

PPN User Guide Consultation

Submission from the PPN Regional Meeting, 21st March 2019, Athlone

The meeting took the format of a facilitated session following the structure of the consultation paper circulated by the Department of Rural and Community Development (the Department). There were 11 participants in total, representing the following PPNs:

PPN	Resource Worker	Secretariat	Other
Monaghan	1		
Westmeath	1		Support Worker
Laois	1		
Carlow		2	
Offaly	1	3	Support Worker

The consultation followed the format of the online consultation form and the User Guide contents. Participants were asked to identify areas that of improvement, expansion or clarity required within the User Guide to make it a more practical supporting document. They were also asked to identify what, if any, areas should be made mandatory. The point was made that the User Guide should be a 'living document' with flexible options available. Recommendations, with dissent where indicated, were made as follows:

Structure of the PPN

The session opened with the consensus view that the flat structure should be mandatory for all PPNs, with no appointed Chair or other similar company officer posts.

There was a view that the county plenary locations (i.e. a central location may still be some distance from those at the periphery of the county), so Municipal District plenarys should be optional.

The group found that linkage groups were not working effectively in any of their areas. The suggestion was made to change this to thematic groups only, which tend to generate more interest and have better participation. The group also felt that all thematic groups should have a seat on the Secretariat.

The diagram within the User Guide should be changed to more accurately reflect the structure of the PPN, with the Plenary at the centre, followed by Municipal Districts and then the Secretariat and Resource Worker supporting these structures.

The group felt that the Municipal District PPNs should be optional as, depending on county size, these can be unmanageable. The User Guide should also contain a mechanism for reviewing the engagement at this level.

Finally in this section, and linking also to the section on the Relationship with the Local Authority later in this submission, the group felt that links should be made between the thematic groups / MDs to specific posts within the Local Authority to have a more direct access to the decision making processes. This is currently the case in one PPN area and is found to be effective.

Activities of the PPN

The group were then asked to reflect on the activities of the PPN and how they might best be represented in an updated User Guide.

It was felt that all Committee Representatives (e.g. SPCs) should be reporting to the PPN and including the Resource Workers in their email distribution lists for meeting agendas and minutes.

A mandatory set timeframe for the provision of information from and to these groups would also enhance active participation in these processes as receiving information too late for a consultation hinders the PPN in their work.

Some training provision by the Local Authority would be beneficial for LCD Representatives and would help develop relationships with the Local Authority personnel.

The current version of the User Guide refers to timing meetings to accommodate representation by the PPN, however this has not been found to be the case. The group felt that there should be a mandatory proportion of meetings held in the evenings to provide this accommodation.

Induction training should be mandatory for all Representatives and new Secretariat members, with other training to be provided on an optional basis in consideration of the voluntary status of those involved with the PPN.

It was also felt that the membership should have access to training on policy development.

Deviations

While not strictly within the parameters of the consultation, it was felt that the Environmental Pillar should be encouraged to be more inclusive to groups not currently considered for inclusion by them (e.g. Tidy Towns) as this would encourage participation by these groups in the policy processes.

Operations of the PPN

There was a broad discussion in respect of the Workplan of the PPN. As this is generally developed by the Resource Worker and Secretariat, there is a danger that it may not be viewed as representative of the will of the membership. It was felt that a process for allowing consultation / inputs into the Workplan should be developed to allow groups to feed in to a draft, with the Plenary then asked to ratify it at its next meeting.

There was a view that a Budget line should be included to provide external trainers to deliver training on roles and responsibilities for the various stakeholders in the PPN.

The group felt that there needed to be a clear statement in the User Guide that the PPN is a Strategic Body and that the focus of the PPN should be on strategic policy areas.

As the needs of the PPN change from year to year, it was felt that there should be some change to the current process of Budget surpluses being deducted from the next year's allocation. Options suggested were an optional refund of the surplus or the ability to carry over an amount up to a certain limit. The building of 'savings' would allow the PPN to plan for bigger / special projects over the space of 3-5 years.

Deviations

While not strictly within the parameters of the consultation, while the Budget to provide a Support Worker was welcomed by the PPNs, it was noted that there was not additional provision in the operational Budget of the PPN to reflect increased associated costs (e.g. provision of equipment etc.).

Relationship with Local Authority

While acknowledging that the Department was not the overseeing Department for LAs, a recommendation was made that the PPN Resource Worker should be hosted outside of the Local Authority office, even where they are formally employed by the Local Authority. This would give greater clarity of boundaries and allow the Resource Worker to be seen as independent. In this regard, a clear statement as to the line management of the Resource Worker would be of benefit in this section.

The current version of the User Guide refers to the Local Authority supporting the PPN's independence, the group felt that this should be emphasised in the next iteration.

It was also felt that statements in respect of the relationship with the Local Authority made elsewhere in the User Guide (e.g. re expenses etc.) should be restated within this section.

As referred to earlier, this section should also have a mandatory statement to the effect of meetings being timed to facilitate PPN representation.

Finally on this point, the group felt that there should be a mandatory section of the need to include PPN representatives meaningfully in policy decisions, with the suggestion of a set of agreed protocols being included as an appendix.

Monitoring and Evaluation

The group felt that the Key Performance Indicators already in existence for PPNs and Local Authorities should form an Appendix to the User Guide.

The PPN representatives on the National Advisory Group (the NAG) should produce a written report of meetings for circulation to the PPNs.

The group also wanted a statement within the User Guide to the effect that the PPNs could input into the agenda of the NAG, with sufficient time provided before meetings to do so.

The group felt that there should be a set term for PPN Representatives on the NAG and that the Terms of Reference of the NAG should be included in the User Guide as an appendix.

The new groups, Secretariat and Resource Worker, should also be reflected in the User Guide, as should the regional networks. The section on regional networks should reflect that not every region has such a network.

Divergences

There was some discussion as to whether the Support Worker should be included in the Resource Worker meetings, or whether they should establish their own network.

The point was raised that gender balance initiatives are becoming more prevalent in other policy arenas, and this might be something to be explored by the PPN.

Templates

A range of templates were identified by the group for inclusion in the User Guide which would allow for standardisation and quality assurance across the PPNs and reduce duplication of work. These templates are:

- All policies and procedural documents set out in the Annual Report questionnaire.
- Review the Appendix re Secretariats.

- Terms of Reference for Committee meetings.
- A Reporting Template for Representatives.
- A Grievance Procedure.
- A Workplan Consultation Process.
- Terms of Reference for the National Advisory Group.
- The role of the Resource Worker and Support Worker reflecting achievable goals for these posts.
- A Statement of Management.
- A Conflict of Interest Policy for the various groups and committees.
- Local Authority Protocols.

Other Areas

It was felt that having the following areas addressed directly in the User Guide would be of benefit:

- Data Protection Policies and Guidelines to be clearly set out.
- Governance Codes for PPNs.
- Information and support re Local Elections.
- A review of the section on re-registration of members, with the suggestion that this not be an annual event.
- A clear statement that the Annual Report template will be circulated on a timely basis.
- The inclusion of management protocols for Representatives and a Representatives charter with clear supports around issues such as bullying dignity in the workplace.

The meeting closed.