



15 October, 2019

SUBMISSION from the Sligo Public Participation Network (PPN)

DRAFT SCHEME FOR
SLIGO STRATEGIC POLICY COMMITTEES 2019 -2024

1. Introduction

Sligo PPN is a network of 330 community & voluntary, environmental and social inclusion groups from Sligo. Each PPN has three 'Colleges' which organise the member groups in terms of their interests and activities – these are environmental college, social inclusion college and community and voluntary college. Sligo PPN exists to facilitate the formal participation by the community sector in Sligo County Council's decision making structures and to serve as a support and information sharing network for the Community and Voluntary Sector in the county. It is funded jointly by the Department of Rural and Community Development and Sligo County Council but is autonomous and its activities are directed by its members through an elected secretariat.

1.1 The PPN welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the new Sligo Strategic Policy Scheme.

1.2 Sligo PPN acknowledges that the configuration of the SPCs covers all the Sligo County Council services and will therefore provide focused support and advice to the council in regards to policy and practice in these specific areas. We particularly welcome the new Climate Change SPC and would like to support SCC to ensure that the youth voice, so instrumental in the climate change movement globally, is represented.

1.3 The PPN is committed to providing high quality community, voluntary, social inclusion and environmental representation on Sligo County Council Strategic Policy Committees.

1.4 The PPN is committed to providing on-going support to PPN Representatives who sit on Sligo County Council Structures. This includes on-going training, a PPN Representatives Forum, policy development, and so on.

The PPNs recommendations for the Draft SPC are laid out in the following sections 2 to 5

2. Membership of the Strategic Policy Committees

The remit of each SPC invariably effects each 'college' of the PPN. There is also considerable expertise in each PPN college to inform and contribute to policy issues as they arise. Therefore it is vital that each PPN college is in a position to nominate at least one representatives to any/all SPCs. The PPN should be the 'go to' organisation for all bodies in a county/ city who wish to benefit from community and voluntary expertise at their table.

'The representation of environmental, social inclusion, community and voluntary voices on local authority boards and committees is a core function of PPNs and where such community representation is to be provided on appropriate committees of the local authority, such as SPCs or LCDs, local authorities must source this through the PPN.' (Circular Letter CVSP 7/2019 Department of Rural & Community Development).

Sligo PPN proposes that membership of each of the 4 Strategic Policy Committees is increased to include a representative from each PPN pillar:

- Community & voluntary
- Social Inclusion (X)
- Environment (X)

Sectors to be represented	SPC1 Housing & Corporate	SPC2 Environment & Infrastructure	SPC3 Planning, Community & Economic Dev., Arts & Culture	SPC4 Climate Change
Agriculture / Farming		X	X	X
Environmental/ Conservation (PPN)	X	X	X	X
Development/ Construction	X	X	X	
Business / Commercial				X
Trade Union	X		X	
Community/Voluntary (PPN)	X	X	X	X
Social Inclusion (PPN)	X	X	X	X

Rationale

Environment

- As noted in the County Sligo Local Economic and Community Plan (LECP) 2016-2021, the environment affects and underpins all aspects of society and *'the future wellbeing of the inhabitants of Sligo and the vibrancy of the local economy are entirely dependent upon our achieving a sustainable model of living that safeguards and protects our build and natural environment, and our efficient use of natural resources.'*
- The Sligo County Council Climate Adaptation Plan states that Climate Change *'is the main challenge' facing society and that meeting this will require 'a genuine appreciation for our environment, and a desire to protect the one home that we all share.'*
- Sligo PPN Environment College have already called for the appointment of a new Climate Action Officer which would also support this course of action with the ultimate aim of developing sustainability for the county and all its citizens
- Unlike some other issues, the environment is cross-cutting in that every decision made by society has a potential direct or indirect impact upon the environment.
- Both Climate Change and Biodiversity are cross-cutting issues that can be impacted for better and for worse by policies developed in all four of the proposed SPCs. As such we suggest that these two very serious concerns are included in the deliberations as a part of the work of each SPC, and that the Corporate Policy Group ensures that all proposed policies being put forward from the SPCs are Climate and Biodiversity proofed
- Local Authorities are expected to assist in the delivery of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), 17 interlocking goals providing the structure for developing and implementing all local policies. As shown at right, the essential foundations for SDGs, and a healthy human society, are a stable and thriving biodiversity and ecosystem and economic systems need to nurture and support the environment in support of societal wellbeing.



