
Galway City Community Network

The Public Participation Network in Galway City

Submission on the

Draft PPN Handbook

Preface

Established in 2014, Galway City Community Network is the Public Participation Network in Galway City. It represents over 150 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 Network welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the PPN Draft Handbook. This submission is being made on behalf of GCCN, the Public Participation Network for Galway City, GCCN Secretariat and the wider GCCN membership who were consulted with in the formulation of this submission. GCCN has divided its response into two areas. The first is in relation to the substantive issues that are addressed in the draft PPN Handbook. The latter is in relation to structural feedback that is in the draft PPN Handbook.

General

The GCCN Secretariat reviewed the draft PPN Handbook and strongly contends that, as it currently stands, it is badly written, inconsistent, repetitive and is not fit for purpose. The GCCN Secretariat requests that a new document that is fit for purpose be produced for consultation.

Substantive issues

Purpose of PPNs

The preface of the draft PPN Handbook sets the tone for the document and as written, it sets the wrong tone. PPNs are not and should not be *a network that allows local authorities to connect with community groups around the country*. PPNs should be clearly identified as networks of community, voluntary and environmental organisations and groups, that develop and implement progressive models of and approaches to representation, participation and engagement for civil society in informing and shaping policy development and implementation. The role also needs to be clearly identified. GCCN suggests:

- To act as a platform for the groups/organisations engaged in the community, voluntary and environmental sectors;
- To develop policy and positions on issues of common concern to the sectors and to communities and to advocate for these policies and positions to be implemented;
- To facilitate the representation of the community, voluntary and environmental sectors on the Local Community Development Committee, the Strategic Policy Committees, the

Joint Policing Committee, other local government and local development bodies and any local, regional, national or international body deemed appropriate;

- To contribute to the development and achievement of a vision for the well-being of this and future generations.

GCCN strongly advocates that the underlying premise for a PPN is in its independence from local authority structures (pg. 44). Even for those that work within local authorities, independence and autonomy were always underlying principles. GCCN recognises that it has been referred to elsewhere in the document, however the nature of its importance ought to be reflected in the opening statement as this sets the tone for all other statements and GCCN feels that the independence of PPNs should be reflected in the opening foreword of the PPN Handbook.

Principles and Values of PPNs

The nature of principles and values is that they are reached through a participatory process and are reviewed in the context of cultural and demographic changes. GCCN agrees that values and principles underly all the work we carry out. These ought not to be prescriptive but reached through engagement with member organisations.

GCCN would like to draw attention to the use of the term “Deliberative Democracy” in the list of acronyms (pg. 7 & 18). As a PPN we work from the principle of “Participative Democracy” where all our members are supported in participating in local structures through various means. GCCN would point out that the handbook refers to these two terms as the same (pg. 9) where there are theoretical differences.

Structure of PPNs

Flat Structure

GCCN believes that the PPN Handbook’s insistence on a flat structure is out of touch with the reality of the nature of the work of a PPN. GCCN previously outlined our position on this in the submission we made in relation to the User Guide in 2019. GCCN would like to add to this in relation to the voluntary contribution members make. A flat structure requires considerable investment in the capacity building of members to take on leadership roles. This is in addition to the considerable time that volunteers contribute to PPNs. In line with the flat structure outlined in the Handbook chairing of Secretariat meetings is recommended to be in line with that of a flat structure. GCCN agrees that the holding of power should not lie with a single individual However there needs to be a recognition that members of the Secretariat come with different skill sets. Imposing a flat structure on Secretariat meetings would be counter productive and tokenistic.

In GCCN, roles rotate in the Linkage Groups and the Thematic Groups, and the Secretariat operates a participatory structure that prioritises the active participation of members, including at Plenary meetings.

GCCN recommends that the ‘flat’ structure should be optional once PPNs can provide evidence that members feel that the structures are participatory and transparent.

Secretariat

GCCN believes that the Handbook is not reflective of the division of tasks between the Secretariat and paid staff. The Secretariat are volunteers who do not carry out administrative functions such as; organise or help organise activities on behalf of the members groups, communicate regularly with all member

groups and share information about all PPN activities as widely as possible and keep up to date all PPN business, including minutes of meetings and making sure agenda are circulated in good time (pg. 11).

Resource Workers

As stated throughout the Handbook the role of a PPN is to encourage increased participation by member organisations through facilitating meetings, providing support and communicating relevant information. GCCN believes that Resource Workers need a background in the Community and Voluntary sector in order to be able to carry out their role. Resource Workers need to be drawn from areas that are independent from the Local Authority as opposed to being on secondment (pg. 12 & pg. 45).

Training and Networking

GCCN welcomes the recognition of the role that PPNs play in communicating with members around training events and the networking involved. GCCN recognises the requirement for the ongoing upskilling of our members in a number of areas. The Handbook states that PPNs provide training for member organisations which is free or at a very low cost (pg. 19). The delivery of training is an extra resource that has not been budgeted for in the allocation of funding to PPNs (pg. 37).

National Advisory Group

GCCN believes that the membership of the current National Advisory Group requires transparency and accountability. The Resource Workers have a clear election process but there appears to be a lack of clarity in relation to the other members bar the chair who is the Principal Officer of DRCD (pg.49). In line with the Department's requirements GCCN call for an election process that is inclusive, transparent and fair. GCCN call for an open election process in relation to nominations, elections and a clear time frame.

Community Well Being

GCCN believes that the development of a vision for a Community Well Being Statement is not best placed in a PPN Handbook (Pg. 40 & 47).

Structural Feedback

GCCN welcomes the development of a Draft PPN Handbook and our opportunity to give feedback. In line with a number of other PPNs, as communicated at the National Resource Workers Meeting on January the 15th to Niall Hayden of DRCD, there were a number of shared issues that were articulated. Amongst these were the fact that the Draft PPN Handbook was lengthy and addressed issues that were not relevant to a Handbook.

The Secretariat of GCCN fed back that the addition of appendices, templates etc. was best placed in another resource. The duplication of issues and the over explanation of structures was also highlighted as unnecessary. The Secretariat also highlighted the inconsistencies and repetitions throughout the document