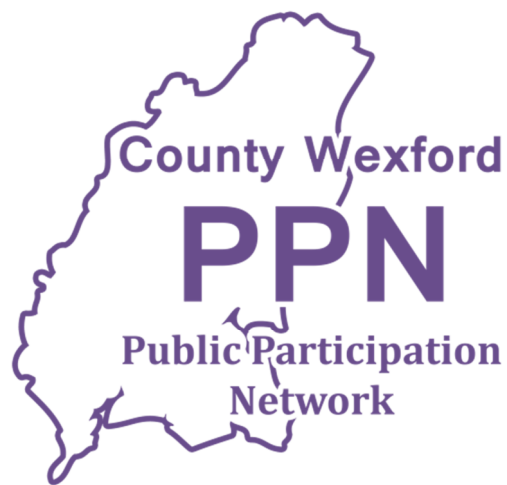SUBMISSION TO:

Consultation on Review of Public Participation Network User Guide

Submission from:

Wexford Public Participation Network (PPN)

Completed on behalf of Wexford PPN by:

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About Wexford PPN

Wexford PPN, an independent network of Community & Voluntary groups, is based at Wexford County Hall and has an MOU with Wexford County Council to facilitate its operations and staff employment.

Wexford PPN has 352 Approved Member groups spread across County Wexford. The Secretariat currently has 8 members and the organisation has one full time Support Officer.

The network currently has 30 volunteer Representative Seats across 12 different committees, both at Wexford County Council and other Organisations. Outside of these representations our PPN Support Officer also represents Wexford PPN at the Community Resilience Steering Group at Wexford County Council, and Wexford Comhairle na nÓg Steering Committee.

Wexford PPN engaged the membership through a consultation event to discuss and prepare for this submission. This submission includes the feedback from this event, in addition to that of the PPN Secretariat, a volunteer committee and the PPN Support Officer who is a paid employee.

Submission

As requested the submission follows the key headings as outlined in the call for submissions. These are

1. Structure of PPNs
2. Activities of PPNs
3. Operation of PPNs
4. Relationships between the PPN and the respective local authority
5. Monitoring and Evaluation
6. Templates that would be helpful
7. Any other Recommendations in relation to the review of the User Guide

1. Structures of PPNs

At an overall level the structures of the PPN are **not clearly understood by members** for two main reasons.

1. Use of jargon, acronyms and language not common to most community and voluntary groups and therefore are a primary barrier to understanding. Suggestions for potential changes of key terms include:
   - Plenary – Total membership
   - Plenary Meeting – County Membership Meeting
   - Secretariat – Steering/Managing committee
   - Electoral College – Group Type/Category
2. Secondly the structure of the PPN is seen to be confusing – with an over-complication and misunderstanding of terms. This is particularly around linkage groups and thematic networks – with both often being confused.

The structures of the PPN are also seen to be **over-complicated and not practical** for operation by a PPN. Simplification of the structures could include:

- Membership - categorised by Group Type (Electoral College) & geographic region (MD)
- Meetings – categorised by County (plenary), Regional (MD) or Interest Area (Thematic Networks)

Linkage groups are seen to be unworkable for the following reasons:
- Linkage groups link to a specific committee or board. In many cases the work of the board or committee is not known or understood and so members do not engage due to lack of understanding.
- Requirement to have a linkage group per Committee and for these to meet/engage regularly with multiple Representations means it is not practical for volunteers. For example, in Wexford with representation on 12 committees we should have 12 linkage groups and have a means of engagement for each including meetings, in addition to other members meetings.

It is suggested that linkage groups be removed from the structures and that 'Interest Areas' be the focus, with each committee representation assigned specifically to an 'Interest Area' category. Commonality of some interest areas across all PPNs would be beneficial as this would allow for national networking on these issues where necessary. Voting of Representatives could then be completed at total membership level or interest area level. An alternative would be to focus on each pillar or Electoral College. However, there are some concerns around current Electoral College structure.