- The environment is potentially affected by every decisions made by society. For this reason, environment considerations need to be taken into account in the deliberations and workings of each SPC and this can be best assured with the environmental representation on each of the four proposed committees.
 - With specific regard to SPC3, Planning, Community and Economic Development and Arts and Culture, the environment is central to the LECP and County and Local Area Development Plans and, in this context, Government Guidelines (LG07 2014) in relation SPCs state: *Specific consideration should be given to inclusion of the Environment Sector on the SPC for Economic Development and Enterprise in view of the expertise available within the sector in relation to sustainable development.*
 - With specific regard to SPC1 housing and corporate, the need for sustainable, environmentally friendly housing development should be paramount for the county and an environment rep would be able to advise with regard to best practise in this regard. Similarly they will be able to offer support as SCC, as a corporate entity, seeks to review and improve it's own internal environmental practises.

Social Inclusion

- Social inclusion is a cross-cutting theme in that every decision made by society has a potential direct or indirect impact upon access and inclusion and the move towards an equal society.
- Social Inclusion is at the very core of the PPN structure and ethos. It is essential that those whose voice is often overlooked are given the opportunity to shape strategic policy in a way that moves us towards a more equal and fair society. The opportunity for individuals representing the sector be able to speak on behalf of harder to reach groups on SPC2 and SPC4 is therefore critical.
- Having social inclusion represented across all SPCs and being able to accessibility proof all LA planning and programme development will support Sligo County Council in fulfilling mandated commitments under Public Sector Duty legislation.



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3. Operation of Strategic Policy Committees and Corporate Policy Group

3.1 ANNUAL WORKPLAN

Sligo PPN recognises the importance of each SPC having a focused Workplan for the term of the SPC containing strategic goals and objectives aligned with the County Development Plan, Local Economic and Community Plan, the National Development Plan, the Climate Adaptation Strategy, the Regional Spatial & Economic Strategy and any other relevant local, regional and national documents. This document should be published and kept available for public perusal.

3.2 ENCOURAGING REAL ACTIVE CITIZEN PARTICIPATION

The Sligo PPN /SCC MOU states that SCC will 'Work with the PPN to agree, adopt and implement a protocol for all committees/decision making bodies with PPN representatives that will enable the representatives to engage fully, taking into consideration timing, location, documentation etc.' Sligo PPN proposes that once SPCs are established, this protocol be devised with participation from Sligo PPN and then agreed and adopted in line with Circular Letter CVSP 7/2019 Department of Rural & Community Development to 'enable the representatives to engage appropriately'. This document should be published and available for public perusal.

Below is a summary of some of the protocol considerations that Sligo PPN would like Sligo County Council to consider to address it's commitments under Public Sector Duty, the 2014 IHREC legislation. For a more detailed outline of these considerations and how they might be achieved please see **Appendix A.**

3.2.1 Maximising Expectations

SPCs need to be able to demonstrate that they are worth engaging with and are capable of achieving positive change.

Managing expectations is important to avoid SPC members becoming disengaged. It should be made clear to all members of the committee what they can realistically expect SPCs to achieve, for example in relation to how national policy may impact local policy.

3.2.2 Timing and Nature of Information Dissemination

One of the key functions of a PPN representative on an SPC is to gather and represent the views of PPN members.

Therefore it is important that documentation that will be discussed and deliberated on in an SPC meeting is shared with PPN representatives in a timely manner.

3.2.3 Scheduling and contribution to meetings

We request that this draft scheme will contain a commitment that Sligo PPN representatives and Sligo PPN staff, as well as sectoral interests, receive an invitation to contribute to the agenda of each meeting before it is circulated.

We also request that this draft scheme include a commitment that Sligo PPN staff will receive an annual schedule of SPC meetings as soon as this is available.

