

PPN User Guide Consultation

Submission from the PPN Regional Meeting, 12th March 2019, Dublin

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 8 participants in total, representing the following PPNs:

PPN	Resource Worker	Secretariat	Other
Dublin City		2	SPC Rep
DLR	1	1	
Wicklow			LA Support Officer
Fingal		1	JPC Rep

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 a view that the current iteration of the User Guide on structures was fine as it was, it just needed to be adhered to, with some calls for this section to be made mandatory in its entirety. This was not a majority view.

Greater clarity was sought in relation to the operation of a flat structure, particularly where access to funding etc. is only available to independent entities. To this end, Appendix 3 should also be reviewed. An example of best practice discussed was that of the use of a facilitator for a 6 month period, which would provide continuity. This suggestion could be incorporated into the User Guide.

Clarity is also sought in relation to Linkage Groups, election to them and their decision-making processes. Some PPNs are interpreting the current guidance in this area as meaning open to all, whereas Linkage Groups are only open to special interest groups in other PPN areas. It was felt that mandatory rules on election, representation and decision-making would be of benefit here, while at the same time allowing an element of flexibility to encourage participation.

The group also felt that the newly formed national Resource Worker and Secretariat groups should also be reflected in this section.

A suggestion was made to replace the current diagram on page 11 of the existing User Guide to one that reflects the centrality of the Plenary to the processes and decision-making of the PPN.

Further clarity was sought on what is required for election to SPCs.

Finally in this area, it was felt that ensuring a balance should be made 'best endeavours' (not quite mandatory) to ensure gender and geographical representation.

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 training was needed on the User Guide itself so that everyone involved in the PPNs was aware of what they were, what they were intended to achieve and how they can be used. This training should be mandatory.

The User Guide should reflect a new way of working with Local Authorities (LA), modelled on best practice in PPNs with good working relationships with their LA. This could form part of mandatory induction training for new Reps and LA personnel. It was felt that this relationship could also benefit from the development of a PPN Annual Report presented to the councillors.

There was some discussion that both the PPN as a whole and the Linkage Groups would benefit from focusing on what can be agreed on and moving forward, rather than engaging in protracted discussions on 'sticking points' – although it was acknowledged that areas of disagreement would need to be dealt with. To this end, it was suggested that the diversity of opinions are reflected in the contributions of Reps where possible.

Deviations

While not strictly within the parameters of the consultation, it was felt that there should be an insertion / Departmental circular to the effect that the current version of the User Guide must be adhered to until such time as any new iteration has been issued.

Operations of the PPN

The group felt that the Plenary should set the agenda of the PPN, rather than working to the recommendations of the Secretariat. However it was acknowledged that some PPNs may not yet be at this stage in their development yet, and so there should be some pathway to achieve this.

PPNs should have an annual work plan with an element of continuity (e.g. online consultations) to provide some clarity of purpose.

A section on the newly funded Support Worker post was sought, in addition to the expansion of the section on the Resource Worker to make it more reflective of this substantial role. In addition, a statement of funding security in regard to these posts was sought. It was also felt beneficial that any expansion in relation to the Resource Worker would contain clarity as to the relationship of the Resource Worker with the LA, where the Resource Worker is seconded by / otherwise directly employed by the LA.

It was felt that the PPNs would benefit from a timeframe for the year, i.e. indicative delivery dates for specific pieces of work (the example provided being the generation of a work plan in the Autumn of the previous year, rather than the beginning of the new year).

Relationship with Local Authority

While acknowledging that the Department was not the overseeing Department for LAs, a recommendation was made that a statement re principles of equality and respect be set out at the beginning of this section to ensure that both parties adhere to these principles in their dealings with each other.

In line with good practices established in some PPNs, it was felt that having a PPN Rep attend the management meetings of the LA would be beneficial.

The requirement for the LAs to circulate consultations should be strengthened to include reference to these consultations to be circulated as soon as possible and circulation of documentation by the LA should be time-based, e.g. within 2 weeks of the meeting.

It should be mandatory that LA staff engaging with PPNs should be at a level with decision-making power.

Information should also be consistent across LAs, irrespective of the individuals involved (at present engagement is based on the individual concerned in the respective area).

Monitoring and Evaluation

The group felt that there should be some onus on the PPNs to make better use of their Salesforce databases, e.g. through the use of survey and analytics apps available to voluntary organisations which would enhance the PPNs understanding of its membership and the issues affecting them. These tools should be supported by a 'How To' guide appended to the User Guide.

Any LA review of the PPN should be made available to the PPN in advance of publication, with a feedback mechanism for PPN inputs.

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.
- Guidelines for LA and PPN engagements with best practice examples.
- An expanded Representatives Charter, particularly for SPCs.
- A diagram of PPN (and Groups) placement in decision-making structures.
- Training presentations for standardised training delivery (e.g. induction training)
- Code of Conduct, although there were some views that this should not impede functioning of the Reps or act as a deterrent to potential volunteers.
- Rights and Responsibilities of LA, similar to what was in place in the 2014 guidelines.
- The full template of Annual Report questions.
- Appendix for the Support Worker and Resource Worker.
- Sample Budget.
- Sample Workplan.
- A strengthened Declaration of Interest.

Other Areas

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

- Definition of Public Participation and Participation generally, with training on what constitutes meaningful participation.
- Recommendations for Digital Resources, e.g. online meetings and consultations. However, it was also stressed that these should not fully replace meeting in person and open consultations through various media.
- That the national Resource Worker group be replicated for the Secretariat and have consistency.
- A list of supports available to the Resource Worker, from other stakeholders.
- A statement to the effect that PPN Reps, acting in the course of their duties, be exempted from defamation proceedings.

The meeting closed.