

PPN User Guide Consultation

Submission from the PPN Meeting, 09th April 2019, Tipperary

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 13 participants in total, representing the following roles in Tipperary PPN:

Secretariat	Resource Worker	Support Worker	Local Authority	SICAP staff	PPN Reps
5	1	1	2	1	3

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:

Out of Scope

The session opened with a clear statement by one person present of dissent with being asked to indicate that anything should be mandatory in the next iteration of the User Guide. This, it was felt, was contrary to the spirit of Community Development, engagement and real participation.

There was also a view that making grant applications contingent on PPN membership weakened the membership representation as there may be groups who are currently members of the PPN who do not actively engage.

A further suggestion, again acknowledged outside the scope of the session, was that there was a need for parity among staff, and that scales for both Resource Workers and Support Workers should be aligned.

Structure of the PPN

There was a strongly held view in the room that the language of the PPN should be reviewed to bring clarity to the roles and structures – that words like 'Secretariat, Plenary, Resource Worker, linkage groups' were not easily understood and did not reflect the language of the Community and Voluntary sector. Words such as 'Committee' and 'Interest Groups' were felt to be a better fit. This in turn would lead to a review of the Glossary of Terms. The language and structures set out in the "Putting People First" document was felt to be informative.

When the document is finalised, there was a suggestion that it should be 'Plain Englished' and be awarded the Plain English mark.

There was also a view that concrete examples of what the PPN is and can achieve, with positive case studies showing how communities can have a voice, would help to make the User Guide, and PPN, 'user friendly'.

It was suggested that there be an agreed mandate for PPN representatives on committees and policy groups.

In terms of the way in which the structures work, there was a suggestion that the plans and recommendations for consultation be simplified to allow for consultation within specified timeframes, and that consultation deadlines generally were too restrictive.

It was further felt that some collective action, outside of the Plenary, was needed to bring the three colleges together more cohesively.

Finally on this section, the group felt that there needed to be more promotion and awareness raising of the PPN, with perhaps a tiered membership to allow for associated / affiliated members.

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.

The group felt that the PPN should be the 'go to' organisation to nominate representatives to local authorities and other policy-making structures. There should be more emphasis on the benefit of PPN representation on these policy structures.

One area where the group felt there should be a mandatory intervention was in having the local authority provide training for representatives and local authority staff – this needs to be mandated by the Department (with an awareness that the main funding Department is not the same Department that oversees local government). In this regard, it was felt that the two governing Departments should engage more and generate interdepartmental cooperation, with one view that PPNs should be listed as a statutory agency for the purpose of reporting templates used by local authorities, and another view that this would risk diluting the diversity of a key Community and Voluntary stakeholder.

The group felt that there should be a national promotional campaign, supported and promoted by all of Government, on the PPNs.

In terms of operational activities, such as meetings, the group felt that there was some scope to use virtual and online platforms, while being conscious of the need for face to face engagement, particularly for those with low literacy and digital literacy skills and those in areas with poor connectivity.

The PPN websites should be used to greater effect to promote the activities of the PPN.

The User Guide should also have a clear statement at the outset of who the User Guide is for, with the suggestion of tiers or chapters for different stakeholders.

Operations of the PPN

There was a broad discussion in respect of the Budget process concerning the Department and the Local Authorities (LAs). It was felt that the current workplan is unrealistic for the budget, with reference made to the high level of staff turnover in PPNs nationally.

The budget should support a flat structure, with scope for token gestures in recognition of the value of volunteerism on PPN Secretariats and committees.

There needs to be a section on the Support Worker and recognition of the supports provided by this role.

There was a suggestion that the budget allocation should recognise the variances in scale across different counties. The group felt that this process should be reviewed as there cannot be standardisation of outputs without appropriate budgetary recognition of the different composition of counties. An example of where this type of budget allocation was working was in the Community Enhancement Programme.

Finally on this point, the group felt that there should be a compliance budget line to take account of statutory and non-statutory compliance requirements. This should be a set percentage of the PPN budget allocation.

Relationship with Local Authority

The group felt that the relationship with the LA was very personality driven. While Tipperary had a very supportive LA, a change in personnel may undermine the relationship. There is a need to define what makes a good relationship and enshrine a partnership approach in the User Guide. A suggestion was made that there needed to be an emphasis on 'respectful and equal' partnership in this engagement.

Given the change in Department structures since the last iteration of the User Guide, the group felt that the reference to the Department being the final arbiter between the PPN and the LA should be removed and replaced with an independent arbiter and an emphasis on finding ways to work together.

The group felt that the onus on the LA to promote PPNs and to educate staff in other sections needs to be more visible.

The reference to the independence of the PPN in the User Guide generated a discussion on what independence meant in this context, with the following outcomes:

- Financial Independence – although acknowledging the need for operational funding.
- The State's own aim as set out in the "Better Local Government" document.
- Independence of staff – where staff allocated by / seconded from the LA may not feel they can be properly independent while also following the LA structures.

The process of having the Plenary ratify the SLA should also be explicitly stated in the User Guide.

Finally on this point, it was felt that there is a need for the independence of the PPN, and it's a-political stance, to be made explicit both in the User Guide and on PPN websites and materials.

Monitoring and Evaluation

In respect of the National Advisory Group (NAG), the group felt that there should be an Appendix of the membership of NAG, which is kept up to date, and their Terms of Reference.

The new national structures, Secretariat and Resource Worker groupings, should also be reflected in the User Guide.

The group felt that there should be scope to insert a mechanism for monitoring and evaluating the relationship with the LA.

Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) should be developed at national level that would be reflective of the community nature of the PPN, with reporting to allow for more narrative beyond bare numbers re members and events. These KPIs could be developed locally, reflecting a more 'bottom up' approach to PPN development.

There was also a suggestion of a Membership Feedback mechanism to ensure that the PPN is responding to the needs of its key stakeholder.

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.
- Representatives Reporting Template.
- Educational / Promotional materials with clear case studies demonstrating the benefits of PPN membership.
- A Commitment / Outcomes document – what would your group get out of this?
- A description of the core functions of the Resource Worker and Support Worker, which could be modified to allow for local variations (note – there was some dissent about this inclusion).
- Draft Service Level Agreement with the Local Authority and with the Department.
- Terms of Reference for the National Advisory Group.
- Financial Reporting templates – aligned with Salesforce and Aggresso, where in operation.

Other Areas

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

- A restatement that the language used to describe PPNs and their structures needs to be reviewed.
- Watermarking PPN publications to ensure that their source is always clear.
- A restatement of the need to ensure awareness that the PPN is independent of party politics.

The meeting closed.