3.2.4 Agreed statement of actions

Sligo PPN requests that at the conclusion of each SPC meeting an agreed statement of outcomes and actions will be adopted by the membership

3.2.5 Training

Training in relation to SPCs should be made available equally to all members of the SPC including external members. This will promote mutual understanding, better relationships, and a stronger SPC body which will lead to good decision making, better policies and greater benefits for the county.

3.2.6 Timing and hosting of Meetings

As stated, Co Sligo PPN is a network of community and voluntary groups. The majority of these groups are volunteer run and led. Co Sligo PPN seeks representatives from these groups to fill community & voluntary, environmental and social inclusion seats on the SCC SPCs. Many of these volunteers are employed during the day.

3.2.7 Enhancing Relationships

The attitude and abilities of the chairperson play an important part in how PPN representatives experience their role on the SPCs. PPN representatives are often coming into a culture and environment they are not familiar with. A positive atmosphere in the SPC makes members want to keep engaging with it.

3.3.8 Enhancing Opportunities for PPN Reps

Clarity is needed regarding the ways in which PPN representatives can input into the work of the SPC and the procedures, rules and processes for doing so.

3.2.9 Corporate Policy Group

Sligo PPN requests that as part of the draft scheme for SPCs a commitment is included to ensure that SPC members and SPCs receive timely updates from the Corporate Policy Group.

4. Lobbying Act 2015 / Transparency Code

Sligo PPN welcome the addition of a reference to the 2015 Lobbying act, but would ask that adoption of the code could be strengthened by;

- 4.1 Detailing what is required in order for the SPC's to operate in compliance with the Transparency Code;
- 4.2 Outlining the responsibilities of each SPC Chairperson in relation to operating in compliance with the Transparency Code; and
- 4.3 Including "Briefing on the requirements of the Transparency Code" in the list of on-going training to be provided for the members of the SPC's.

5. In Conclusion

Sligo PPN would like to thank you for this opportunity to feed into the DRAFT SCHEME FOR THE STRATEGIC POLICY COMMITTEES 2019 -2024 and for helping to ensure that the community & voluntary, social inclusion and environmental sectors can actively and positively engage with Sligo County Council's decision making forums.

The success of the SPCs is vital to Sligo PPN. We believe Sligo PPN, as a network of around 350 community groups active in the county, can be an asset to the SPCs. A number of suggestions on how the SPCs can be improved have been offered in this submission. We would welcome the opportunity to collaborate and work with the local authority on implementing these suggestions where appropriate, such as:

- **Developing and delivering training for SPC members.**
- **Distributing the Sligo PPN user-friendly, plain English handbook to SPC members.**

We look forward to seeing our input considered and reflected in the final document. In the meantime if you have any queries regarding the proposals contained herein please do not hesitate to contact us.

This submission has been checked against the UN Sustainable Development Goals. For more information on the UN Sustainable Development Goals visit:
<https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/>



Appendix 1

Appendix 1 provides an outline of some of the considerations and recommendations that would ensure the operation of Sligo SPCs is in line with Public Sector Duty legislation and actively encourages the community sector to inform and influence decision making.

"since the start of PPNs, there has always been a physical seat at the committee table for reps,we need more than a seat, we need to be able to have our voices heard." (PPN feedback, Carlow Conference)

Maximising Expectations

Our responsibility to the local authority is to ensure there are PPN representatives who are willing and able to engage in the SPC process on a voluntary basis. Therefore, SPCs need to be able to demonstrate that they are worth engaging with and are capable of achieving positive change.

Managing expectations is important to avoid SPC members becoming disengaged. It should be made clear to all members of the committee what they can realistically expect SPCs to achieve, for example in relation to how national policy may impact local policy.

There needs to **be clarity about how Strategic Policy Committees achieve things**, what the process is for making decisions, where the decision-making power rests and how decisions come to be enacted.

There also needs to **be clarity about what is expected of each member of an_SPC**, their roles and responsibilities. The PPN works with its representatives to try to help them understand their role on the committee but it is important that the local authority, as the 'owner' of the SPCs, is involved in this too.

