Submission to the Public Consultation on

Wicklow County Council Draft Strategic Policy Committee Scheme 2024-2029

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 462 diverse member groups, some of these groups are networks in their own right. PPN representatives have served as a voice for the community on structures including: the Local Community Development Committee; Wicklow County Council Strategic Policy Committees, Co Wicklow Children & Young People's Services Committee; 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.

Key Submission Message.

Section 46 of the Local Government Reform Act 2014 provides the legislative basis which gives effect to the Framework for Public Participation and the Public Participation Networks (PPNs). This Act, which amends section 127 of the Local Government Act 2001, requires each local authority, in accordance with general policy guidelines issued by the Minister, to adopt a Framework for Public Participation in Local Government for the purposes of promoting, developing and implementing a coherent and integrated approach to participation in decision-making processes of the local authority.

The PPN nominates members of community groups to fill the SPC seats available to the environment, social inclusion and community & voluntary sectors in Co Wicklow. All PPN representatives are volunteers, many of them have employment and family commitments and their voluntary time is limited. It can be difficult for volunteers to take time from work lose income or use up their holiday allowance to attend meetings. To ensure diversity and inclusion in local decision making it is incumbent on the local authority to take this into consideration and ensure that there are no barriers to voluntary attendance at meetings.

Wicklow County Council Draft Strategic Policy Committee Scheme 2024-2029

Part 7 – Number of SPCs

Co Wicklow PPN acknowledges that the configuration of the SPCs covers all the Wicklow County Council services and will therefore provide focused support and advice to the council in regards to policy and practice in these specific areas.

Wicklow PPN welcomes the decision to maintain the Housing SPC in recognition of the long-term housing crisis. It believes that retaining a PPN rep for the environment on the Housing SPC would be important going forward to maximize the take-up of low carbon measures to housing.

Wicklow County Council was the first local authority to declare a Climate & Biodiversity Emergency and it was the first to establish a Climate & Biodiversity Action SPC showing its awareness of climate and biodiversity loss issues and its commitment to mitigating against them. Other local authorities have since developed these important structures. As Climate Change and Biodiversity loss continues at an alarming rate and Ireland is failing to meet its emission targets it is important that a clear focus remains on this issue.

Wicklow PPN welcomes that the Marine has been acknowledged in this SPC, however, it is very concerned that Recreation and Amenity has been brought under its auspices. The PPN believes that introducing these elements has the potential to dilute the focus of the SPC. It is also a huge workload for a committee which only meets four times per year.

Theme 1, Governance & Leadership of Wicklow County Council's Climate Action Plan, 2024-2029 states as its second Action that it will "maintain a Climate and Biodiversity Strategic Policy Committee to ensure implementation and development of policy." This implies that each of the 135 actions in the Climate Action Plan will be monitored by the SPC at planning, development and implementation stages to assess their efficacy at reducing carbon emissions, conserving and enhancing biodiversity and mitigating the damage done by global warming. Reports, (often presented by Council Staff), will be available at the Strategic Policy Committee meetings and the members of this SPC called on to develop the policy by recording changes to the policy they believe would substantially lower carbon emissions or sustain and replenish biodiversity over time. Such progress reports would be published on the Wicklow County Council website for the public to read and sometimes convey comment upon through the SPC representatives. The SPC would also discuss feedback on their recommendations given at Plenary Council meetings. This is a large brief.

Wicklow PPN recognises that the names of the SPC should reflect the work of the structure. It is also aware that these names are reduced to acronyms. Therefore, the Climate Action, Biodiversity, Environment, Energy, Marine, Recreation & Amenity SPC could potentially be the CBEEMRA SPC! Most people report that they are challenged by acronyms and a shortening of this title would be helpful.

Wicklow PPN recommends that:

- Wicklow County Council considers adding Recreation and Amenity to the tourism brief. **Response:** The configuration of the SPCs has been considered at length and the committees are configured to represent recent organisational change and the relevant Directorates with responsibility for that area. The relevant Directors of Services support the work of the SPCs in formulating policy for consideration by the SPCs, this is set out in the Meetings and operations procedures. The relevant Director with responsibility for Recreation and Amenity rests with the Director of Climate, Environment, Recreation and Amenity Directorate. This directorate is

also resourced with the necessary expertise, plans, policies and budgets to undertake the work in this area under this SPC. While the exact remit of SPCs varies from local authority to local authority, depending on the individual SPC scheme, generally speaking, most local authorities have established either four or five SPCs, reflecting the main local authority programmes such as housing, planning and Environment, Wicklow County Council has established 6 SPCs. It is not proposed to reconfigure as requested.