Electoral College or group type should be based on self-selection for all cases with no need to have Environment groups approved at a national level. Currently some groups who are very active environmentally are in a community and voluntary Electoral College which does not accurately reflect the structure of the membership. At a national level the 2017 annual report showed that the Community & Voluntary Electoral College accounted for 79% of the membership. Such a majority classification must call into question the classifications.

Secretariat role should include mention of a monitoring and oversight role.

Underpinning the PPN with a **Legal Framework** is mentioned in the current user guide. Currently, PPNs based in Local Authorities do not have this option. These PPNs do not have a legal structure – they are simply 'A Network'. It would be beneficial to include guidance on same and the type of options available to PPNs based at Local Authorities. This would also help to highlight the independence of PPNs. Some PPNs also have constitutions, while others do not. Guidance on what is needed by PPNs overall and by structure type (hosted, LA, or Company) and templates for same should be required.

Some clarification needs to be provided around **Policies and Procedures required by PPNs** overall and by structure type (hosted, LA, or Company) and templates for same should be required.

Guidance should be provided on **requirements on PPNs** – e.g. should PPNs be registered with The Lobbying Register (Lobbying.ie)?

The current **diagram** provided with the Use Guide to explain the structures is seen to be confusing by PPN volunteers.

GDPR and membership contact management needs to be considered in the new User Guide. Guidance around whether Secretariat or Reps should have **access to member details** should be considered. If access is given, consideration should be given to whether this gives unfair advantage to these individuals at time of elections – as they have member contacts to encourage support for a nomination. However, without access PPN Reps and Secretariat feel they cannot engage with the membership and build relationships. This means also that the administrative burden on the Resource Worker increases – as they act as the go-between for members. National guidance is needed and templates or procedures for same.

Re-registration annually has been a concern for many PPNs. Wexford has conducted annual re-registration and we would welcome same in a simple manner for members to ensure the membership remains current and relevant. If re-registration is to be extended to two years in the guidelines can it be worded to 're-register at least every two years' which would allow conducting annually if the PPN decided to do so.

The current guidelines (Appendix 1) suggest group contacts should be '**active users of email'**. Practically not all groups use email and for greater social inclusion we should recognise and facilitate this reality.

Appendix 1 – Managing Membership - Paragraph 6 'An individual should not be the **contact for multiple groups'** - This is difficult in reality as some groups would not be members only for one key contact who is happy to take on the contact role. Enforcing this strictly could mean the loss of groups and so it should be encouraged rather than being a rule.

Appendix 1 – Managing Membership - Paragraph 7 mentions '**direct outreach to groups'**. This is not possible with current resourcing of PPNs. With the administrative load on current workers real development work is not possible.

2 Activities of PPNs
The description of the activities of the PPN should be **short, concise and understandable**. Wexford PPN uses the following to describe the activities to functions – Informing, Developing, and Representing. Descriptions of the activities in a short concise and understandable way will increase awareness and understanding and give clarity to what PPNs are and do.

The core of the PPN is around representation of the Community & Voluntary voice at local decision-making tables. However, the user guide does not give a **relative weight** to the importance of each of the activities or functions of a PPN.

The **appeal** of each of these functions among members varies also, with only the most engaged members showing interest in the Representing function. Therefore, it seems that the information function is often a recruitment tool and that members are grown towards the Representing function. The user guide needs to recognise this fact and provide guidance on how members can be grown to greater engagement with the Representing function.

Use of jargon, acronyms and language not common to most community and voluntary groups and therefore are a primary barrier to understanding the activities. Within the activities **Capacity Building specifically** is a term that is not common and often misunderstood.

The Use Guide states that the PPNs should be **the 'go to' organisation** for all bodies in a county who wish to benefit from community and voluntary expertise. Inclusion of details of how this aim is being promoted at a National level also would provide reassurance for volunteers operating PPNs also.

