
Galway City Community Network

The Public Participation Network in Galway City

Submission to

Draft Strategic Policy Committees' Scheme 2019-2024

July 2019

Preface

Established in 2014, Galway City Community Network (GCCN) is the Public Participation Network in Galway City. It represents groups and organisations in the community, voluntary and environmental sectors in Galway City. The twin objectives that GCCN pursues are to

- Advance the values of sustainability, equality, culture, community, empowerment and inclusivity and embed these in the policies, programmes and practice of local government, state organisations, national government and civil society;
- Develop and implement progressive models of and approaches to representation, participation and engagement for civil society in informing and shaping policy development and implementation.

Submission

Galway City Community Networks welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Draft Strategic Policy Committees' Scheme 2019-2024. GCCN believes that Strategic Policy Committees (SPCs) make a crucial contribution to the formulation, development and review of policy¹. As Circular LG 07/2014 highlights, the SPCs bring together both Councillors and people actively working with social, economic, cultural and environmental bodies to develop and review policies related to council services. The SPCs, thus, provide councillors 'with external views as they discharge their strategic role in the development of the local authority, including their policy development and oversight roles within the local authority....The SPC system provides [Councillors] with a better focus and enhanced capacity for involvement in policy formulation, review, monitoring and evaluation with inbuilt assistance of relevant sectoral interests and with the support of a Director of Services'².

Notwithstanding the vibrancy of Galway City, there is much work to be done over the lifetime of this council to ensure progress towards the achievement of the vision for Galway City to be a **successful, sustainable, socially inclusive regional capital** as set out in the City Development Plan³, particularly in the context of the significant challenges of accelerating climate breakdown and biodiversity loss that will impact on all aspects of life in Galway City.

This submission was developed based on a consultation process which many GCCN members engaged with and is categorised into the following:

- Operation;
- Code of Conduct;
- Public Sector Duty;
- Number of Strategic Policy Committees;
- Cross-cutting Themes;
- Membership;
- Review;
- Conclusion.

¹ Circular LG 07/2014 - Establishment of New Strategic Policy Committees (SPCs) and Corporate Policy Group – Strategic Policy Committee Guidance

² Ibid, P 3 & 4

³ Galway City Council Development Plan 2017-2023

Operation

It is the experience of many GCCN representatives that their contribution is not as valued or respected as it should be. It is critical that a culture of collaboration and partnership is developed that will underpin and inform the way the SPC members work together to achieve their shared vision. Please see the GCCN publication, *Guidelines for Successful Community Engagement*⁴ for more on this.

Given the critical nature of the work of the Strategic Policy Committees, **GCCN recommends that there should be a minimum of six SPC meetings in each calendar year.**

GCCN representatives have raised the issue of meeting dates being changed and starting times amended, making attendance by GCCN representative challenging. **GCCN recommends that all SPC meetings be calendar-dated at the beginning of each year or term.** We acknowledge that this is not always possible or that meeting dates sometimes need to be changed or meetings need to be called at short notice. However, this should be the case only in exceptional circumstances. Where this is the case, three weeks' notice is essential in order to enable the GCCN representative to make arrangements to attend.

We refer to **DRCD Circular Letter CVSP 7/2019 on the role of PPNs on new Boards and Committees requiring PPN Representation** in reminding 'you and your colleagues to be cognisant of the voluntary nature of PPN Representatives and that due consideration be given when arranging meetings'. **GCCN recommends that all GCCN representatives be consulted on the timing of meetings and that times are set to best suit them and other SPC members.**

Another issue that has been highlighted consistently by GCCN representative on SPCs and other structures is the timely circulation of documentation. This refers to minutes of previous SPC meetings, often not circulated until the next meeting is due, the draft agenda and other documentation relevant to the meeting, often only circulated at the meeting. Circular LG 7/2014 makes a number of recommendations regarding the timely circulation of documentation and this is an ideal time to address this issue.

GCCN recommends:

- **The minutes of meeting be circulated within two weeks;**
- **The draft agenda and other meeting documentation should be circulated with three weeks' notice/reminder of the next meeting. Where additional information is to be circulated, this should be clearly indicated and sent to the representatives at least one week in advance;**
- **A clear mechanism should be put in place for SPC members and community groups to request policy items for the agenda of each SPC meeting including timelines and groups responsible for any presentation.**

Inclusion of items for the agenda is also an issue for GCCN members. **GCCN recommends a clear, transparent system for including items on the agenda for all SPCs.**

Circular LG 7/2014 Section 3.1 recognises that Councillors active involvement is crucial to the success of SPCs, stating, 'The success of the SPCs is crucially dependent on the active involvement of councillors and on a positive mindset from all involved –councillors, sectoral representatives, Chief Executives, directors and staff – that are focused on the strategic role of SPCs. The work of the SPC chair and Director of Services is of critical

⁴ <https://galwaycitycommunitynetwork.ie/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/GCCN-Guidelines-for-Successful-Community-Engagement-728x1030.jpg>

importance.’ In the experience of many of the GCCN representatives, several other members, particularly Councillors, often arrive at meetings late and leave meetings early. This is disruptive and often leads to meetings being inquorate. **GCCN recommends that all members be required to allocate sufficient time to the meetings.**

There is currently little evidence in relation to the effectiveness and the impact of the work of the Strategic Policy Committees. **GCCN recommends:**

