

**Consultation:**

Open Government Partnership
Ireland: Have Your Say

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No

Observations:

Theme: Do you have ideas on how to improve citizen engagement?

Title: Consultation, Participation and Representation - Moving Beyond a Box-Ticking Exercise

Public Participation Networks (PPNs) were established in each local authority area as part of the Local Government Reform Act 2014. Galway City Community Network (GCCN) is the PPN in Galway City and facilitates participation by the community, voluntary and environmental sectors in local government and other structures. It also facilitates consultation processes in local and national policies and strategies and regularly makes submissions based on a process that includes research into best practice and workshops for GCCN members and citizens/residents of Galway City.

In our experience, one of the most significant barriers to real citizen engagement is the lack of respect for the process consistently displayed by government agencies and local government. For example, while consultation processes are regularly carried out on policies, strategies and plans, it is rare that the final policies, strategies and plans will reflect any of the submissions made. It is the experience of our representatives on local government structures that while they participate in good faith and on a voluntary basis, their contribution is largely ignored. GCCN is about to undertake research with our representatives on this issue. As one illustration, two GCCN representatives attended a Strategic Policy Committee meeting on a recent Monday morning and were asked to approve a substantial strategy for the city that had been sent to them on the afternoon of the previous Friday. This is not unusual despite many complaints and is not acceptable.

If the Open Government Partnership is to achieve its aspirations, it must change the mindset and ethos of those required to consult in line with the DEPR guidelines on consultation. While support for the community, voluntary and environmental sectors must be maintained, primarily through the PPN process, equal if not

more emphasis must be placed on ensuring that contributions through consultative and participatory processes are considered and included in a real and meaningful way.

Practically:

- Consultation and participatory processes should allow for adequate notice and time to facilitate real participation. To date, this has been left too open to local authorities and to individual structures and is often misused. The PPNs work best when there is time to engage the wider membership. GCCN, like many PPNs, has a system of Linkage Groups to enable thematic discussion of issues that inform the participation of the representatives. However, it takes some time to enable these structures to meet prior to the SPC and other meetings. A circular should be issued to local authorities to instruct them to allow adequate time for engagement in consultation, participatory processes and representation. In the GCCN policy document on consultation, participation and representation (currently in draft form) we suggest that all meetings are calendar dated but where this is not possible at least three weeks' notice should apply. Documentation for the meetings should be circulated in the same time frame.
- PPN representatives should be enabled to suggest items for the agendas of structures on which they participate.
- Structures such as Strategic Policy Committees should be enabled to monitor the implementation of policy.
- All processes in which the PPN is required to participate should operate from best practice principles and be open and transparent.
- Significant work needs to be done with local government and other agencies to ensure they take consultation and participatory processes seriously and respectfully. This will involve leadership at national level that includes but goes beyond that provided by the Department of Housing, Planning, Community & Local Government providing for a legal imperative to be issued to local authorities and agencies to engage in MEANINGFUL consultation and participation.
- Training should be provided to local authority staff, elected Councillors and agencies on the importance of consultation and participation to policy making (in line with the priorities of Open Government Partnership) and on the importance of the Public Participation Networks and other structures in this regard.
- GCCN has facilitated a number of significant processes to develop various submissions, all of them depending on the time and expertise freely given by GCCN members on a voluntary basis, many of whom are independently expert in the fields in which they are contributing. It is our experience that little if any of this work is reflected in the documents – policies, plans or strategies - issuing after the consultation process. Local government and agencies should be required to demonstrate what has been included from contributions to consultation processes. There should be an imperative on them to engage meaningfully in these processes.
- PPNs should be facilitated and encouraged to operate independently of the local authority. Currently there are a number of models and the position of GCCN is that in order for ownership of the PPN to be facilitated by the community, voluntary and environmental sectors and to ensure that the PPN can without restriction critique policy where necessary, it is imperative that the PPN remains independent of the local authority.
- The current guidelines informing the development of the PPNs are overly prescriptive, particularly in relation to the 'flat' structure required. This is unworkable and unwieldy and should be immediately revoked.

Number of Documents Attached: 1

Boundaries Captured on Map: No