The guide states that a person who stands for election cannot be a PPN Rep for **one year after election** (if unsuccessful) or term (if elected). PPN Volunteers consider this a harsh measure for those never elected. Therefore, the suggestion is to allow unsuccessful candidates, never previously elected within the political spectrum, to immediately be nominated as PPN Representation with no time limit applying.

Appendix 8 of the current guide outlines the roles and responsibilities of the board or Committee. However, this is seen to be best practice that many committees deem not practical or possible. Can the user guide look at how the Representing function can practically operate within the confines of the current realities?

These **current realities** include,
- Limited or no committee induction training offered
- Short time for agendas and meeting materials
- Agendas not always set in consultation with members
- Meetings not facilitating the participation of volunteers – e.g. structure, timing, location

3. Operation of PPNs
A key is that the operation of the PPN is, and is seen to be, **independent**. This is particularly important for PPNs within Local Authorities.

In budget terms the Local Authority should be encouraged to further support the PPN either through additional finance or other supports as the successful development and engagement with PPNs will provide significant benefit to Local Authorities.

As an independent organisation the role of the Local Authority in the budget and workplan should be once of oversight and monitoring – as a part funder. While the PPN may engage

with the Local Authority as a stakeholder when developing the Budget and Workplan the decision for same should rest with the Plenary.

Where the Resource Worker is based at a Local Authority the **Line Manager** for the Resource Worker should be different to the PPN Contact. This allows the HR function to be separated from the PPN function for the Resource Worker and would more freely allow the PPN to be the 'critical friend' to the Local Authority. In most cases this would mean the line manager being outside of the Community Department, which is most usually the PPN liaison Department.

Titles for Resource Workers and Support Workers should be standardised across all PPNs to give greater consistency.

The User Guide suggests that the workload of PPNs can be helped by taking on **administrative support trainees**. It needs to be recognised that for some PPNs based at Local Authorities such options are not available and therefore alternative options should be suggested.

PPN Staffing requirements and skill sets are different to that of similar staff levels/grades of the Local Authority. Therefore, PPNs based at Local Authorities should be allowed to conduct specific recruitment for staff, facilitate through the Local Authority.

4. Relationships between the PPN and the respective Local Authority

The **Memorandum of Understanding** should be the key document for this relationship and each PPN relationship will vary based on same.

The **relationship** of the PPN with the Local Authority should be one of equality and partnership – working together for the benefit of citizens.

A key **Development requirement** is that the PPN has a presence and is understood right throughout the Local Authority. Therefore, development of a structure to facilitate this – for example PPN Ambassadors in each LA section who are driving the PPN message and function may help this development. Inclusion of PPN in the Councillors Handbook and induction is also seen to be key.

5. Monitoring and Evaluation
The **workplan and budget** should be the key measures by which the Local Authority monitors the work of the PPN. Regular reporting may be required, as agreed in the MOU, to facilitate this oversight.

The **Secretariat** should have a clearly defined monitoring and oversight role within the PPN.

6. Templates that would be helpful

See note on Section 1 around **GDPR** and membership contact management. National guidance is needed and templates or procedures for same.

See note in Section 1 regarding **Legal Framework.** Depending on the decision for same specific templates would be required.

See note on Section 1 around **Policies and Procedures required by PPNs.** Depending on the decision for same specific templates would be required.

7. Any other Recommendations in relation to the review of the User Guide

At an overall level the guide should be **restructured and abbreviated** for an overview of the structures, with more detailed and specific information provided in later chapters or appendices. Such an approach would engage members to a greater degree and this **executive summary type guide** could be used by each PPN as the universal and agreed explanation of PPNs. This would build greater awareness and understanding nationally – with consistent messaging. The document format should **reflect the audience** it is interned for – which is primarily community volunteers, in addition to resource workers.

There should be **no acronyms** used in the document and the use of **'plain English'** is encouraged to reach a broad audience. This could be achieved by engaging with the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) and their 'Plain English' proofing service.