



**Submission to the Public Consultation on
The Draft Guidelines on Civil Participation in Political Decision -
Making**

By

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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.

Draft Guidelines on Civil Participation in Political Decision Making

County Wicklow PPN welcomes the guidelines on civil participation in political decision making as we believe that citizen engagement is a crucial factor in ensuring that societies needs are met in the most efficient, just and beneficial manner possible. The guidelines also validates the work that we do to promote, encourage and facilitate citizen engagement in Co Wicklow.

2. Conditions and Principles

Co Wicklow PPN agrees the importance and ethos of the underpinning principles within the draft guidelines and recognise them as similar to "The Principles and Values of PPN" (as laid out in Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government Draft Public Participation Networks User Guide May 2016) which are Inclusive, Participatory, Independent, Valuing of Diversity, Transparent, and Accountable.

It is important that these principles are adopted by public authorities as well as NGOs

3. Enabling Environment

The points to establish an enabling environment as laid out in the guidelines will preserve fundamental rights of freedom and they value diversity

Co Wicklow PPN would like to highlight the importance of point 8 and in particular the reference to the undue administrative burden placed on NGOs for receipt of funding. While transparency, accountability and good governance is essential in the appropriation of public funding, it is important to recognise that the work of small NGOs can be limited or halted due to bureaucracy and unnecessary administrative procedures much to the detriment of society.

4. Prerequisites for Meaningful Civil Participation.

Co Wicklow PPN agrees that for meaningful civil participation to take place an enabling protocol and framework must be in place both at national and local level. The framework should be practical and easily understood by all stakeholders as well as flexible enough to allow for organic growth and development. The framework should be articulated across and implemented by all national and local statutory departments and not just those that have a community development focus.

Co Wicklow PPN see points 15 through 17 as also being crucial to the promotion of equal participation.

5. Levels of Civil Participation.

While it is highly important to have legal and procedural guarantees in place to promote effective civil participation it is even more important that it is seen to be implemented properly and that genuine partnership and co-decision is fostered at all times.

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.

An onus should be placed on statutory organisations to meaningfully consult with civil society on all decisions that will impact on their quality of life. Civil society should be a valued partner and diversity should be welcomed. While the action of consultation is highly important, respect for those who participate is equally important. Therefore feedback on consultation outcomes should also be guaranteed.

6. Ensuring Meaningful Civil Participation in Practice

Co Wicklow PPN wholehearted agrees that “enshrining guarantees for civil participation in a legal and regulatory framework” is a crucial first step in promoting citizen engagement. However, it is also important that an implementation process for the development and more importantly the maintenance of the framework is also guaranteed.

In our opinion training and awareness raising is key to ensuring meaningful civil participation in practice, and any framework 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.

Again 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

Conclusion

The Draft Guidelines on Civil Participation in Political Decision-Making is a welcome boost for Public Participation Networks already on their developmental path. Experience so far is teaching us that the ultimate destination mapped out in the guidelines will take time to achieve but that with the proper resources, accompanied by political and civic buy in, it should not be unattainable. With time, awareness raising, training, and a genuine partnership approach, civil society can be enabled to fully participate in political decision making.