Galway City Community Network

The Public Participation Network in Galway City

Submission on the

PPN User Guide Review

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 Networks welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the PPN User Guide Review. The subsistence of the submission is based on the outcomes of a discussion held at the GCCN Plenary Meeting in March and discussions at GCN Secretariat level.

Structure of PPNs

'Flat' Structure

GCCN believes that the User Guide insistence on a 'flat' structure is out of touch with the reality of the nature of the work of a PPN. No other organisation or network in the community, voluntary or environmental sectors is required to have such a structure. It is being imposed on PPNs without an adequate discussion/debate on the difficulties associated with it. GCCN would encourage the department to refer to the 10 Strategy to Support Local and Community Development and to engage with experts in this field such as Community Work Ireland to discuss this issue.

The issue has been discussed by the Secretariat and the Plenary on a number of occasions and in the experience of many of the members, a 'flat' structure has a number of significant number of drawbacks:

- The lack of a democratically accountable chairperson has the potential to create a void into which individual voice(s) would dominate without being accountable;
- There are inherent power imbalances in networks such as PPNs and bigger/greater resourced organisations could potentially dominate;
- It would leave the PPN without a recognisable leader in the context of often have to negotiate with the local authority, a very hierarchical structure.

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.

Plenary

GCCN believes that the Plenary meetings are critical to ensure participation, openness and accountability and the User Guide should expand on this section to reflect this. GCCN hold four Plenary meetings a year.

The Plenary meetings are where all members have an opportunity to hear what GCCN elected representatives do on behalf of GCCN. The visibility of the representatives is important in encouraging transparency and accountability. Members are encouraged to provide input and bring up issues relevant to the LCDC, SPCs and other structures and the Plenary is a critical space to discuss and engage with these issues.

GCCN suggests that two Plenary meetings a year is insufficient and recommends at least three. GCCN recommends that the section in the User Guide is expanded to reflect the practice as outlined above.

Secretariat
GCCN believes that the User Guide is adequate in relation to the Secretariat. In GCCN, the composition of the Secretariat is balanced across the Pillars and reflective of GCCN membership.

Linkage Groups
Linkage Groups and more informal Thematic Working Groups are crucial. GCCN has established a number of Thematic Linkage Groups through which it undertakes much of its work. The Linkage Groups and the Thematic Working Groups are critical to the participatory way that GCCN seeks to work and to the facilitation of the flow of information, ensuring that the representatives' positions are robust. Through the Linkage Groups, GCCN seeks to ensure that the representatives are aware of cross-cutting issues. For example, we would expect that the Environmental representatives are aware and will advocate for issues of social inclusion and equality and vice versa. As the Linkage Groups are thematically based, they are a good way of encouraging members to participates and move on to representation.

Activities of PPNs

Participation and Representation on Decision/Policy Making Bodies
GCCN Believes that the current User Guide is adequate in relation to this section and the GCCN Representatives' Charter reflects this approach as outlined. GCCN provides training in representation skills and this has proved very useful for current and potential representatives.

Whilst beyond the scope of the PPN User Guide, equal consideration should be given to the structures on which PPN representatives take seats. In a survey of GCCN representatives, one of the key findings was that the representatives do not believe that they are facilitated to participate on an equal footing with elected members and feel that their contributions are often treated with less than respect. In response, GCCN developed a document on consultation, representation and participation, outlining the rationale for participation and the expectations of GCCN representatives. GCCN would recommend this as good practice and has shared it with PPN colleagues.

GCCN recommends training be provided to current and potential representatives in representational skills, and the development of a guide to representation, consultation and participation as good practice. GCCN further recommends binding protocols be imposed on local authorities so that all members of the LCDC and SPCs are treated equally, with equal access to meeting documentation and information. Documentation should be circulated in advance of meetings in time for PPNs to organise Linkage or Thematic Group meetings. Finally, GCCN recommends that all documentation be made available in accessible formats and meetings be conducted in ways that ensure that people with disabilities be facilitated to fully participate.

Capacity Building and Training

GCCN believes that the PPN User Guide is adequate here. It reflects the collaborative approach taken by GCCN to this area of work. GCCN has established and engaged in a number of networks and coalitions to ensure capacity building and training to member. Examples include partnering with Galway City Partnership to provide training in the General Data Protection Regulations and partnering with the local authority to provide capacity building for the Community Enhancement Programme and training in the Public Sector Duty.

Information Sharing and Communication

GCCN believes that the PPN User Guide is adequate here and reflects the work of the network. GCCN circulates a newsletter on an almost weekly basis that is populated by a combination of information on GCCN events, including notice of upcoming meetings and reports of Linkage Group, LCDC, SPC and other meetings, and information from PPN members on their events etc.

One of the key difficulties is in ensuring that all relevant information from the local authority is sent to GCCN for circulation. While a number of sections of the local authority do this, other areas do not.

GCCN recommends a binding protocol be put in place by DRCD to ensure that all information is sent to the PPN for circulation.

Operation of PPNs

Budget and Workplan

GCCN believes that the PPN User Guide is adequate in this area and reflects GCCN practice. The GCCN budget is developed and approved by the Secretariat before being sent to Galway City Council for approval. Galway City Council have always treated GCCN fairly in relation to their contribution to the budget.

Similarly, the GCCN annual workplan is developed by the Secretariat and staff after consulting with the Plenary. It is then submitted for approval to Galway City Council.

Resource Worker and Support Worker

GCCN believes that the PPN User Guide is adequate in this area. We welcome the recent addition to the staff team and look forward to developing the capacity of the network in relation to communications and other supports. In Galway City, the staff are managed and directed by the Secretariat. Progress reports on the workplan are provided to the Secretariat at the monthly meetings and quarterly reports are provided to Galway City Council.

Monitoring and Evaluation

Budget, Workplan and Workers

Having agreed the budget and workplan, an update on progress and a financial report is made to every Secretariat meeting and GCCN finds this ongoing monitoring useful. Reports on both are made quarterly at the Plenary meetings and an Annual Report and financial report are also presented at the AGM.

PPN National Advisory Group

The relationship between the NAP and PPNs needs to be strengthened and communication needs to be improved.