Sligo PPN would suggest the following actions for consideration:

- Make **case studies** available of previous achievements of SPCs.
- Create a **diagram that explains** the system of decision-making in the Council and how the SPCs connect into this.
- Create a **user-friendly handbook on the SPCs for members**. This could include the two suggestions above.

Timing and Nature of Information Dissemination

One of the key functions of a PPN representative on an SPC is to gather and represent the views of PPN members.

Therefore it is important that documentation that will be discussed and deliberated on in an SPC meeting is shared with PPN representatives in a timely manner that allows them to:

- a) prepare for the meetings and to consult with the members of their nominating bodies in order to create the best foundation for meaningful debate.
- b) submit requests for information and items for the future workplan based on the engagement with the linkage groups. The current minimum of 2 weeks is not enough time for this and we would request agendas and relevant information be circulated at least 4 weeks in advance of the meeting

We request that in line with the following '*that Local Authorities facilitate access to a library of relevant thematic documents focused on groups and committees that the Network are represented on*' (Circular Letter CVSP 7/2019 Department of Rural & Community Development) early access to hard and soft copies of all documents to be discussed at SPCs be made provided in advance to Sligo PPN Staff and Representatives.

SPCs usually meet on a quarterly basis and as such a considerable period of time will pass until the minutes of the meeting are approved for circulation, an agreed brief report should be made available for members to circulate to their nominated groups/organisations within 1-2 weeks of the meeting taking place (This is also a recommendation which is coming through nationally in the National PPN Annual Report). Correspondence should be available by email so as to facilitate sharing of information and reduce paper usage and postage costs.

Corporate Policy Group

Sligo PPN requests that as part of the draft scheme for SPCs a commitment is included to ensure that SPC members and SPCs receive timely updates from the Corporate Policy Group. We request that up to date CPG minutes and/or draft minutes be circulated to all SPCs as part of their notice of meeting package along with the agenda and SPC minutes. We request that each SPC and each member of it should receive the minutes of all Corporate Policy Group Meetings that have taken place since the previous SPC meeting.

Scheduling and contribution to meetings

We request that this draft scheme will contain a commitment that Sligo PPN representatives and Sligo PPN staff as well as sectoral interests receive an invitation to contribute to the agenda of each meeting before it is circulated.

We also request that this draft scheme include a commitment that Sligo PPN staff will receive an annual schedule of SPC meetings as soon as this is available, that Sligo PPN staff will receive notice and agenda for each forthcoming SPC meeting as well as the draft minutes from the previous meeting, at least three weeks in advance of the meeting date. This is necessary to enable Sligo PPN staff to work with their representatives and member groups on Sligo's PPN's contribution to each meeting.

Agreed statement of actions

Sligo PPN requests that at the conclusion of each SPC meeting an agreed statement of outcomes and actions will be adopted by the membership and that this statement will be recorded by the administrator or minute taker and circulated to all SPC members within one week of the meeting having taken place. This statement of actions must not replace the minutes but rather be complementary to them and facilitate the ongoing work between SPC meetings. This system is already in action in other Local Authorities and Sligo PPN requests that in the interests of effective participation and information sharing that this approach be adopted in Sligo.

Training

Training in relation to SPCs should be made available equally to all members of the SPC including external members. This will promote mutual understanding, better relationships, and a stronger SPC body which will lead to good decision making, better policies and greater benefits for the county.

As the SPCs will generally only meet 4 times a year, some Committee Members may find it very hard to adopt to this new working environment, and consequently may feel unable to participate fully. In the case of the voluntary Sector Members this may result in frustration and a tail off in attendance. Training in advance of the first meetings of the SPCs, on the role of the SPCs, meeting skills and policy creation processes, would be an essential foundation on which to build their success.

The PPN recommends the addition of a Training Provision section in the draft SPC scheme. A similar provision can be seen the South Dublin County Council SPC Scheme. The PPN recommends this provision should include appropriate training on:

- Induction to SPCs, including terms of reference and the processes and procedures of the SPCs.