- The SPCs consider establishing sub-groups which can focus on important areas of work: **Response:** Each SPC will adopt a multi-annual work programme. SPC members will be fully involved in the process of preparing the SPC work programme which should begin once the policy parameters of each SPC have been drawn up, the SPC scheme agreed and the SPCs membership having been determined. The establishing of sub-groups as suggested can be considered post the agreement of the work programme as relevant and is a matter for each SPC to consider.
- Climate, Biodiversity and Sustainability is a cross-cutting issue which should be considered across all the SPCs. This could be achieved by ensuring there is an environment seat on all SPCs. This can also be achieved by ensuring that the

statutory National and local Climate and Biodiversity policy are at the heart of decision making and economic development by SPC's and The Corporate Policy Group – **Reponse:** There have been significant developments in the area of climate action since the adoption of the last SPC Scheme and there are increased obligations on the Council to act in a manner that supports and furthers climate action ambitions. Climate change and biodiversity remains an ongoing and long term commitment for the Council which will require continuous and ongoing consideration across all the Council's functions. Work is underway in the preparation of the Corporate Plan 2024 – 2029 which will incorporate Climate and Local Carbon objectives across all directorates . A new Local Economic and Community Plans has recently been adopted which fully aligns with the provisions of the National Climate Action Plan and other national plans and strategies. The National Climate Action Plan, 2021 places a clear focus on leadership and transformation of service delivery. This approach is reflected in the LECP, and will be reflected in the new Corporate Plan as well as the SPCs.

- In addition to the environment seat there should be space for another expert in environmental issues on every SPC. This could be a sectoral expert or a member of WCC staff that has a relevant environmental qualification: **Response:** Each Directors of Services will undertake appropriate research on relevant policy options when SPC members are formulating Policy. In addition, staff of the Council with expertise and knowledge in the relevant area of work being considered by a particularly SPC may be invited to attend the meeting of the SPC and participate in the discussion and policy making process having regard to their broad knowledge and expertise. It is also open to each SPC to invite to the meeting representatives from outside agencies to contribute to the meeting where appropriate.
- Climate, Biodiversity and Sustainability should be an Agenda item for all Corporate Policy Group meetings. – **Response**: Noted this is a matter for the Chair and members of each of the SPCs.

Part 8 Chairs

Wicklow PPN recognises the importance of the role of the SPC Cathaoirligh and agree that they should have an interest, knowledge and experience in the focus of the SPCs work. The importance of working with the Director of Services is also recognised.

The PPN particularly acknowledges the importance of reporting back to the full council as well as all the other nominating bodies of the SPC membership. This communications role should be supported and implemented in a timely manner.

The area of work covered by SPCs can be diverse and extensive. The establishment of a Leas Cathaoirleach position would support the Chair and allow for sharing some of the workload. All members of the SPC should be considered for this position including sectoral representatives.

Wicklow PPN recommends that:

- A brief report/Statement of Outcomes should be developed as soon as possible after each SPC meeting. This report should be circulated to all nominating bodies to the SPC i.e. elected & sectoral representatives. **Response:** Noted – this is a matter for each SPC to agree as appropriate.
- A Leas Cathaoirleach position should be established and all members of the SPC should be considered for the role. **Response:** The Chairs of the SPC and the election of the Chair are set out in legislation. There is no provision for the position of leas Cathaoirleach of the SPC.

Part 9 Membership – Nominating Process

Public Participation Networks (PPNs) were established under the Local Government Reform Act of 2014. They provide representation for the community sector in local policymaking, giving local groups a greater say in local government decisions which affect their communities as per section 127 of the Act.

Wicklow PPN recommends that:

Under the nominations section of the scheme the role of the PPN is clarified as follows:

> **IV.** The environmental, conservation, community/voluntary and social inclusion sectors will be determined on the basis of the local nomination process through Wicklow PPN in accordance with section 127 of the Local Government Act 2014
>
> **V.** Groups and Organisations joining the PPN must opt to be included in one of three colleges/sectors i.e. Environment, Social Inclusion, and Community/Voluntary. To

join the Environment Electoral college an organisation's primary objectives and activities must be environmental/ecological protection and/or environmental sustainability. To join the Social Inclusion College an organisation's primary objectives and activities must focus on social inclusion/social justice/equality. Organisations whose primary objectives are other than those listed above will be members of the Community & Voluntary College

VI. The environmental/conservation sector of the SPC will be facilitated by the environmental pillar and the associated environmental college of the PPN arrangements. The PPN will validate membership of the environmental college with the national environmental pillar

Part 10 The SPC Work Programme

Wicklow PPN acknowledges the importance of All SPC members having the opportunity to contribute to the preparation of the SPC Annual Workplan. We understand that this process begins with an induction for members of the SPC.

