

PPN User Guide Consultation

Submission from the PPN Regional Meeting, 30th April 2019, Leitrim

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 16 participants in total, representing the following PPNs:

PPN	Resource Worker	Secretariat	Other
Leitrim	1	2	2
Mayo	1		
Donegal	1		
Westmeath		5	
Roscommon		1	
Sligo	1		
Galway City		1	
Galway County		1	

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. Recommendations, with dissent where indicated, were made as follows:

Structure of the PPN

The first section the group looked at was the one relating to the Structure of the PPN. There was some discussion that there should be an alignment with the constitution of the PPN and Departmental circulars to bring greater clarity to what is expected of the PPNs. In particular, it was suggested that a clear statement be set out in respect of how Secretariat members should engage with the local elections and the difference between those potentially being nominated by a party to stand for election, and those standing as independents.

Another suggestion was that the section in respect of the Plenary be expanded to take account of the difficult circumstances that can emerge in calling a Plenary meeting and to reflect the diverse nature of the PPNs (e.g. geographically etc.).

The group felt that Linkage Groups should be discretionary and that perhaps it would be better to move to thematic groups instead. Where this model is operating it was found to improve participation at representative level.

It was also noted that much of the language within could be confusing and therefore off-putting to potential participants. For example, 'plenary' is not a word that everyone understands and terms such as 'community meeting' or 'AGM' might better reflect what it is. The same issue emerges with reference to Municipal District Plenary meetings, that might be better described as 'information meetings'. The group agreed that there needed to be consistency of language for PPNs that is reflective of their nature and readily understood.

A suggestion was made that the Plenary should be developed, aligned to the Linkage Groups and allow for informal Thematic Groups.

A further suggestion was the need for a clear, comprehensive explanation of what is expected from a flat structure and either make the flat structure mandatory or all within this clear definition or discretionary. There is a very poor comprehension of flat structure. Further education is required to bring about cultural change as well as general education on how it can work.

Where areas of best practice exist, these should be reflected in the User Guide as case study examples to support other PPNs.

There was also the suggestion that a Representatives Forum could improve participation.

There was a suggestion that the make-up of the Secretariat be established as a set of rules within the User Guide, with the role of the Environmental Pillar reviewed to be more consistent with its proportionate membership. It was also felt that there was some disparity between the election of Social Inclusion and Community and Voluntary Representatives and the appointment of Environmental Representatives.

It was acknowledged that the role of the Secretariat is very onerous on the volunteers and that this should be reflected in the document.

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 induction training should be mandatory for all Secretariat, Local Authorities, Council Officials and Councillors, with an associated budget line for this provision. A suggestion was made that this training be signed-off and representation should not be allowed to proceed without it. It was further suggested that Committees themselves be involved in the provision of training for Representatives, by way of a preliminary meeting. This would also alleviate some of the work in this area for the Resource Worker.

The group felt that there must be a statement of the Representatives' responsibility and reference to a Representatives Charter and Code of Conduct set out in the Appendix.

A suggestion was made that an appeals process is needed for Associate Memberships to become Full Members.

The group felt that there needed to be a review of the Representatives commitments, with greater and more timely information provision for Representatives.

The group also felt that a mandatory national advertising campaign was needed to raise awareness of the PPNs at national level. This should be provided on an ongoing basis and written into the User Guide.

A statement of national standards was suggested, including a clear statement on the need to encourage diversity and respect.

Finally on this point, it was suggested that a statement to the effect that the PPN will work collaboratively with SICAP workers should be included in the User Guide to encourage participation.

Operations of the PPN

It was felt that there should be fluidity in the Workplan to account for the needs of the community which the PPN serves and to allow PPN workers to be responsive to those needs. More detail was also needed on the individual workpieces to fully reflect the time and resource commitment involved,

with contingency time embedded into the Workplan to allow for responses to unforeseen pieces of work or events.

The group felt that there should be clarity on the role of the Resource Worker vis a vis the Secretariat – and the role of the Local Authority as employer where the Resource Worker is directly employed by them. The role of the Resource Worker in general also requires greater clarity than currently provided in the User Guide, with the suggestion of both a Resource Worker and Support Worker definition / description being included as an Appendix.

With regard to the budget, the group felt that there should be a clear distinction between the staffing budget and the operational budget of the PPN.

A mandatory Dignity in the Workplace training was also suggested for Secretariat members to understand their duties in this regard.

Finally on this point, the group felt that there should be a clear statement of responsibility for fulfilling the workplan with more alignment of stakeholders.

Relationship with Local Authority

The group felt that the reflection of the relationship with the Local Authority in the User Guide needs to be reviewed, with clarity provided on the Department who will now act as arbiter in disputes given that Local Authorities and PPNs come under two different Departments.

There was a view that the points currently in the User Guide are well made but that Local Authority staff need to be updated and receive ongoing training on engagements with the PPN.

A suggestion was made that a case study (e.g. Age Friendly Ireland) could be useful in terms of how the stakeholders could work together, however there was some dissent as to how useful this isolated example might be.

The group felt that there should be greater alignment of structures between the Secretariat and the Local Authority, with particular emphasis on providing clarity for the Resource Worker in their role vis a vis the two and a move towards greater engagement between Local Authorities and Secretariats. There is a need to separate the resource worker from the LA. He or she is employed by the LA but is guided by the Secretariat. This offers job security to the individual but leaves them free to work with, rather than for, the LA.

Notification and Information for meetings was found to be an issue, particularly in terms of the notice periods for receiving information.

Finally, a suggestion was made that when the section on arbitration is being reviewed, that the process might benefit from a 'traffic light system' / phased process before escalation. Detail on how this would be implemented, step by step, would be required.

Monitoring and Evaluation

There was some disagreement in respect how evaluation of the PPNs should be conducted, with one view that an external and independent evaluator be employed and another that the internal expertise be used, particularly when evaluating the Secretariat.

A review of the contents of the Annual Report was suggested as it was felt that this does not accurately reflect the work of the PPN, although there was some dissent expressed as to the necessity for this.

The group expressed disappointment at the lack of engagement or information from the National Advisory Group with a suggestion that the Terms of Reference be included as an appendix and regular information updates be circulated.

It was suggested that a section for the Secretariat's Forum and the Resource Worker Forum be included in the User Guide, with Terms of Reference for each to allow for greater transparency and address any issues emerging with a lack of accountability.

Finally on this point, it was felt that there should be more representation on the National Advisory Group for PPNs, prescribed by the User Group.

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 included:

- A draft Constitution
- Data Protection Guidelines
- Governance Documents
- A Local Authority and Representatives User Guide – a condensed version of the PPN User Guide
- Representatives Charter
- Codes of Practice / Conduct for both Representatives and Secretariat Members
- Grievance Procedure
- Best Practice Case Studies

Each of these documents must have mandatory provisions highlighted.

Deviations

While not strictly within the parameters of the consultation, the group felt it important to bring the following matters to the attention of the Department:

- A review of the timeframes of Departmental correspondence.
- A review of the overall structure of the PPNs.
- A review of the number of meetings held, with the suggestion that membership be allowed to call meetings themselves through their Representatives.
- The need for interdepartmental cooperation for Representatives information.
- A review of the relationships within the PPN and the need for more alignment between stakeholders.
- A progression pathway for staff.
- A review of the budget allocation.
- Clarity on the process whereby a Secretariat member has agreed with the content / terms of the Code of Conduct that they signed in their induction process, and then proceeds to be in breach of the code but refuses to step down. It was felt that there is a huge need for specifics that will deal with such a situation.

The meeting closed.