- **Metrics for effectiveness are developed for each SPC work programme in order that the impact of the work of each SPC can be tracked and reviewed;**
- **The effectiveness of each SPC should be measured by its policy output;**
- **All motions or policies passed by SPCs should automatically go on the agenda of the next council meeting. These should be proposed at council meetings by the chair of the relevant SPC;**
- **Members of SPCs should be advised in advance when motions or policies from the SPC are likely to be debated by council.**

The importance of the Corporate Policy Group, as emphasised by Circular LG 07/2014, is acknowledged. In the interests of collaboration and partnership working, **GCCN recommends that the CPG includes a representative of each of the sectoral interests.**

We refer to DRCD Circular Letter CVSP 7/2019 on the role of PPNs on new Boards and Committees requiring PPN Representation and highlight its renewed call:

- that Local Authorities agree to and adopt a Protocol for all committees/decision making committees with PPN representatives which will enable the representatives to engage appropriately;
- that Local Authorities set aside resources for participation on key decision making committees to cover travel and subsistence expenses for PPN representatives;
- that Local Authorities facilitate access to a library of relevant thematic documents focused on groups and committees that the **Network** are represented on, and;
- that Local Authorities provide Training Supports that may be required for Representatives to enable them to build their capacity for the role of PPN Representative.

Code of Conduct

GCCN recommends that all members of each SPC be required to agree to a code of conduct that is based on mutual respect. This code should be derived from the principles in the Galway City LCDC Human Rights and Equality Statement and all SPC members should receive mandatory diversity and social inclusion training.

Public Sector Duty

GCCN recommends that members of Galway City Council and in particular in this instance, members of the SPCs should be reminded of their legal obligation to promote equality, prevent discrimination and protect the human rights of their employees, customers, service users and everyone affected by their policies and plans. This Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty is a legal obligation originating in Section 42 of the Irish Human Rights and Equality Act 2014.

Number of Strategic Policy Committees

The draft states that the proposed number of SPCs in Galway City Council will be five, including the SPC whose remit includes Economic Development and Enterprise, which is required under the Local Development Reform Act 2014 and further states that a number of factors were taken into account in determining this number. However, this determination has resulted in a number of SPCs having significantly challenging remits given the breadth of the work to be undertaken, and GCCN is concerned that the depth of work required under each area of responsibility will suffer as a result.

This is particularly the case with the proposed SPC3 – Economic, Community and Cultural Development (to include Economic Development and Enterprise) and SPC5 – Climate Action, Environment, Recreation and Amenity. Each of the SPC headings would warrant an SPC of their own. GCCN is critically concerned that:

- It will be difficult to identify members that have an interest in the eclectic range of issues to be dealt with under SPC3;
- The challenges associated with the issues to be dealt with under SPC5 make the combination unworkable.

GCCN recommends:

- **Acknowledging the crisis in homelessness, SPC1 Housing and Social Inclusion should be renamed Housing, Homelessness and Social Inclusion.** GCCN believes that taking this into account Affordable Housing is included in the remit of this SPC. The inclusion of social inclusion under the auspices of this SPC should be defined and it should be explicit that social inclusion is not confined to the work of this SPC but is a cross-cutting theme for all SPCs;
- SPC3 – **split the SPC into Economic and Enterprise Development and Community and Cultural Development.** Given the critical nature of the work under both sets of issues, GCCN believes that there is a strong rationale for this. In the absence of this, at the very least expand the membership of the SPC and ensure that there are working groups to cover both sets of issues attached to the SPC;
- SPC5 – **establish a standalone Climate Action and Biodiversity SPC.** In addition, acknowledging that the effects of climate breakdown will impact on all aspects of life, **each SPC should include climate action as an issue.** In that context, each SPC should have a Climate Action Working Group and members of each Climate Action Working Group should be convened on a regular basis under the auspices of the Local Community Development Committee;
- **SPC4 Transportation should be renamed Transportation, Infrastructure and Energy** to ensure that these critical areas of work are named and included and to reflect the role that local authorities are assigned in the area of energy by the national **Climate Action Plan 2019: To Tackle Climate Action.**

Cross-Cutting Themes

GCCN recommends that there be a number of cross-cutting themes that all SPCs should be asked to be mindful of and responsible for in their areas of responsibility. These include social inclusion, diversity, equality, accessibility, as well as the afore mentioned climate breakdown and biodiversity loss. SPCs should be required to proof their work to ensure that any negative impacts are avoided, and positive impacts are promoted.

Membership

It is noted that Galway City Council are restricting membership of each SPC to 12 members, comprising 8 Elected Member and 4 Sectoral Representatives. It is noted that Circular LG 07/2014 states that each SPC should have as a minimum a total membership of nine but does not specify a maximum number of members. GCCN suggests that this number of members may not be sufficient to meet the obligations of the SPC, particularly where the SPC spans a number of issues. **GCCN recommends increasing the number of members in each SPC to 15.**

The proposed representation of the sectors on the Strategic Policy Committees is set out on page 7 of the draft schedule. **GCCN is requesting that the community, voluntary, social inclusion and environmental representatives be increased, and that Galway City Community Network be assigned three places on SPC1, SPC2, SPC3, SPC4 and four places on SPC5.**

Review

GCCN recommends that a system of annual review is built into the SPCs.

Conclusion

Galway City Community Network looks forward to working with colleagues on the SPCs in a joint effort to ensure that Galway becomes a successful, sustainable, socially inclusive regional capital.