Wicklow PPN Recommends that:

- SPC Induction training should be open and welcoming of all SPC members and every effort made to ensure that as many SPC members can attend as possible even if this means that these sessions are held outside of normal working hours. **Noted this recommendation will be taken into consideration in SPC induction training.**
- Presentations and any other documents relating to the training should be made available to all SPC members and provided to any new members that may join the SPC at a later date. **Recommendation noted and agreed.**
- All members of the SPC, including those from the external sectors should have an opportunity to use their areas of local knowledge and expertise to shape the Workplan and there should be clear procedures and protocol for them to do so. Similar to induction training, every effort should be made to involve all SPC members in developing the annual Workplan even if this means holding this meeting outside of working hours. **Response:** The scheme provides that SPC members are fully involved in the process of preparing the SPC work programmes, this would include external members.
- Supporting documentation for the meeting should be circulated well in advance, and at least 4 weeks ahead of the meeting to allow SPC members to confer with their nominating groups and to enable them to make informed contributions. **Response:** The scheme provides that agenda and minutes of SPC meetings should be circulated well in advance to all SPC members. The recommendation is noted and will be taken into consideration, however it may not always be possible to circulate documentation at least 4 weeks ahead of the meeting having regard to timelines and preparation time.
- To enhance community buy-in, all the Workplans should be communicated widely and available to view & download from the Wicklow County Council website. Updates and evidence of outcomes should also be made available on a regular basis.

Recommendation noted, each SPC can implement as appropriate.

Part 11 Meetings & Operational Procedures

SPC members bring local knowledge and expertise to policy and decision-making tables. As such Wicklow PPN welcomes the acknowledgement that the members should be involved in drawing up the SPC Agenda, although it is not clear what process there is for them to do so.

As stated at the beginning of this submission, SPC members who give their time voluntary should be accommodated without any personal loss to them. This may mean holding some meetings outside of normal working hours, or in the late afternoon/early evening where there might be limited disruption to working hours.

The location for meetings should rotate to give those in West Wicklow a chance to meet closer to their home. They have a 2 hour add on to their day because of travel whilst those on the east coast have easier access to meetings.

A calendar of SPC meetings is welcome particularly in facilitating voluntary participation. It is important that this calendar of meetings is set at the beginning of the SPC term and is adhered to as it can be difficult for volunteers to navigate their volunteering and employment responsibilities. Changes to the schedule should be agreed by all members of the committee.

Arriving for a meeting to find that it has to be postponed due to the lack of a quorum should be avoided at all costs and all members of the committee should take responsibility to ensure this does not happen.

If an individual member of the SPC has not attended at least 2 meetings of the calendar year their nominating body should be notified with a view to nominating a replacement.

SPC members are representative of their nominating bodies. It is important they are provided with the opportunity to inform and consult with their nominees. Therefore, it is vital that SPC documentation, including Agendas is provided to members in time to facilitate this process, four weeks is recommended in The Revised Guidelines for Establishment and Operation of CPGs & SPCs prepared by the Dept. of Housing, Local Government and Heritage June 2024.

It is also important that SPC members feedback and update their nominating bodies on outcomes of the SPC meetings and its work. We understand that the elected representatives have also called for this at a recent council meeting. This should be provided within a week or two of the meeting, particularly as there is a 3-month gap between meetings. This process will have the benefit of:

- Keeping all stakeholders informed of the work of the SPC (including the full council)
- Providing a clear report & recommendations for the full council to consider at their next meeting. As per XIII (page 12 Draft SPC Scheme) members of the SPC should also be provided with feedback on the outcome of the council's decisions on the SPC recommendations.
- Reminding members of any actions they have undertaken to do by the next meeting.

Please note that Co Wicklow PPN and its Representatives agree to work in accordance with the Co Wicklow PPN Representatives Charter, which sets out the role and responsibilities of the PPN's Representatives. The Charter underpins the mutual respect and expected

behaviours of all PPN Stakeholders. A copy is available on the PPN website. We hope that Wicklow County Council and all its committees will recognise and operate in the ethos of this Representatives Charter.

Wicklow PPN recommends that:

