Community Services”, The Centre of Effective Studies Rapid Evidence Review, feedback from the Open Policy Debate on Commissioning, the Community Workers Ireland “In Whose Interests?” report, the Wheel’s “Commissioning for Communities” Report and from consultation with our members, Co Wicklow Public Participation Network has prepared the following submission.

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

Volunteering and Active Citizenship

All PPN member groups are managed by a voluntary committee and most of the work of these groups is done by volunteers. Co Wicklow PPN believes that volunteers are the life blood of any community providing services and benefits to the community at little to no financial cost. Yet these actions and services prove to be of immense value in the enhancement, maintenance, upkeep and security of local areas, as well as the physical and mental well-being of local citizens, and therefore making a huge financial and non-financial contribution to society. Co Wicklow Volunteer Centre reports that the estimated hours of work provided by volunteers registered with them in 2015 was 21,732 and the monetary value of those hours at average wage would equal €471,149 (CWVC December Newsletter). It is estimated that the actual figures, adding non registered groups, are much higher.

Voluntary work is borne through an identified local need. Using local knowledge, assets and local relationships volunteers have the expertise to work towards addressing these needs. More importantly they have the heart, conviction and care for their own community which makes them much more likely to persevere, and succeed in providing the best possible outcomes for their local communities. Furthermore voluntary work is underpinned by a community development approach which empowers people and promotes collective working, social justice and equality. A key strength of this approach is the participation of service users in the governance of the

actual service. Co Wicklow PPN believes that these societal values should be maintained at all cost.

Grant Funding and Commissioning

Most of Co Wicklow PPN member groups can only provide the actions and services they do with the support of much needed grant aid. Whilst funding has diminished over the last number of years, communities are resourceful and have adapted as best they can to provide the best level of care and action they can offer to their local communities, simply because the alternative is abhorrent to them.

Co Wicklow PPN is concerned that commissioning could impact on community work taking the responsibility for implementing programmes, services and actions away from the local people who care so much about them. There is a real fear that a commissioning or funding model that focuses exclusively on minimising public spending risks compromising the quality and effectiveness of grass roots local action, to the detriment of society as a whole. The impact of community groups should be measured by their broader societal role rather than from a financial perspective. Privatisation of public services will result in boosting profits for shareholders rather than improving public services for the people they are there to serve.

According to the Centre for Effective Studies Report, the key rationale for Commissioning is to improve outcomes for service users, however there is limited evidence to show that this is the case. Outcomes, particularly for those most disadvantaged, are difficult to measure and may not become apparent for many years. Furthermore dictating outcomes and targets to community organisations can result in groups compromising their own vision and mission to achieve targets that might not be to the actual and immediate benefit of the service user/community. This approach also risks losing the engagement of the individuals and communities that our members were set up to support.

Co Wicklow PPN also believes that work implemented by community & voluntary groups and organisations, particularly those focusing on poverty and social exclusion, should not be defined solely as service provision. Categorising it as such could lead to groups being subject to procurement legislation unless a social clause is evoked. It is believed that procurement and tendering will have negative impacts on the way groups work. In their report "In Whose Interests" Community Work Ireland suggest that using the concept of Services of General Interest would be a more adequate categorisation.

Conclusion

Economic policy very often focuses on getting the highest and quickest financial savings rather than strategically investing in people and the importance of building relationships with people is lost when profit becomes the main focus. This must be avoided at all costs.

There is confusion in relation to the actual meaning of the term commissioning and concerns about possible related processes such as tendering and procurement.

When commissioning is described as the targeting of resources, higher quality service provision, value for money, and better outcomes for service users, and speaks of competitiveness and competition as well as referring to markets this moves away from the ethos of putting people first. While larger organisations may have advantages of scale they do not necessarily provide better outcomes for people. Community groups by comparison in the most part operate from good governing principles (particularly since the establishment of the Governance Code), they are careful and make the most of the limited funding they receive and they always operate from a humane approach for the communities they care about. It is important that changing policy does not set the criteria so high that it excludes community & voluntary groups as potential providers.

Or that any costs incurred in implementing Commissioning would take valuable resources away from much needed service provision.

While most people agree that public services should become more transparent and accountable, the actual practise of privatisation mitigates against this.

The Centre for Effective Services state that introducing commissioning runs the risk of “losing local knowledge and assets, erosion off the ecosystem of voluntary activity, diversion of resources to application writing, and reducing the sustainability of organisations”. By eroding the sustainability of community groups and organisations the very communities they support will become unsustainable and society as a whole with suffer. Co Wicklow PPN believes that community & voluntary work is unique and cannot be categorised similar to private and public sector service provision therefore (and in agreement with Community Work Ireland) “the establishment of a distinct community development programme/framework, based on a grant-giving model” is the most ideal method to support community & voluntary work/activity.

Commissioning is also being described as a Strategic Planning process. Strategic Planning is crucial to identifying and addressing needs and it is important to monitor impacts. Developing a framework for strategic planning in this context should be done collaboratively with the input of community groups and organisations who have the knowledge and experience of working in the sector. It is imperative that any change in policy should not undermine the many existing scenarios that are working well and providing beneficial outcomes for service users.

Finally, prior to implementing any form of Commissioning Co Wicklow PPN believes there should be more clarity and understanding on the purpose and model of Commissioning and that government departments must take time to work collaboratively with the community sector to work towards a shared vision of community work in Ireland.