- Briefings on relevant policy, including the reform of Local Government
- Workshops on the policy remit of SPCs
- Briefing on the requirements of the Transparency Code

The PPN feels that this provision is an enabling measure to best support all members of the SPC in fulfilling their respective roles and will result in quality outcomes for Sligo County Council and SPC members. Sligo PPN would welcome the opportunity to work with SCC to develop a training programme and handbook in plain English suitable for PPN reps and other external members.

Timing and hosting of Meetings

As stated, Co Sligo PPN is a network of community and voluntary groups. The majority of these groups are volunteer run and led. Co Sligo PPN seeks representatives from these groups to fill community & voluntary, environmental and social inclusion seats on the SCC SPCs. Many of these volunteers are employed during the day. There is no financial cover for them in missing work and it is unfair to expect them to lose their income or interfere with their holiday allowances. As such we would like SCC to consider holding some, if not all SPC meetings outside of normal working hours to accommodate volunteers and show them that their time is valued.

Enhancing Relationships

The attitude and abilities of the chairperson play an important part in how PPN representatives experience their role on the SPCs, including:

- Feeling respected by and equal to other members of the committee.
- Having an opportunity to share their experience and knowledge.
- Feeling that their expertise and knowledge is used.
- Knowing that their time, as volunteers, is valued.

PPN representatives are often coming into a culture and environment they are not familiar with. A positive atmosphere in the SPC makes members want to keep engaging with it.

Sligo PPN offers the following suggestions on how these issues can be improved:

- Training for SPC chairpersons on how to run effective, inclusive and collaborative meetings.
- Chairpersons welcoming committee members and giving members of the SPC the opportunity to introduce themselves as a standard procedure.
- An informal meeting between the chairperson and Sligo PPN representatives before they attend their first SPC meeting to discuss the SPC.
- Chairpersons briefly outlining procedures and protocols that will be followed during the meeting.

Enhancing Opportunities for PPN Reps

Clarity is needed regarding the ways in which PPN representatives can input into the work of the SPC and the procedures, rules and processes for doing so.

PPN representatives want to be able to give of their best on the SPCs. They feel they are being listened to and are contributing when:

- Their **comments are minuted**
- Their **input is discussed**
- They **receive feedback**
- They can **see a result or outcome to their input.**

When PPN representatives make suggestions or recommendations into pieces of work it is essential that they are given feedback with regard to how these suggestions are being considered and whether action is being taken on them. Whether suggestions are taken on board or not, an explanation of why their suggestion has not been included is essential. This is so they feel their time on the SPC is not wasted.

One of the key functions of a PPN representative on an SPC is to feed information from the SPC back to PPN members for discussion and deliberation. This can be problematic due to a lack of clarity about what information shared within SPCs is confidential and what can be shared with PPN members.

Presentations and updates frequently appear on the SPCs' agendas. Though informative, they can relate to matters that have already been decided elsewhere, with little opportunity for meaningful input or decision making by SPC members.

Some potential actions to resolve these issues may include;

- **Guidance for PPN representatives about how decisions are made** on SPCs and how the decision is progressed to an outcome. This could also go into the user-friendly handbook mentioned previously or be part of induction training for committee members.
- **Use plain English and accessible language** whenever possible, for example in documents and presentations. If acronyms are being used provide a list explaining what the acronyms mean.
- **A specific liaison person in the local authority for PPN representatives** to contact with any questions relating to the SPC. The liaison could meet new representatives before the first meeting and talk through key procedures.

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- A **guaranteed response to any questions addressed to the liaison** within an agreed time.
- **Feedback**, for example from the chairperson, on why a representative's attempt to input into the SPC was unsuccessful.
- Regular **opportunities for committee members to give feedback** and suggest improvements on how the committees are working, for example once a year.
- **PPN business as a regular item on the agenda.**
- PPN representatives being given the **opportunity to make a presentation on their own area of expertise** as it relates to strategic policy.
- Changing the style of **minuting SPC meetings to more clearly reflect what is discussed.**
- SPC chairpersons **making it clear at the SPC meeting what information is confidential** and what can be shared.