- Clarity should be provided in relation to the process for SPC members to contribute to the SPC Agenda: **Recommendation noted and can be considered and implemented by each SPC.**
- A clear pathway should exist for members of the SPC to make representation through the chair of the relevant SPC to the CPG - **Recommendation noted and can be considered and implemented by each SPC.**
- Meeting times for the SPCs must be inclusive and accommodate all members as much as possible. **Response:** Recommendation noted, however SPC meeting schedules are agreed by each SPC in advance and at the beginning of the year. SPC meetings are held during normal working hours.
- The location for meetings should rotate to give those in West Wicklow a chance to meet closer to their home**. Recommendation noted and can be considered and implemented by each SPC as appropriate.**
- A calendar of SPC meeting should be agreed at the beginning of the SPC term and adhered to. Changes in the schedule should be made in consultation with ALL the members of the committee. **Recommendation noted and agreed.**
- SPC documents, including Agendas must be circulated in time for members to consult with their nominating bodies and at least 4 weeks in advance of the next SPC meeting (as per Revised SPC Guidelines) **Response:** The scheme provides that agenda and minutes of SPC meetings should be circulated well in advance to all SPC members. The recommendation is noted and will be taken into consideration, however it may not always be possible to circulate documentation at least 4 weeks ahead of the meeting having regard to timelines and preparation time.
- A brief statement of outcomes should be developed immediately following an SPC meeting. This should be circulated to all SPC members, including elected members and sectoral representatives as well as being uploaded to the WCC website within one week of the meeting. **Recommendation noted and can be considered and implemented by each SPC as appropriate.**
- WCC should advertise and communicate the work of the SPCs in local media where possible to keep the public informed, similar to the council meeting reports. **Recommendation noted and agreed.**
- A written feedback summary relating to SPC recommendations to the full council meeting should be provided to the SPC members immediately following the council meeting at which they were discussed: **Recommendation noted and can be considered and implemented by each SPC as appropriate.**
- All reports should be available on the Wicklow County Council website. **Response:** The agenda and minutes of each SPC are currently available on the website. Recommendation in relation to reports etc, is noted and can be implemented as appropriate by each Directorate.

Appendix 1 – SPC Configuration

As the SPCs cover a myriad & diverse programme that affects all members of our communities, Wicklow County Council should where possible ensure that the environment, social inclusion and community & voluntary sector is represented on all SPCs. Where not considered possible Wicklow County Council should at minimum consider the following recommendations.

Wicklow PPN recommends that:

- Sustainability in the housing sector is vital, therefore an environmental seat should be included/retained in the Housing SPC **Response** – Recommendation agreed to have Housing SPC configuration amended to include Environment/Conservation representative. It was in the previous scheme
- Social Enterprise plays an important role in the local economy therefore a social inclusion seat should be included in the Economic development and enterprise support SPC: **Response** – Recommendation agreed to have Economic Development and Enterprise support SPC configuration amended to include social inclusion seat for the reasons outlined
- Transport & connectivity issues have a huge effect on rural and disadvantaged communities therefore a social inclusion seat should be included in the Transportation Infrastructure delivery and Emergency Services SPC. Due to their role in connecting rural communities, the TFI Local Link for Carlow, Kilkenny & Wicklow should be approached and offered a seat on this SPC. **Response** – Recommendation agreed to have this SPC configuration amended to include Social Inclusion seat for the reasons outlined
- Climate Action, Biodiversity, Environment, Energy & the Marine should be a stand-alone Environmental Action SPC. In this case our recommendation is to maintain the 2 environmental seats and include a social inclusion seat to ensure that plans take into consideration a just transition. Response: There are two Environment Seats on this SPC included in the configuration one from East Wicklow and one from South Wicklow. As set out above SPCs have been configured having regard to organizational structure and includes recreation and amenity
- Community groups undertake a spectrum of work under the Recreation and Amenity heading and therefore should be included in whichever SPC this is under. **Response** – Recommendation agreed to have this SPC configuration amended to include Community/Voluntary seat for the reasons outlind
- Rural Development is significantly undertaken by community councils and groups therefore a seat should be included for the community & voluntary sector on this SPC. – Recommendation agreed to have the Planning and Rural Development SPC configuration amended to include Community/Voluntary seat for the reasons outlined .

Appendix 2 – Principles applying in relation to the appointment of Members/Sector

Representatives

Co Wicklow PPN nominates representatives in accordance with our Constitution. The term of a PPN Representative is 3 years with the opportunity of sitting for a second term. Our Constitution is available to download from our website.

Appendix 3 – Regulation of Lobbying Act 2015

Co Wicklow PPN is registered with the lobbying authority and submits quarterly returns

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Co Wicklow PPN has circulated the Wicklow County Council Draft SPC scheme to all our member groups encouraging them to engage with this process and some groups have indicated their intention to do so. This submission was drafted, circulated to all members and includes the feedback submitted by our deadline.

We hope that Wicklow County Council finds this submission useful, that it considers the suggestions put forward carefully and that the majority if not all of the suggestions are implemented in the new SPC scheme. We look forward to hearing from you in this regard.

References:

Corporate Policy Groups and Strategic Policy Committees - Revised Guidelines for Establishment and Operation (June 2024)
https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/67bad-corporate-policy-groups-and-strategic-policy-committees-revised-guidelines-for-establishment-and-operation-june-2024/

Co Wicklow Public Participation Network Representative's Charter
https://countywicklowppn.ie/about/finance-governance/

Co Wicklow Public Participation Network Constitution
https://countywicklowppn.ie/about/finance-governance/